

A Late Summer Flight

By Mike Finegan

It was a late summer day, the Friday before Labor day. The 31st of August, to be exact. The weather looked great on Thursday, with a cold front that passed through in mid-afternoon. I expected Friday to be good as well, and arranged to take Friday off to do some cross-country soaring.

I already had a task in mind: take-off at Benson, head to a turnpoint in southwestern Wisconsin, a point east of Durand taken off a prior sectional titled "Sellman", a private airstrip, then north to Barron, and back to Benson for a 300-kilometer triangular flight. If I were to make it successfully, that would accomplish two goals:

- Gold Distance flight of at least 300Km
- Diamond Distance To a Goal flight of 300Km

My preparations continued: Checking the current sectional, I noted that my first turnpoint was no longer on the map! No matter; since I was to be using the Volkslogger GPS unit for the first time this flight, I did not need to have a recognizable geographic picture on the ground. Just having the GPS coordinates is enough. I checked the Wisconsin DOT site to obtain an aerial photo of the turnpoint at Barron, and a few of the other potential landing sites along my course. Nice to know the runway orientations and widths.

The weather still looked good: not great, but who knows. The wind was forecast to be from the north at 9 kts throughout the day. The thermal index taken from the morning's sounding was still not available. At about 8:30am, impatient, I decided to ask the briefer. Sure enough, it was ready, but someone forgot to put it on the tape. About -3 at 3000, but forecast to be positive by 5000 AGL. He said that the forecast max temp was conservative, and it was possible to get several degrees higher. Great! If that happened, cloud bases could reach 5000AGL or more, better than the 3800-4200ft projected cloudbase in the afternoon. Good enough to go cross-country.

John McGregor was in the lead for the Hilton Cup; I would have to do more than 330 miles to beat him for the coveted trophy. The math was compelling: my best x-c speed so far has been about 50mph; 350 miles at 50mph would be seven hours in the air. I saw the day die Thursday about 6:00pm. Seven hours did not seem possible this time of the year. My diamond-goal flight, however, looked much more reasonable. If I plan on a launch at about noon, I could be back in four hours if I make my best previous speed. Even at only 40mph, five hours might be doable.

Out to Benson's, got the tow cart warmed up, laid out and checked the towrope, pulled out the PIK fuselage, ready to assemble. When Alan and his son arrived, we assembled the glider, did a pre-launch inspection and PCC, ensured that the radio and vario were in order, and double-checked that the logger had my flight declaration loaded.

Launch occurred at 12:53:34. The first thing I noticed was that the Volkslogger obscured the yawstring. Apart from that, the tow went well, and I released between Benson's and Bald Eagle Lake at about 2900 AGL at 12:59:10, marking the release with a sharp right-hand turn. I immediately headed towards the north, hoping to catch my first thermal, to allow me to get on course. I searched for several minutes, then caught a weak (1-2 knot) thermal off the end of the runway, eventually making it up to 3000AGL, then headed across my start line and back to the north.

The next stage of the flight consisted of testing the few cu for lift. Cloudbases were about 4000-4500AGL. I tiptoed around the edge of Class B, crossing the St. Croix just north of Stillwater. Across from Bayport I got another small boost, then continued gliding/drifted downwind to Hudson. At this point, everything went BLUE all ahead of me! I scratched and scratched over Hudson and the dog track, getting mostly zero sink, all the while drifting further south-southeast. As I got closer to the town of River Falls, it was quite depressing, sinking below 2500AGL, and keeping an eye out for landable fields. I wondered if the River Falls airport was still there (it wasn't), and decided to make a pass right over town before searching the far side of the town for a good landing site. BUMP! Right over the football training camp (I could see a logo of a chief) I picked up a 2-knot thermal which netted me another 800 feet.

I continued on, hoping that the day would improve, but also thinking that it better hurry up, or I'll never complete the course. We continued this pattern most of the afternoon, going a few miles, then picking up a light thermal and

a few hundred feet. I kept getting back up to about 4000 AGL each time, and deciding to continue towards any wisp I saw. Got another thermal between Ellsworth and its golf course. Better head more to the east; I'm drifting south of the course line. Spent a lot of time between Ellsworth and Rock Elm. Near the town of Rock Elm, I noticed that some cu were starting to form off to the east. The closer I got to the town of Durand, it was obvious that the topography was changing; more hills, valleys and trees. Each bump provided a few hundred feet, so I kept going, finally crossing the Red Cedar River, and seeing the Durand Airport just beyond a treeline.

The segment between River Falls and Durand has no airports, but fortunately there were ample landable fields. Finally I approached the turnpoint, and was glad to hear the logger beep that I was in the sector. I continued further into the sector to ensure I had gotten a valid fix, and I looked down at the turnpoint. I saw no airfield, only a small quarry. I hoped to catch what was starting to look like a possible cloudstreet. I headed north by northwest in zero- and mild sink, and re-crossed the river and its many alluvial fans. At about 2700 AGL I caught a 2-3 knot thermal, and was back up to almost 4000AGL. I kept a northerly heading, but mostly found sink. Of course there was; I was over the town of DOWNSVILLE! A check on the prayer wheel indicated that I could make it into Menomonie, which was right under my course line. I flipped the radio to Menomonie's traffic frequency.

OOOPS! I accidentally flipped the power switch for the logger!!¹ I turned it right back on, and realized that it wouldn't matter, since I couldn't finish the task anyway. Shortly thereafter I got another bump and back up to about 3500 AGL. I continued on to the north, passing to the west of the Menomonie airfield, and announced my position in case there was any traffic. No response. The airfield looked beautiful, two long paved runways, with grass on both sides of the East/West runway, and a grass "infield" to the west of the North/South runway that looked landable.

Having about 3000 AGL, I decided to press on, and made it about ten miles beyond² before I decided to turn back and land at Menomonie. I knew from my glide calculator that I could make it into Boyceville, but the day was clearly dying. I realized that with one or two thermals I might have made it into Barron, but the lure of the beautiful field at Menomonie was overpowering. Besides, it was located immediately off the interstate, making a retrieve easier. I turned around, and headed for Menomonie, doing a few zoomies in the process. Good time to drink some more water, too.

Approaching the airport, I announced my position again, the set up a downwind for runway 36. Flap setting selected, gear down and locked, speed set, trimmed, scanned for traffic again. The runway had widely spaced lights, so I could easily land on the pavement, and maybe even taxi off the runway between two lights. The grass to the left of 36 looked really good. On base, I kept a close eye on a Cessna that was taxiing towards the end of runway 09. Turning final, I further adjusted the flaps, and as I got even lower it was apparent that the grass infield was really smooth, and I adjusted my flight path to take the grass. Smooth touchdown, wheelbrake applied. The time was 4:54:21 PM, four hours in the air. My flight came to an end,³ but not the adventure.

After securing the glider and turning off the power, I surveyed the airport. One really large hanger, and several smaller hangars, what looked like an FBO with gas and office. I headed in that direction, and was happy to find the office door unlocked, and bathroom functioning. A call to crew (THANK YOU, ALAN!), and a message to home, then I decided to find someone on the field for a hand at getting the glider off the grass. Only one hangar door was open, so I walked there (naturally, at the extreme far end of the row of hangars) and found a family "helping" the pilot ready for an annual inspection.

"Were you the glider that just landed?" Yup. "We thought maybe it was Doctor Dan." Doctor Dan? from Menomonie? Oh yeah, I remembered that Dan Johnson had attempted to start a club in Menomonie, but I had heard that the club was disbanded. At any rate, I went back to the phone, and gave his home a call. His wife was skeptical at first, but gave me Dan's direct dial number. No pencil near the phone (remember for takeoff checklist

¹See point 1 on the trace. The trace ended, and a new trace began when I turned the logger back on (new trace not included in article).

²See point 2 on the trace.

³See point 3 on the trace.

next time), so I was hoping that I could keep all the numbers in my head and not mix them up with my calling-card numbers.

The good doctor answered, remembered me, then beeped off to take a call. A minute later, he was back on the line, and said "My wife will pick you up in five minutes. I'll help you put the glider in the big hangar." What luck! Even before I got back to the glider, Isabelle showed up. We pulled the glider down to the big hangar and secured it. A few minutes later, I was sitting at the Johnson kitchen table, sipping a root beer when Dan Johnson walked through the door. We decided to go put the glider in the hangar, then get some dinner.

The Menomonie Airport (Score Field) is really a great glider site! Lots of pavement, lots of smooth grass (he showed me the few bumps that should be smoothed), and even great grass underruns big enough to land on. The big main hanger is little-used, with extra office space and other facilities. It made me think that this could be a great contest site. He invited our entire club to come over to Wisconsin for a soaring getaway. We should!!!

After dinner, we went back out to the field, got his Ventus CM assembled and ready for the weekend, then waited. Alan arrived with the trailer shortly. We disassembled the PIK in the light of the main hangar, and headed home, arriving back at Benson's at about 11:30.

I was disappointed to not make my goal, but glad to have made a cross-country flight of over 100 miles. It reinforced to me two main points:

1. One of the great things about soaring is the people you meet.
2. Even on mediocre days it is possible to soar cross-country (it would have been a good Delbert day) reasonably surprising distances. On a day like this, someone flying the Pilatus or Ka-6 could have stayed right with me and flown the same course.

It appears that the Gold Distance/Diamond Goal will have to wait for next year. It also gave me a chance to learn how to use the logger properly.

Attachments:

"MAP" - this page shows the GPS trace overlaid on the course that was declared.

"Barogram and Variogram" - this shows the vertical profile of the flight (just like a paper or foil barograph) and below it reflects the relative climb/sink rates over the flight.

"Sectors" - this shows a blowup of each declared turnpoint and the start/finish, for use in flight verification:

- Box 1 shows the start line at Benson's, perpendicular to the first course line.
- Box 2 shows the trace around the first turnpoint (clearly identifying that I was inside the FAI sector)
- Box 3 shows the second turnpoint (not made)
- Box 4 shows the finish line at Benson's perpendicular to the last leg (also not made)