I'm at 15,000 feet, climbing at 1300 feet per minute next to a dark, vertical wall of cloud connecting a cloud far above me to another cloud far below me. In all my soaring fantasies I've never imagined anything like this. I must be on another planet. This must be a dream. Don't wake me up...

Just a week before, I set out for soaring's Promised Land with my crew and fellow Illini Glider Club member Bob Gillespie. While repairing a nearly detached trailer fender, we met Craig Loomiller towing his 1-26 from Tulsa. Craig, who would become famous for his outlanding on Day 4 (SOARING Magazine, January 2006), was a beginning cross-country pilot flying in his first contest, hoping to learn from the hot shots and improve his skills. Our meeting brought back memories of my first few contests, the many memorable flights where I pushed myself further and tried to learn how the big boys made the fast speeds. And all in the very friendly atmosphere of the 1-26 crowd, more family reunion than cut-throat competition. When I started flying contests, I was immediately welcomed into the group and there was always someone to give me advice and encouragement. It is fun just to be around these people, to share thermals with them, and tell stories after the flying. Some came with crews, some had none. Fellow Illinoian Bob Quas always came with his wife and mother-in-law as crew! Bob was so excited to fly at Moriarty that he stayed up over seven hours on the first practice day. After spending so much time in the midwest, it was really cool to cruise around at 16,000 feet and be able to see forever (they said the visibility was 'only' 50 miles due to some Arizona wildfires).

A meteorologist will explain to you why the soaring here is so good, something about wind and precipitation patterns, but I have my own theory. The Estancia Valley is known as the pinto bean capital of the U.S. In the fields are mice and other animals. You get the picture.

June 29. Contest Day 1

Weather guru “Sergeant” Mitch Hudson mentioned two words that pilots detest: blue and windy. CD Carl Ekdahl wisely called a task north and south of Moriarty keeping us over friendly terrain. Everyone had their own way of staying cool and relaxed before flying. Vern Hutchinson could usually be found asleep under somebody’s wing (1-26 wings are fat enough to provide adequate shade). Vern arrived from California with a motor home that must have been held together with duct tape, and at 80 years old, he was only the third oldest pilot in the contest. Marvin Willis played his banjo for us before the launch, and a stray dog named “Landout” would go from plane to plane “inspecting the troops” (looking for his lunch).

The sniffer gave a positive report and soon gaggles of colorful gliders filled the sky. As on all but one of the contest days, we flew a TAT (Turn Area Task), which has two or three large circular areas we had to fly into in the proper sequence, our distance and speed figured from our GPS trace. We had a lot of flexibility to determine our course to fly and the distance we wanted to fly, and there weren't more than half a dozen landouts each day. Pilots were starting and finishing at different times,
A jet engine attached to a sailplane...now that's a combination any pilot would like to take a look at. Bob Carleton put the two together in this unique craft in which he gave a demonstration that was enjoyed by all. Photo by Bob Gillespie.

flying different routes, and we would rarely see each other on course. Soon 123.5 Mhz would come alive with pilot-crew reports. Hearing “Comin' 'Round the Mountain” on harmonica told you that Marvin Willis was on final glide. Hearing some weird coded message told you that Ron Schwartz was either (a) at 18,000 feet in a cloud street, (b) at 500 AGL over unlandable terrain, (c) lost, or (d) all of the above.

I used a technique that Irn Jousma taught me long ago for flying on cloudless days: when in sink, fly across the wind, and when reaching lift or reduced sink, turn into the wind. The theory is that the lift and sink are organized roughly in streets aligned with the wind, the same as on cloud days. The method worked very well and I worked myself 30 miles north between 12,000 and 15,000 feet.

Below 10,000 is considered low not only because the terrain is at 6-7000 feet, but the sink can exceed 10 knots. Where I usually fly, you are fat and happy at 8000 feet! After sinking to 9500, I stumbled into a 10-knot thermal and had no further difficulties, finishing with 77.7 miles at 36.9 mph. To my surprise, I won the day, a first for me after seven previous contests.

There was some very sad news this day. While pulling Norm Miller's glider back to the tie-downs after his flight, Norm's crew Chuck Colvard suffered a massive heart attack and could not be revived. Chuck and Norm were very close, having served in the Marine Corps together. It was a loss felt by everyone.

June 30. Contest Day 2
At the pilots' meeting, Norm told us in a shaky voice how much fun Chuck was having at the contest, hanging out with the pilots and crews. Norm also expressed to all the crews that Chuck would have wanted the contest to go on, and it did.

On a lighter note, we waited eagerly for a report from Bob Quas about his landing at Zorro Ranch airstrip. You see, there were rumors that the ranch is owned by some big bosses at
Victoria’s Secret. Hmmm. While waiting for his crew, Bob got a tour of the place, including the “big pink house,” a 40,000 square-foot mansion. Any supermodels?

Today was blue again, higher thermals but less consistent. After digging out of a hole at Estancia with five other 1-26’s, I relayed landing coordinates for Jim Walker and Dan Bryan, who proved what a Real Man he was (Dan recently wrote a book about his many soaring adventures titled “Real Men Land Out”). Bob Hurni won the day at 39 mph, putting him in the overall lead. Multi-time 1-26 Champions Schwartz and von Hellens had disappointing landouts the first two days, so the top of the score sheet is filled with pilots who have not won a contest before.

That evening, Larry Richardson, who rigged the recovery systems for the Gemini and Apollo space programs, gave a fascinating slide show about his NASA activities.

**July 1. Contest Day 3**

Pilots would finally get a real treat as the famed “Marfa dry line” would visit us. Something about moist air from the Gulf of Mexico clashing with dry air from the southwest and creating a shear line where everything is going up (I still think the mice have something to do with it). The first two hours on task are a pure adrenaline rush: fast running full throttle with areas of lift and sink that almost balance each other out (kind of like ridge flying), a few brief gaps followed by 8-10 knot climbs. This much fun must be illegal! I went to the far end of the first turn area and back, where I saw the “wall” cloud. I had to leave the dry line for the second turn area, floundered around a bit, and finished with a speed of 47 mph. Schwartz regained his old form and smoked the course at 55 mph, while Hurni kept the overall lead.

**July 2. Contest Day 4.**

The day develops late, but the sky fills with cu everywhere except for a huge blue hole south of Moriarty. Most pilots elect to follow good looking clouds around the eastern side. The western clouds are smaller, but further west it is blue and I’m thinking this west line of clouds is indicating some kind of shear. Three strong thermals confirm
my choice, but then the clouds end. Taking a gamble, I cross the 15-mile blue hole to reach a gorgeous cloud street south of Willard. Then it’s high and fast running just like yesterday, to the far edge of the turn area and back. Past the street I hit regular 6-8 knot lift. It is a really incredible, perfect flight, almost all above 15,000, at a blistering speed of 54.5 mph. Up until then, 50 mph had been a magical barrier for me and I had now finally broken it. On top of that, I won the day again and regained the overall lead.

July 4. Contest day 5.

After a rest day (winds too strong), Carl calls a bigger task: 3-hour minimum with 3 turn areas. The lift again develops late but is strong at task opening. This is the first day Carl had sent us over unfriendly terrain east of Moriarty, so I flew more conservatively, staying above 12,000 even if I had to work weak lift. Forgetting the lesson of Day 4, I chased solid clouds in the eastern part of the turn area, but the lift was weaker. I retreated back west, ran a nice street north, negotiated the blue third turn area and finished well past the minimum time: 177 miles at 45.7 mph. I retain the overall lead, with Hurni only 98 points behind. Schwartz leads the pack again with 52 mph.

We celebrate Independence Day with a special night air show put on by Bob Carleton, with fireworks shooting off the wing tips and out the back of the plane. Very cool! Bob also owns a jet-powered motorglider, which he demonstrated for us one morning.

July 5. No contest day.

Thunderstorms with hail blow up all around Moriarty, so we get another rest day after holding the annual 1-26 Association meeting. I visit the animals at the Wildlife West park, and have pity for a turkey vulture stuck in a cage. A sign says he was let free but didn’t want to leave. Different priorities I guess. One day left. Hurni and I put “hexes” on each other over dinner at the TA truck stop. Unfortunately, they worked.

July 6. Last contest day.

Another 3 turn area TAT with a 3-hour minimum time. I have a pretty good run 45 miles south, then turn downwind toward Vaughn. The lift is only 4-5 knots (man, I’m really getting spoiled), and chasing what I thought were the best clouds, I drifted further southwest than I had planned. Perhaps a little mental fatigue setting in after so much flying? The run back north is agonizingly slow, with heavy sink, weak lift and in every thermal I’m blown further east by the 20-kt winds. I hear over 123.5 that Hurni and von Hellens are struggling down low near Clines Corners, and they later land out. I shift from “speed mode” to “survival mode,” but I’m blown further east and down to 10,500 near Clines Corners myself. A great thermal with Quas and I’m back to 10,500, and it’s the last real lift I see. I barely stretch back into Moriarty at 7:15, having missed the third turn area (and hearing the Ed Kilbourne song “One more climb” in my head).

After almost six hours in the air, I’m worn out, happy to have made it home but disappointed at the incomplete task. Several top

**AWARDS**

- **The Marion C. Cruse Trophy (Individual Pilot with highest final score):** Kevin Ford
- **The Bob McNiel / Fred Cuny Memorial Team Trophy:** Harry Baldwin and Del Blomquist
- **The President’s Trophy (Pilot with the fastest flight):** Ron Schwartz, 55.2 mph.
- **The David C. Johnson Memorial Trophy (Highest average score of 1st-time contestant):** Craig Loomiller
- **The John P. Greene Memorial Trophy (Highest average score of pilot under age 30):** Mitch Bauer
- **The Old Goat Trophy (Highest average score of pilot over age 60):** Harry Baldwin
- **The Old Toad Trophy (Highest average score of pilot over age 70):** Harry Baldwin
- **The Old Buzzard Award (Oldest pilot):** Jim Walker
- **The Spiffy Award (Best looking aircraft):** Kevin Anderson
- **The Yardstick Award (Shortest credited distance on task):** Craig Loomiller, 6.9 mi
- **The Turtle Award (slowest speed of finisher):** Bill Bentley, 16.9 mph
pilots had made big mileage but failed to complete the task on previous days, so I wasn't alone.

Nineteen out of twenty-one pilots flew 96 miles or more today, led by Kevin Anderson at 51.9 mph and Ron Schwartz who went 203 miles in four hours. Stephen Michalik, who was 300 points back in 3rd place going into today, has made a fast flight.

**July 7. Awards breakfast.**

All good things must come to an end. Tom Pressley is still crunching the numbers during breakfast, and soon has the verdict: Stephen Michalik in first and myself, 48 points behind, in 2nd. There were a few short speeches, photos, then we said goodbye to our old friends and new friends, until the next time. Tom Pressley gave each of us a CD with all of the logs. Looking at these, one thing that hits you immediately is how different the course tracks are, as pilots make decisions about where to go based on what they see. Bob and I returned to the hot and muggy Midwest. In August, NASA posted some dust devil photos taken by the Mars rovers (http://marsrovers.jpl.nasa.gov/gallery/press/spirit/20050819a.html) that look awfully familiar. Maybe I was on another planet after all.

**August. Postscript and a surprise.**

To err is human. In the rush to complete the scores, Tom inadvertently scored one pilot as a finisher on the last day by mistake. The scores were corrected and the official announce-