

THREE DIAMONDS IN A 1-26

by Doug Levy (with help from
George Powell)

My youthful dreams of flight were turned into reality by hang gliding. During the spring of 1974 I learned to fly hang gliders in upstate New York in an area about an hour's drive north of Harris Hill. Eight years later I moved to California. For the next decade I frequented the Owens Valley and flying the Sierras, where I logged many 100 mile plus adventures.

In 1995, I began taking sailplane lessons at Warner Springs and earned my private glider license in 1996. While on a hang gliding trip in 1996, I rented a Lark at the Bishop airport, and that first flight in a sailplane over the White Mountains was a new and exciting experience. I was hooked! Now I was determined that I would fly a sailplane cross-country across here in one of the most spectacular soaring areas of the world.

Warner Springs is my home base. It is located in southwestern California where soaring conditions are great year-round. In the fall of 1996, I bought a Schweizer 1-26 B, #317. My plan was to fly the Owens Valley along the same routes I had flown in hang gliders. I had been warned by several sailplane pilot friends who had also flown hang gliders that a 1-26 wouldn't perform much better than a hang glider and would probably be disappointing. But, "what the heck," I could always sell it and buy something else.

I spent the winter of 1996 honing my skills. Friendships were developed with the "Skid Row" gang, a group of fun loving 1-26ers. Garry Dickson, George Powell and Jimmy Zapata were some of the ringleaders of Skid Row, and the gang started calling me "Hangman."

March 2, 1997 - DIAMOND ALTITUDE ATTEMPT

Garry Dickson, who had just finished earning all three Diamonds in his 1-26 in 1996, became my mentor and provided a gauge to measure my flying against. He suggested that I make a Diamond Altitude attempt at California City, and since a wave camp was scheduled in March, I signed up.

Sunday March 2, 1997 dawned at California City with the most beautiful lenticular wave clouds imaginable hovering in the lee of the Sierras. I did not have a transponder in my 1-26, which meant that it would be necessary for

Cindy Brickner to accompany me in her transponder-equipped glider. About 3 p.m., Cindy launched to chase another glider. I would follow next, call her when I was near 18,000 ft. and we would climb together.

The flight through the rotor was the roughest I had ever experienced. After some slow climbing, I found a sweet spot with smooth 1,000 fpm lift and climbed steadily through 17,000 ft. Cindy informed me that the controllers were allowing gliders without transponders above 18,000 ft in the window that day. Climbing above those beautiful lenticular clouds at 23,000 ft is a vision I will never forget.

Not knowing how long it might take to get down and unable to climb any further, at about 5:15 I decided to pull spoilers so I would land before dark. I was indicating 24,120 ft when I pulled full spoilers. The thermometer on the air vent read 30 degrees below zero. The sun was setting on the horizon as I touched down.

Cindy measured the barograph trace and concluded that the flight was 50 feet short of Diamond Altitude. I wasn't too concerned, as this was my first wave flight. I would surely do better on my next attempt. Then I made a big mistake. I went home.

The next day the wave returned and Jim Payne set a new speed record in strong lift. In the weeks that followed I returned again and again, and each time the wave eluded me. It was not to be.



Crew members Beverly Darley and Mike Longwell.

June 20, 1997 – DIAMOND GOAL

During May, I completed my 5 hour duration flight at Warner Springs with George Powell doing the timing. My five hour and twenty minute flight was properly acknowledged upon landing by the Skid Row gang pouring cold beer on my head.

On the weekend of June 20, 1997, I returned to the Owens Valley. My plan was to attempt a Diamond Goal flight out of Lone Pine. Tows were not available at Lone Pine, so I arranged one from Bishop. I declared Janie's Ranch (a former brothel with an abandoned air strip on the Nevada border) as my first turnpoint, Keeler (a little mining town south of Lone Pine) as my second, and then back to Bishop as goal.

I launched, climbed to 10,000 ft and headed north along the White Mountain range. Flying close to sharp cliffs and snowy ridges along the Whites, my 1-26 would drop like a rock between thermals. Then, just as I would turn away from the ridge, it would hit lift, climb up and jump across another canyon. At Boundary Peak, I departed the mountains after a boomer got me to 17,000 ft. I radioed my crew, Mike Longwell, and his assistant, Beverly Darley, to check out the landing possibilities at Janie's Ranch. Mike radioed the bad news. The truck had died at Janie's.

I flew out across the valley and took the turnpoint photos. I told my crew to look up and smile as I passed over their heads and snapped the picture. I raced back toward Boundary Peak, headed south and radioed the Bishop Airport requesting that they call a tow truck to rescue my crew.

By the time I reached Black Mountain at the south end of the Whites, Mike, with the help of the tow truck, was on his way back to Bishop. I asked him if I should land. He insisted that I keep going.

I climbed to 16,000 ft before jumping the notorious sink hole at Westgard Pass. I lost over 6,000 ft before reaching the foothills of the Inyo Range. After a lot of struggling, I climbed back to 15,000 ft and raced for Keeler. Mike now had a new battery in the truck and was headed south.

At the south end of the Inyos I dashed away from the mountains, snapped the second turnpoint picture at 11,000 ft and got back in lift at 8,000 ft. It was 5:30 p.m. I regained 15,000 ft along the Inyos in weakening conditions.

As I moved north along the Inyos, I worked every scrap of lift I could. I slowly worked up to the highest ground before dropping into the low knolls of Westgard Pass. The day and the lift were dying. My crew was waiting at a place we had scouted out as a possible landing area near

the pass. As I crept across Westgard Pass, I was down to 7,500 ft, only 3,500 ft above the uninviting, brush-filled desert floor. It was doubtful that I could make it to Bishop. Then, in close on the west side of Black Mountain, I felt light bump. After several passes, I inched my little bird up to 8,000 ft. Hoping I could make it, I sent my crew toward the Bishop Airport. I would need witnesses at the goal. Then, magically, the lift turned on. Before long I had climbed to 11,000 ft. I rolled out and headed toward Bishop.

I landed at 7:00 p.m., having taken seven hours and thirteen minutes to fly 210 miles.

I was ecstatic. It had been a cliff-hanger. Had my crew not performed above and beyond the call of duty, it would not have been possible. Diamond Goal on my first attempt in the Owens Valley! Life was good. But with an average speed of 30 mph, how was I going to ever fly the over 310 miles required for Diamond Distance?





Triple Diamond friends, (left to right) Captain George Powell (Hawkeye), Doug Levy (Hangman), and Garry Dickson (2x4).

June 28, 1997 - FIRST DIAMOND DISTANCE ATTEMPT

The following weekend I returned with three of the Skid Row pilots, and this time we staged out of Lone Pine. Garry, George and Jim towed east to the Inyos. Based on my hang gliding experiences I decided to try my old route going north along the Sierras. Instead of towing east, I went west climbing from 7,500 ft to above the escarpment at 11,000 ft. Soon I was north of Independence. Upon reaching Tinemaha Peak, I crossed the Owens Valley and reached the Whites at Black Mountain, thus bypassing Westgard Pass. On the Whites, I joined the others as we headed for our first turnpoint, Boundary Peak. From Boundary Peak we headed south toward the Cerro Gordo mine. However, as we reached the south end of the Inyos we hit a strong east wind and big sink. That ended the day. We all ended up landing in Lone Pine.

This experience convinced me that taking the first leg north up the Sierras had several advantages over the traditional route the 1-26s had been taking along the Inyos:

1. The sun heating the eastern slopes of the Sierra made an earlier start possible.
2. Waiting for the hang gliders to climb above the peaks on the Sierra gave us an accurate indication exactly when the lift was working.
3. The hang gliders along the Sierras could mark the thermals.
4. Crossing the Owens Valley from 16,000 ft was far easier and safer than staggering across Westgard Pass at a lower altitude.

July 18, 1997 - SECOND DIAMOND DISTANCE ATTEMPT

On the weekend of July 18, 1997 we returned to Lone Pine for another attempt. George, Garry and Jimmy had decided to give the route up the Sierras a try this time. We would all tow to a remote start point over the switchback road seven miles southwest of Lone Pine. From there we would either fly straight out across Nevada or use our declared turnpoints. Even if we didn't fly Diamond Distance, the scenery below would be magnificent. Indeed, as we flew north we marveled at frozen lakes in the middle of July. We circled over snow-capped granite cliffs, waterfalls and sparkling streams. We flew past the highest mountain in the contiguous United States – majestic 14,494 ft Mount Whitney. Garry and I made the crossing from Mt. Tinemaha to the White

Mountains. Jimmy raced into Bishop. George returned to Lone Pine with technical problems.

Garry and I got turnpoints at Boundary, and then flew south and got our photos of the Dolomite Mine. However, it was getting late and lift was dying so Garry decided to land at Bishop. As I flew past White Mountain, I experienced unusually heavy sink. After staggering along the hills, I finally had to bite the bullet and land out in Del Anderson's field, which is just down the hill from the Montgomery Pass. This was my second off-field sailplane landing, a 280 plus mile flight.

July 19, 1997 - THIRD DIAMOND DISTANCE ATTEMPT

On Saturday I planned to fly north deep into Nevada. Launching from Lone Pine, Garry, George and I headed north again along the Sierras. Jimmy headed up the Inyos. Soaring conditions were improving. Flying over new terrain and pushing toward Austin, I finally landed just before sunset at Hawthorne, Nevada. George stayed in the Owens Valley and earned his well-deserved third Diamond in his 1-26.

July 20, 1997 - DIAMOND DISTANCE

Sunday morning, July 20 arrived with George elated and Jimmy and I determined. We declared the same turnpoints that George had used the day before: Montgomery Pass, Dolomite Mine and Boundary Peak. Having earned their Diamonds, Garry and George decided to celebrate by flying over Mt. Whitney for a picture taking session and then fly south toward home.

First on tow, I released over the Switchbacks and headed for the top of Mt. Whitney, a personal goal I've had for years. I was able to get to 13,600 ft, but after a time of trying I gave up and headed north.

I left the Sierras lower than I liked at 13,500 ft and arrived at the southern end of the Whites at 9,000 ft. As I passed Bishop, the thermals became stronger and I flew over White Mountain at 15,000 ft. After that, I simply dolphin-flew to Boundary Peak, thermaled quickly to 17,500 ft and headed for Montgomery Pass. I took my first turnpoint photo without dropping below 14,000 ft. It was 2:30 and the first 100 miles was behind me.

The flight back to Westgard Pass was easy without much circling. Flying near cloud base my indicated airspeed was 45 mph, while the GPS would show a ground speed of 90 mph. I headed across Westgard Pass with 16,000 ft, hit sink but found lift about midway. There were clouds over the Inyos and 16,000 ft was easily maintained. I took the turnpoint picture at Dolomite Mine and turned north in sink. It was 5:15. I found the lift and was soon back at 16,000 ft. With 200 miles completed I still had over 110 to go.

Westgard Pass had more clouds now and the crossing was effortless. After reaching the Whites at 14,000 ft, I hit sink and was down to 10,500 ft near Bishop. I wasn't worried because there was a cloudstreet ahead and in a short time I was cruising past White Mountain at 15,000 ft. I reached Boundary Peak, my last turnpoint, at 7:10. I was over 17,000 ft as I turned south. I left the cloudstreet at White Mountain flying over 90 mph at 16,000 ft and arrived at Bishop with 12,000 ft.

It was over. I did some wingovers and landed to my waiting crew at 7:30 p.m. after eight hours, eleven seconds and 326 miles.

All the necessary forms, film and barograph traces were forwarded to the SSA. In due course, I was notified that my Silver and Gold Badges had been issued. Later I was informed that both the Diamond Goal and Diamond



Author Doug Levy after completeing his Diamond goal in his 1-26.


Distance flights had been approved and the certificates were issued. I was still missing Diamond Altitude to complete my Diamond Badge. Just 50 feet short of a Diamond Badge!

However, in July I received a letter from the SSA indicating that there was a possibility that the March flight at California City might qualify for Diamond Altitude, using FAI Sporting Code methods. The barograph trace went back to the observer for another measurement and then back to the SSA office. I didn't follow up. The matter was entirely out of my hands.

I was determined to make a Diamond Altitude flight before the end of the year, so I headed for Minden on October 25, 1997. I got a lot of friendly help, but could find

only light wave. I made two more trips in November, to no avail.

On November 27, as I was packing for a fourth try at Minden, the mail arrived. It included a letter from the SSA. I opened it and couldn't believe what I was reading. Judy Ruprecht had reviewed my March altitude flight and using the FAI Sporting Code rules had determined that the flight qualified as Diamond Altitude!

It was over. In the span of five months, from March until July, I had completed all three badges: Silver, Gold and Diamond in my trusty 1-26. Life is good. 

About the Author: Doug Levy lives in Oceanside, California and works as a Mechanical Engineer. His current favorite soaring is straight out cross-country. His personal

goals include flying in a soaring contest and a straight-line flight of over 400 miles in a 1-26. In July of this year he flew over 300 miles from Cal City to Austin, Nevada. Doug believes more of the aging hang glider pilots will enter soaring in the next few years and with their skills a new era of soaring will begin. Doug says he's still learning about soaring and the 1-26 is a great way to begin.



The SSA Is Open For Business 24 Hours A Day

Soar
The
Net

www.ssa.org

Soar
The
Net

Where to Fly
Governmental News
Contest Results
Merchandise
Classified Advertising
And Much, Much More