

Calendar

Come Back Alive

The History of Soaring in San Diego

If anyone might be considered the Tiger Woods of soaring, it would be John Robinson," says local-aviation historian Gary B. Fogel. "As a student at San Diego High School in the early 1930s, Robinson was one of a group of teenagers who took their gliders to Black's Beach, before any nude sunbathers were there. With a long rope attached to a car, they ran a glider down the beach, and released it. They soared back and forth along the cliff. For a high-school kid that takes a little courage, and there was a whole group of them."

Robinson, who went on to set records and win national soaring championships, is among the local

LOCAL EVENTS

Soaring in San Diego. Drawing on research and interviews with aging aviators, he begins the book with 19th-century hang-gliding, covers gliders and sailplanes, and concludes with today's paragliders — the "collapsible" aircraft. "The entire aircraft actually fits inside a backpack," Fogel says of paragliders. "You can hike anywhere, open it up, jump off a cliff, and go soaring. It's the most compact aircraft ever imagined."

Long before that was possible, however, there were the motorless-flight pioneers.

Fogel names San Diegan John J. Montgomery as the first American to fly a glider. "In fact, he was the first American to fly, period, here in San Diego, in 1883." But he isn't famous because he was secretive about it, Fogel contends. "In those days, if you were thinking about flying anything, you were considered a little crazy." He kept it to himself for fear of ridicule, Fogel speculates. For that reason no photographs document his claim. "The only witness was his brother. But as I explain in the book it seems that all the conditions [for success] were favorable."

William Hawley Bowlus was born and raised in San Fernando, but he was living in San Diego when he built the first sailplane in America, in 1929. Back then, the distinction between gliders and sailplanes was that gliders, unlike sailplanes, never rose above the point where they took off. "How could they, without a motor? But Bowlus created such an efficient glider, he was capable of launching off a hill and staying in the lift above the take-off point. It was a new experience in American aviation. The only Americans who had done it

before him were Orville and Wilbur Wright, who experimented with gliders before their motorized flight. Bowlus would launch off Point Loma and soar back and forth for long periods. In fact, he took the American duration record for soaring from nine minutes to over nine hours."

Charles Lindbergh himself made motorless flight history in San Diego. It happened because of Bowlus, who was superintendent of construction on the Spirit of St. Louis at Ryan Aeronautical Co. When the plane's historic flight was over, Bowlus and Lindbergh stayed friends, and Lindbergh came to San Diego to learn gliding from Bowlus, who had started a gliding school here.

"In 1930, Lindbergh was launched in a sailplane from Mount Soledad and managed to soar along the coastline all the way to Del Mar. It was a local-distance record for sailplanes. But the flight is most important for being the first recorded use of the lift along the cliffs at Torrey Pines."

This weekend, Fogel, who works as

senior scientist for a computer firm in La Jolla, will be at the Torrey Pines Gliderport for a book-signing and discussion. He obviously feels a special reverence for the place, which, with his help, was designated a national soaring landmark by the National Soaring Museum in Elmira, New York. Thanks partly to his documentation, it has been recognized as a city, state, and national historic site, too.

Geographically speaking, few places in America can compare with it. Today pilots in all disciplines still experiment with low speed, motorless aeronautics there. These experimenters include radio-control modeling enthusiasts. "Things you can do with a model you wouldn't necessarily want to try in a real one first," says Fogel, who includes modelers in his history.

The early glider planes of 1930s vintage are "pretty much all gone," says the 32-year-old, who has flown models since childhood and still does, in addition to flying with friends in their real sailplanes. "Gliders and sailplanes

don't survive very long. They're not built like 747s to last 40 or 50 years. But one way we can recapitulate their history is by making models and flying them."

Local modeler Carl Gwartney was a WWII glider pilot in the days when there used to be "big, troop-carrying gliders that would drop men silently behind enemy lines," says Fogel. "The object was to get back alive. They actually did a lot of this successfully. Now this former pilot has built a replica of one of those gliders. And he flies it as his way of recapitulating his own history."

— Jeanne Schinto

"Wind and Wings: The History of Soaring in San Diego"
Book-signing and discussion
by author Gary B. Fogel
Saturday, November 25,
2:00-4:00 p.m.
Torrey Pines Gliderport
2800 Torrey Pines Scenic Drive
Free
Info: 858-452-9858



Gary B. Fogel

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