

The Hunt for Red

The Cast:

• 1-26 Pilots:

"157" (myself),
"242" (Curt Laumann),
"Hangman" (Doug Levy, #317),
"Two by four" (Garry Dickson, #024).

• 1-26 STARKs:

"157 ground" (Chuck Peifer),
"242 Ground" (Lynn Ket),
"Hangman Ground" (Mike Longwell),
"Two by four ground" (Brian Dickson).

• Professional pilots:

DAHL,
FedEx,
United Airlines pilots (names unknown).

Act 1. A Star is born

Monday, June 1, 1998, 10 AM. The opening day of Goal Strike IX, an annual cross-country camp for 1-26 pilots hosted by the Las Vegas Valley Soaring Association at Jean, Nevada. My crew, Chuck Peifer, is about to embark on his first "chase." I brief him on hooking up the trailer, using the radio, and indicate on maps my likely course, highlighting various checkpoints along the way. This will be a new experience for me as well, as most of my prior cross-country flights were of the closed course variety, or at least intended that way. I'd heard many stories from other pilots about losing contact with crew, spending the night in the glider in the middle of the desert, and other fond memories of prior adventures. That wouldn't happen to me of course. I'd make my Diamond, my crew will be there to greet me with a nice cold beverage the moment I stop rolling, and we'll be back at the airport before midnight. Then again, the best laid plans of mice and men...

Chuck hails from the San Antonio area, only two hours from where I lived at the time, but he came to be my crew in a roundabout way. During May, he was visiting relatives in San Diego, including his brother-in-law Tom Basham. Tom had served as crew many times for Del Blomquist (#144), and they brought Chuck out to the gliderport at Warner Springs a couple of times. Chuck instantly fell in love with the sport, and of course heard an earful about Goal Strike from Del, who organizes the event every



June 1, 1998, 7:00 PM. 157 on the Monita-Valley Road. Photo by Kevin Ford.

year. He indicated that he would like an opportunity to crew for someone. I had already told Del I was looking for a crew, so Del put me in contact with Chuck. An Air Force retiree, Chuck arrived at the airport that first day wearing a Navy T-shirt, clearly a sign he had been spending far too much time around Del and George Powell, both retired sailors. Upon telling the other pilots and crews who he was crewing for, he always got the same remarks: "I hope you like to drive." I guess my long flights at Goal Strike VIII had given me a reputation. Undeterred, Chuck was

October

An Adventure in Soaring and Crewing!

By Kevin Ford

gung-ho to become a 1-26 STAR (Sociable, Tenacious, Aircraft Retriever; crews of glass ships are known by another acronym). The last thing I gave Chuck before I launched was the Las Vegas Valley Soaring Association phone number at Jean, to be used if we lost contact. Correction, WHEN we lost contact.

Before leaving for Nevada I equipped my Jeep with a Terra radio and 5/8 wave antenna. I tried to test it during the drive to Jean, but there were no gliders flying, just some airplane pilot trying to open his flight plan on 123.3. As soon as I was airborne for my flight I verified with Chuck that both radios were working properly. I began working my way toward Goodsprings to get high enough to cross over the northwest ridge, and told Chuck to proceed north up I-15 about 20 miles to the Blue Diamond exit. Once he arrived we again tested our communication and there were no problems. Although the radios were working properly, I was struggling to get across the ridge. The Las Vegas class B airspace had a floor of 8,000 MSL near the airport (with the wind blowing toward it) and that is not high enough to cross over without help from another thermal. After nearly an hour I succeeded, and told Chuck to proceed to the next checkpoint. We'd be out of radio range for about half an hour. I made good time crossing the ridge and very soon was working the slopes of Mt. Charleston. He should have been in range by now, but repeated radio calls went unanswered. The game was afoot.

Act II. The Hunt.

My frustration at not being able to contact Chuck was amplified by an inability to get very high, struggling between 6 and 9K MSL in weak, blue thermals all up the Pahrump Valley. I made contact with both Two-by-four and Hangman, so I at least knew my radio was working. They both tried numerous times to contact Chuck and give him my instructions. I was worried that Chuck had stopped at the Sandy Valley intersection, his next checkpoint, waiting for additional instructions, while I got fur-



Super Star Chuck Peifer with "Red October." Photo by Kevin Ford.



Goal Strike IX Pilot Briefing. Photo by Chuck Peifer.

ther and further ahead (and out of radio range). The next plan was to ask some of the other crews who were coming over Blue Diamond Pass (in particular Hangman Ground and Two-by-four Ground) to be on the lookout for my red Jeep Cherokee, and to pass on my instructions to Chuck if they saw him. Many minutes passed by as various radio calls were made pilot-to-crew and pilot-to-pilot on both 123.3 and 123.5. The other pilots and crews evidently found this to be a fun game, and dubbed the operation "The Hunt For Red October," after the color of my vehicle. Obviously another sign that they had been hanging around George and Del too long. Like the stealth sub in the Tom Clancy novel, my Red Jeep and crew resisted all attempts at location. One by one the crews passed the Sandy Valley junction and reported the same bad news. I was not amused, however. Spending so much time on the radio, I wasn't paying too much attention to my instruments, sometimes finding myself circling in 400 fpm sink. A typical conversation went like this:

157 (heading south): "157 to ground." 157 (heading east): "157 to ground, do you read me." Similar calls at various headings/flight attitudes. (Maybe I can contact him while inverted?) 157: "Two-by-four, any sighting of Red October?" Two-by-four: "Two-by-four to ground, have you found Red October?" Two-by-four ground: "Negative, still looking." Two-by-four: "Ground reports negative contact." (Shall we switch to active sonar, captain?) 157: "Roger." (Expletive deleted)

This conversation was repeated again and again on different frequencies. What could I do now? Hoping that Chuck realized his radio was dead and would call HQ (Jean airport) to report the communication failure, I asked Two-by-four ground to call Jean from Pahrump and give them my position. Approaching the Highway 160/95 junction about 75 miles from Jean, my luck changed, soaring-wise anyway, as I cored a nice thermal to 11,000 feet. Still, it was 3 PM and a Diamond flight just didn't look to be in the cards today. As far as the eye could see ahead (at least 100 miles) the sky was blue, and tailwind was 10 knots at best. Pressing on without a crew seemed less and less worthwhile. As I approached the Jackass airport, garbled reports came in that sounded like Red October had been located. Soon I learned that indeed he had been found. Hallelujah! He had indeed called Jean from Pahrump, gotten the message relayed by Two-by-four ground and was soon spotted by Two-by-four Ground.

Act III. The Relay Race.

Chuck and I still needed to find some way of communicating, however, so the 3 crews hatched a plan together.

Hangman Ground had a CB radio, as did Two-by-four Ground, who lent it to Chuck. For the next several hours, communication between Chuck and I was via Hangman ground (and sometimes Hangman), who had to monitor both the airband and the CB. This sounds like a classical set-up for a comedy of errors, but it worked reasonably well. We stayed in contact this way as I proceeded north to the town of Beatty then on to Lida Junction. For me the soaring got much better, although the nearest cumulus clouds were still far off to the north. I was seeing stronger thermals and was staying between 9 and 12K mostly. As I zoomed ahead, Two-by-four and Hangman were struggling to find good lift and were falling farther behind me. This proved to be a problem when I reached Goldfield, as Hangman Ground lost contact with Red October, since they were now on opposite sides of the Goldfield summit on Highway 95. Fortunately, I had another method of communicating now. Thirty miles south of Goldfield I had caught up with 242 (Curt Laumann) and we soared together for a while. Shortly past Goldfield I spied Chuck following 242 ground on Highway 95 below. I asked 242 Ground to lead Chuck to the Tanopah airport, the next checkpoint. One advantage of flying a 1-26 is that you won't race way ahead of your crew!

I hoped that 242 and I would stay together for the rest of the flight, but it was not to be. We got separated somewhere between Goldfield and Tonopah, and though I kept seeing better and better lift, Curt fell out and landed at the Tonopah airport. I watched him land while at nearly 15,000 feet in a blue thermal. It was now 5:45. With cumulus clouds over the mountains to the north tantalizingly close, and a good tailwind now, I figured I had a good shot at Diamond Distance and didn't want to give up yet. But Two-by-Four and Hangman were still a ways behind, and the territory north of Tonopah is quite desolate, making good crew communication vital. I asked 242 Ground to lend Chuck their radio for the rest of my flight, and soon I heard Chuck's voice for the first time in 5 hours. Our communication problems, however, were still not over.

At Tonopah I had to make a decision of which direction to proceed next. I initially thought to go east, where there were plentiful cu and very little cirrus. Without a tailwind, however, I would have little chance for the Diamond. To the north were two options: proceed up the western valley toward Hadley, which was more covered by cirrus but had a major highway running its length, or the eastern valley, which had less cirrus but no civilization. Once again my desire for the Diamond dictated the decision to proceed up the eastern valley. Several radio calls later I was confident he knew where I was heading.

Act IV. All alone in the night.

The soaring conditions in this valley, however, were rapidly deteriorating, due to the thickening cirrus. Still I worked every little scrap of lift, since I now had a 20 mph estimated tailwind. My last verified communication with Chuck, who was quite a ways behind me now, was that I was passing over the town of Belmont (actually a ghost town, as I would later learn) and that I would land on the road somewhere beyond. There is only one road up the Monitor Valley, and it really is the only landing option. Chuck couldn't possibly miss me. I called one last time at 1,500 feet AGL, but got no answer. At 6:45, 14 miles north of Belmont, I made an uneventful landing on the road, which at this point was dirt. No road signs, stakes, or traffic. Cross-checking the GPS with the sectional verified it: I

was in the precise middle of nowhere. Save the road and an occasional barbed-wire fence, the Monitor Valley looks today exactly like it did 10,000 years ago. I am way short of Diamond Distance, but am quite happy at making my longest ever flight at about 252 miles. Anticipating Chuck's arrival, I quickly set about getting the glider ready to de-rig: canopies and tape off, controls disconnected, nuts off the wing pins, etc. With the sun dipping below the mountains, it started getting chilly here at 6,700 feet, and I put on a heavy sweatshirt I had stashed behind the seat.

7:30. Chuck hasn't arrived yet. I'm getting a little anxious, but he is likely taking it slow on the dirt portion of the road, which did contain a few ruts and cattle guards. I watch attentively for the telltale cloud of dust on the horizon. Another half-hour passes, the sun has set and it is getting colder, but frequent calls on the radio produce nothing. NOT AGAIN! By 8:30 I'm getting really worried, but more for Chuck than myself. I have reattached the canopy and am snuggled up in the cockpit, ready to spend the night there if necessary. I have extra food and water. The glider is still in the middle of the road where I landed it. Bad thoughts cross my mind: the Jeep Cherokee broke down somewhere and Chuck is stranded, lost and the nearest phone is 20 miles away. This will be his first and LAST crewing experience, this I'm sure. More time passes, darkness descends on the valley. I consider building a signal fire. I try to think of something I can do but feel helpless. I figure I can walk 14 miles back to Belmont in the morning to find a phone (in reality there are no phones in Belmont, the nearest phone was 50 miles away!).

Finally I remember something Jimmy Zapata, another Goal Strike participant, had used the day before. He lost contact with his crew, and being a pilot for United Airlines, he dialed in the appropriate frequency and got one of his buddies to contact his crew on 123.3. No frequencies for my area were listed on the sectional but my radio has a scanning mode, and after about 15 minutes I found an active Salt Lake City Air Route Traffic Control Center (abbreviated "Center") frequency, 133.45. Also the 11 Amp-hour battery in my glider will run the radio for several days. The first several attempts to contact airliners were unsuccessful, then I made contact with a DHL pilot. Switching to 123.3, he attempted to contact Chuck without success. Before passing out of radio range, he relayed the message to Center, and a few minutes later a FedEx pilot contacted me. He also failed to contact Chuck, then asked for some information to give to Center. I gave him my call sign, N number, exact GPS coordinates, a description of the crew vehicle and the crew's name, and the phone number at the Jean airport and suggested someone call in and report my situation. He relayed the info to Center, said goodnight and told me to watch out for rattlesnakes. Thanks! Knowing that someone knew of my position and there was nothing further I could do, I relaxed and watched the stars. They are quite brilliant on a cold night in the high desert. Alone and at peace, I contemplated deep philosophical questions such as: What would it be like to soar on another planet?

About 9:30 I was awakened from my doze by a call from United 863: "Glider 157, we have a message for you from Center. Your crew is on the way." HOORAY! Twenty minutes later lights up ahead signaled that Chuck was coming. We de-rigged in the light of a half-moon, stopped for chow and coffee at Tonopah, got caught in rush-hour traf-



Jean, Nevada – 2 casinos, a prison and an airport. That's all there is! Photo by Kevin Ford.

fic going from Pahrump to Las Vegas (at 4:30 AM!), and arrived back in Jean just as the sun was rising. I gave Chuck (and myself) the next two days off.

Epilogue

During the long drive back to Jean Chuck told me what happened from his end: He passed Belmont and followed the dirt road another 11 miles (3 miles short!). Not believing I could have gone further, he backtracked the route all the way back to Tonopah, thinking I might have landed off the road somewhere. He then called Jean, telling them the situation and that he was going back up the Monitor Valley road, this time all the way until he found me. Later, someone at Center had called Jean, got Chuck's message, and relayed it to me via the United pilot. For a first timer at crewing, Chuck deserves at least a Medal of Honor for this heroic performance.

As for my crew radio, the problem was discovered two days later: a blown fuse in the cigarette lighter adapter caused the radio to run off the NiCad battery, already partly run down while testing it on the drive to Nevada. I really want one of those satellite phones. Actually I want one of those Star Trek communicators that work even through miles of solid rock and have an unlimited range. I had three more landouts later in the week, and with improved communications Chuck arrived minutes after my landings. But one never forgets the first time.

About the Author: *Kevin Ford makes money for tows as a Mathematics Professor at the University of South Carolina at Columbia. He has been a member of the Illini Glider Club (Monticello, Illinois), Aero Club Albatross (Blairstown, New Jersey) and the Fault Line Flyer's club (Briggs, Texas) before moving to South Carolina, where he now mingles with the rowdy bunch at Bermuda High Soaring. He has a Gold Badge with two Diamonds, all earned in a 1-26. In 1995 he decided to buy a glider and purchased a 1-26A, "157," rather than starting with a glass ship and upgrading later. He is currently the Record Keeper for the 1-26 Association and has 1,000 hours in gliders, most in 1-26s and 2-33s (as a CFI-G).*

