



DAVID CRONK “TO CATCH THE WIND”

by Robert Wald

“Our species is the only creative species, and it has only one creative instrument, the individual mind and spirit of a man.” —JOHN STEINBECK

And to varying degrees do those of our species implement their one and only creative instrument. Simply put, there are those who possess highly creative minds, yet fall short, due to laziness or a severely slipping brain clutch, resulting in failure to engage first gear. Then there are those of our species who possess great creative instruments coupled with lightening pizzazz, yet lack acceptable social skills to move forward, facing a life of rejection. Finally, there are those of our species who possess a rare combination and alignment of genetic and celestial balance and rhythm, and whose creative instrument is highly tuned, red-lining if you will, yet not overheating to crack and self-destruct. In this class, to this degree, I list David Cronk.

Having been raised in the exact same area as Cronk, my elder brother, Allen, and his friends became good buddies with David—all a very unique clique of musicians, artists, eccentrics and revolutionary beach rats. Though they were only 2 years older than me, they may as well have been 200 light-years ahead. I was still in my teen-

age dark age looking for the light, while these youngsters had already snagged the light and left the planet. Granted, some fell short, lots were rejected, and a few managed to make a go of it. That’s life and life only.

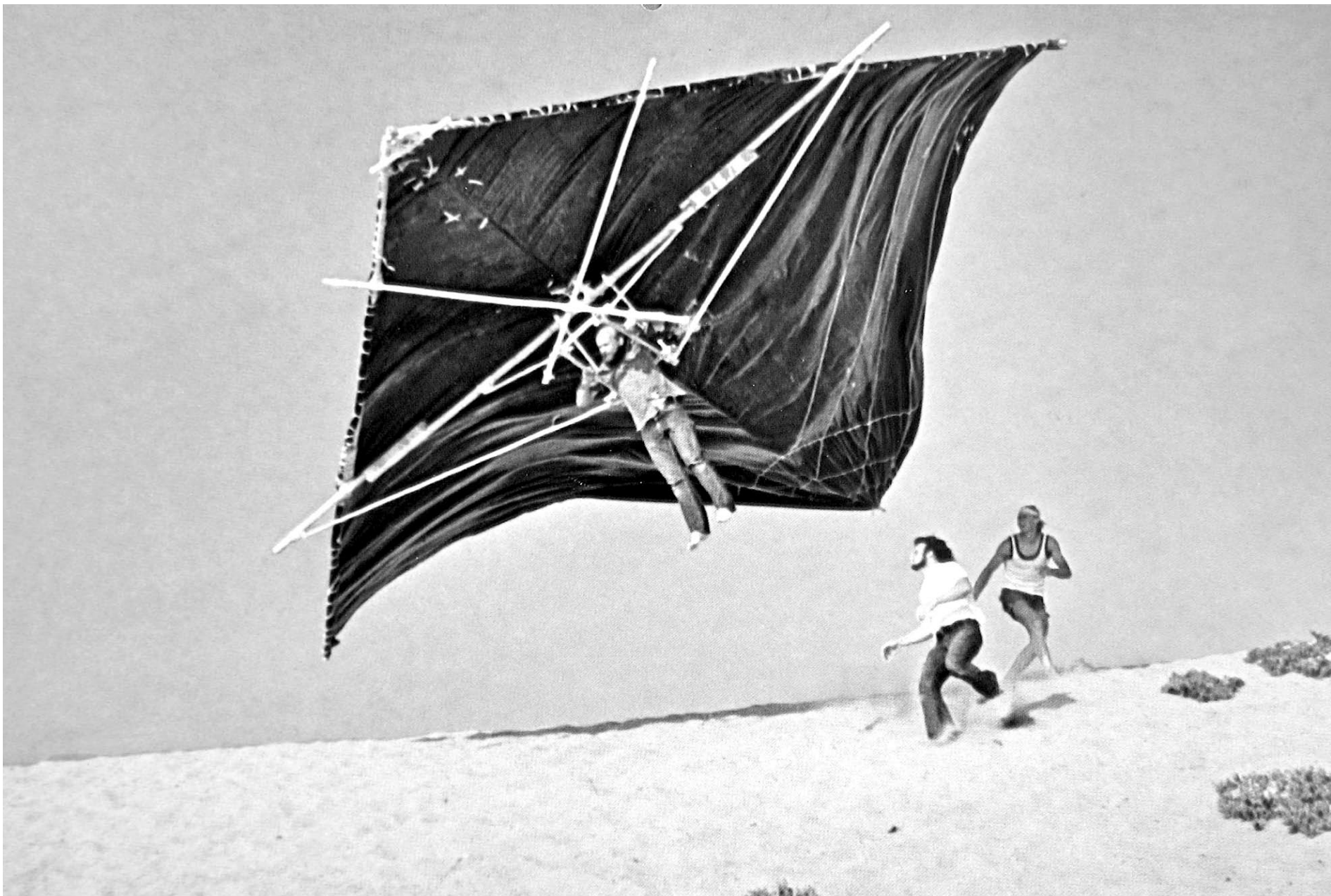
Over the years I’ve heard so much about the special talents of David Cronk and recently discovered he’s been living in north San Diego county for over 20 years. So I tracked Cronk down and put together the following eight page interview, with photographs, which incidentally, could have run into thousands of pages as this man has accomplished so much in his life, all with incredible success. Take it easy, but take it.

Born and raised at Torrance Beach, anybody and everybody who lived on or near the beach of L.A.’s South Bay contracted heavy “surf fever”. What was it like back then, and who were your main influences in ocean sports, particularly surfing, since that was the ultimate rage?

I grew up about a block from Torrance Beach, and started surfing at the age of 10, around 1958. I went to Parkway Elementary school which was conveniently located one block from the beach, and was able to surf every morning before school started.

~ flip to continue ~

*“A Very Windy Day”
Dave Cronk flies his hang glider about 500 feet
above Torrance Beach in 1972.*



One of the early “state of the art” hang gliders and pilots launching at Torrance Beach dunes. The main structure was made of bamboo. The images on the following pages will illustrate the dramatic evolution of hang glider designs over the years.

~ continued from former flip ~

My teacher had the compassion to let me sit next to the heater in the morning and thaw out. Very nice in a time when wetsuits were unknown to most surfers. My first board was an 8-foot all-balsa Velzy. In those days there were no surfing magazines, books, movies or literature of any type, so surf influences came from actually seeing guys in action. Some surfers I really admired at the time were Rick Irons, Jeff Hackman, Phil Edwards, Kemp Aa-berg, Johnny Fain and a few others. I saw most of them for the first time at Rincon and Malibu, although Rick and Jeff were often regulars at Torrance Beach. I loved their beautiful, fluid style, along with their complete command of the waves. As kids we would hitchhike with our boards up the coast to Malibu and above, never knowing where we might sleep that night.

In high school, you were a standout track and field competitor, in particular, pole vaulting. How did this event spark your interest in “flying” or “taking to the skies?”

Well, I always had an instinct to fly. My Dad worked for American Airlines in the 50’s, and we regularly flew coast to coast in DC-6’s, and 7’s. Flying was really an adventure back then, with the outcome not always certain. I found myself attracted to any method of getting off the ground; high diving, jumping off sand-cliffs, jumping off roofs with sheets. Pole vaulting was a natural. It is a com-



Sail On: Jerry Manning at the helm of Mike Deegan’s sailboat; David Cronk keeps watch starboard, and our beloved brother and musician Steve Libbea, flashes peace sign. The Torrance Beach hang gliding take-off dunes are in background.

plex event and carried real risks at the time. I was doing over 15 feet in high school, and they were still using the old sawdust pit for landing.

After graduating from South Torrance High School, you attended El Camino Junior College, lost your interest in track and field and developed a passion for art, design and science? Do you remember how this change of interest transpired, and its effect on your future, not only as a hang gliding pioneer, but as a top-flight engineer?

Along with sports and music, I had passion for the visual arts and sciences at an early age. My Mom was an exceptionally creative person in the visual and musical arts. My Dad was passionate in the engineering disciplines and was a heavy hitter at TRW. I inherited a bit of both parents; some would say an odd mixture. I was passionate about painting and entered competitions around the Bay area. The transition from high school to college revealed options to me, and track and field just drifted away. The exposure to college levels of arts and sciences was a revelation; I realized I could actually do anything I wanted to.

As I understand, these changes in life interests led you to enroll at the Pasadena Art Center College of Design, the premier industrial design college of its kind in the world. It was there that you studied transportation and product

design. Back then 90% of all of the automotive designers in the USA were recruited from Art Center and shipped to Detroit. Tell me about this process and your decision to remain in the SoCal beach area instead of pulling up roots and moving to Detroit.

Back in the 70’s, if you wanted a career in transportation design you had to go to Art Center, and you WOULD end up at one of the big 3 in Detroit. 90% of all of the automotive designers came from Art Center. Scouts would come from GM, Ford and Chrysler and interview all of the students, usually by your junior year. After studying transportation design at Art Center for a few years, the realization that I would inevitably have to move to Detroit finally hit home. I don’t know why it took so long to sink in. I loved what I was doing there, but I made the tough decision to stay in the beach area and try to figure out something else to do. About this time I got married and got a temporary job in the Planning Department for the city of Torrance which influenced my decision to remain at the beach.

What were your impressions Art Center College of Design at the time you attended?

Art Center is a unique place. Without consciously understanding the importance of it at the time, it is one of the few institutions that blend art and science; they of-

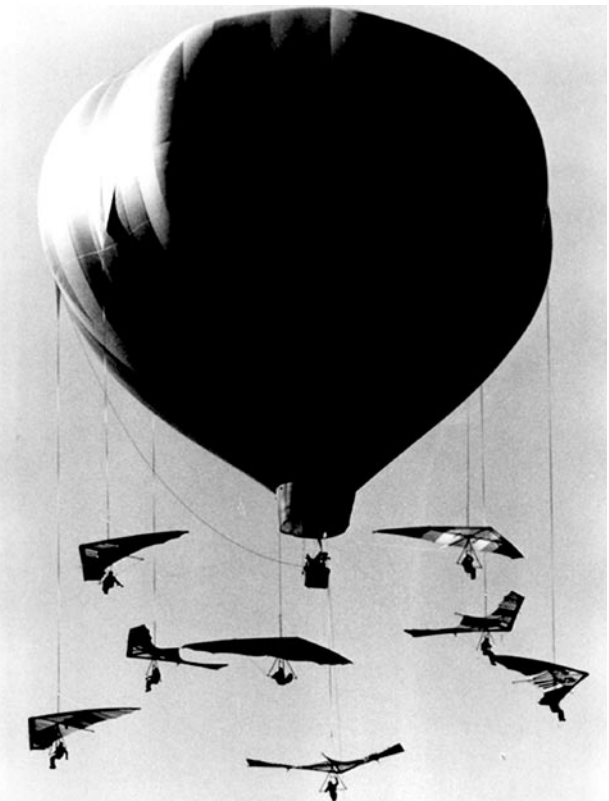


This particular advertisement illustrates incredibly beautiful artwork on wings.

fer BS degrees with a heavy emphasis on making your engineering projects look good. Engineering schools are great at teaching strict engineering disciplines, but they rarely offer classes that add aesthetics into the mix. Most engineering problems can be solved in a number of different ways. A good example is a bridge. There are a 100 ways to design a safe, practical structure that all have similar utility and similar cost. Adding aesthetics into the design goals can result in a far more elegant and beautiful bridge. Some engineers consider aesthetics as frivolous and unimportant, but these objects are all around us and are part of our everyday lives. The man-made world does not have to be ugly. Why not have these things make the world a more enjoyable place?

How did you first develop an interest in hang gliding, exactly when was this, and who was there?

One day around 1969 I heard about some guys flying “kites” off the cliffs at Torrance Beach, just where I had grown up. These were man-carrying gliders that looked liked kites, but were actually based on NASA research into spacecraft recovery vehicles. They were made of bamboo, plastic sheeting and duct tape. Comical, but I was intrigued. I had to get involved. Torrance Beach has



From 1000 feet altitude, he world’s largest hot-air balloon drops 8 pilots, each individually flying the latest “Cumulus 5B” hang glider design—circa 1975.



“Cumulus 5B” on production line

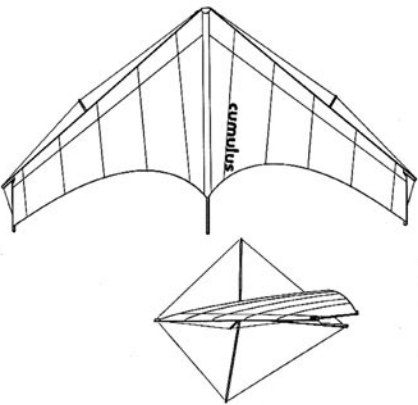


David Cronk flies over Torrey Pines, San Diego, CA. in “Quickliver B” design.

80-foot sloping sand cliffs, which are perfect for beginning flights, and offer pretty low risk at the North end. On a good day they would glide all the way to the water’s edge. Sometimes a glider would have a structural failure, and a pilot would fall onto the sand and everyone would laugh. People rarely got hurt, and it was great fun.

Tell me about your first hang glider; how was it acquired or did you design and build it yourself? Also, what was it made of and how it led to successive designs?

I immediately saw ways to improve these gliders and started designing and gathering materials. I found a guy selling surplus TV antennae aluminum tubing, and used it for the main structure – at the time a major improvement over bamboo. I used aircraft cable instead of bailing wire. I increased the wingspan, which is key to the performance of a glider. I was living with my in-laws at the time, and used their front yard to build my first glider. The upside was that Karen’s Dad was an aeronautical engineer, and offered invaluable design advice. The downside was that I used clear plastic for the wing covering material. I laid it out on the grass in their front yard. The sun turned the translucent wing into a greenhouse, roasting the grass beneath it. It left a huge black imprint for all to see for many months. The in-laws were not amused but for some reason they did not throw me out.



Original “Cumulus 5” mechanical drawing

These early designs were 100% weight-shift controlled which was problematic for turning a large wing span glider. Over various iterations I added control surfaces to overcome the turning problems. In the end I created a glider that was inexpensive, fully controllable, and was soarable in very light winds. Soarable means you can remain in the air, and even climb above your takeoff point, sometimes for hours at a time without a motor of any type.

Tell me about your first hang gliding flight. What happened and what did you learn from this first experience?

I flew that first design off of the sand-slopes at Torrance Beach. That first feeling of your feet becoming weightless is very difficult to describe, but it was overwhelming. There is at once a feeling of elation along with fear and an instinct of self-preservation. I was hooked. It worked incredibly well, and I immediately started thinking about ways to improve the performance.

~

The following is a testimonial by Mike Deegan, recalling the first “high performance” hang gliding flight off the Torrance Beach dunes and Pacific Ocean.

~ flip to continue ~



*“To do well in life, you need two things:
Passion and Curiosity.”*

—DAVID CRONK

Circa 1972: David Cronk launches “Quicksilver prototype #1 off the Torrance Beach cliffs with an assist from Bob Lovejoy.

~ continued from former flip ~

“David and I arrived at the Torrance Beach cliffs just as an ABC Wide World of Sports camera crew had just finished putting away their equipment in their truck and were preparing to depart. They had been filming Dick Eipper floating down to the beach with his bamboo kite, which was a “flight” of approximately 100 yards and a duration of 30-40 seconds.

“As we unloaded and set up David’s unprecedented design, the camera crew looked on with obvious surprise and interest. Their interest became astonishment when they saw David step off the cliff and actually elevate above them on the wind rising up the cliff face. Instead of the usual Eipper-style abrupt decent to the beach, David’s new design not only continued to rise in elevation, but somewhat ominously began to slowly bank into a right turn. The more the kite turned across the wind, the faster it moved and the more the windward tip tried to lift up and turn the kite completely downwind. It became clear that if left unchecked, the kite would rapidly accelerate and violently crash right back into the cliff face or worse, be slammed into the top of the cliff by the “rotor” (hangliding equivalent of going over the falls onto a waterless reef!).

“At that early stage of kite development, there existed neither seats nor harnesses. The pilot controlled and remained attached to the kite by suspending himself with his forearms and hands on two parallel struts that extended down from the centerline of the frame. He swung the weight of his body fore and aft, and right and left to adjust the configuration of the kite to the air it moved through. When David’s windward wing tip began to rise he had to move his body weight toward that wing tip to hold it down and keep the kite from banking back into the cliff. Because of a considerably higher wind speed than David had calculated for, he was forced to move his entire body to, and hang from, the windward strut. Even that was not quite enough

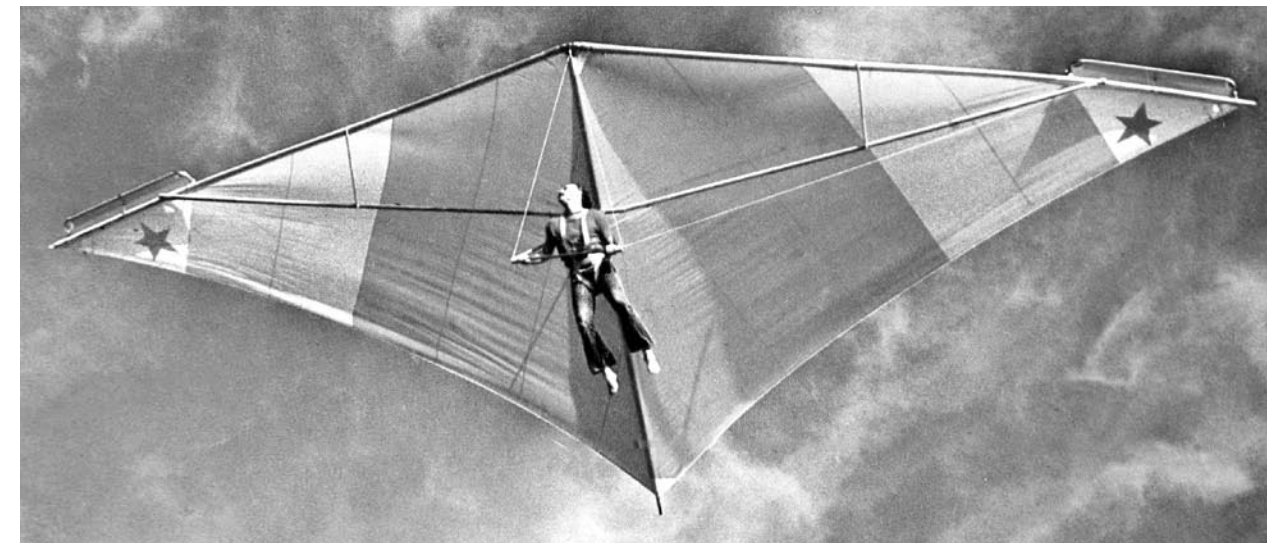


Dave drives on beach at Playa Del Rey in VW bug with hang glider racks, circa 1970

weight redistribution; he had to lift his fully extended legs to windward and hold them there at a full 90 degree angle to his torso. That was physically challenging enough on its own, but David then had to hold that position for the duration of the flight, which turned out to be much longer than any hang glider had ever even begun to experience. Positioning himself so, he was able to muscle the kite to a stalemate with the wind that was trying to kill or maim him! David and his one of a kind hang glider literally soared off into the distance on the ridge lift that slowly diminished with the continually lowering height of the cliff as it extended northward toward the Redondo Beach Pier. I borrowed an onlooker’s binoculars to watch David finally descend to a safe landing, nearly a mile away. I walked back to David’s VW with its homemade roof rack (you could safely leave your keys in the ignition in those days!), so I could drive down to Redondo to pick him up. As I left the ABC camera crew at the edge of the cliff with their jaws agape, one of them called out to me and said, “Hey! What’s that guy’s name?”

“Over the decades since, with all the Smithsonian developments, etc., I’ve always wondered how notable the footage would have become, had the camera crew not left their equipment back in their truck.”

~



Cronk flies high

At this time, hang gliding wasn’t really a bona-fide sport—basically a squad of characters jumping off the sand dunes at Torrance Beach. Tell us about the evolution of the sport, and what led to the next step in the development of hang gliding.

Dick Eipper was one of these early bamboo hang-glider pilots, an amazing person with fabulous strengths and even more interesting flaws. He wanted to take this fledgling sport and turn it into a business. Hang-gliding did not exist as any type of organized sport and the closest thing there was to a business were a few people manufacturing man-carrying kites that were towed behind boats. Dick was an incredible entrepreneur. He called in Popular Science and others and told them he had hang-glider plans for sale. Popular Science ran an article and mentioned the plans. Dick was immediately overwhelmed with orders for these plan. Some days 100 orders at \$5.00 each would come in, and unfortunately the plans were non-existent.

Dick offered me and several others a partnership in the new business, to be called Eipperformance. Up to this time I had felt kind of guilty “squandering” so much time on this ridiculous hobby, but I was passionate. I came home from the job one day and told Karen that I was leaving my stable job and going into the hang gliding business. We were expecting a baby, and leaving a perfectly stable job was clearly a leap of faith. I made the choice to partner with Dick. We finally got the plans completed and sent out. The business quickly took off. This was a rare case where the money flooded in before we had much of a business going.

Dick Eipper was eccentric. Even though he was a fireball at getting things started, he had a tough time coping with the reality of running a business. He was living over an office in the shop in a makeshift bedroom, and was a mess. One morning he emerged from his lair and came down to the shop. He was carrying a large paper bag and claimed he had a bomb. He threatened to blow the place up if we didn’t buy him out for \$50,000. He did not blow the place up, but we did buy him out shortly thereafter. Dick left the company and moved down to Antigua, where he bought a sailboat and continued his misadventures. He died in the late 1980’s.

What was business like those first few years?

Within a few years the sport really took off, and our hobby shop turned into serious business – sales exceeded \$4,000,000 in some years. As chief designer, I came up with a whole range of designs that served us well, and we were imitated by other manufacturers for years to come. One of the greatest benefits was the travel. We went to competitions and exhibitions all over the world to some incredible places.

One winter, Vail, Aspen, Telluride, Grand Targhee and a few others paid our expenses to do demonstration flights

off of their ski slopes. Hang gliding was relatively unknown, and it was a big deal back then. Typically hang gliders are foot launched. On snow, you have to ski down the slope to get airborne, and I had never skied before. My first attempt in Aspen required skis, but you could not use ski poles for obvious reasons. Sno-cats took us to the very top, dropped us off and left. It was suddenly very quiet. Well, the wind started blowing down the hill and we were forced to cancel the flying. I had no other option than to have my first ski experience from the highest ski-mountain in Aspen with no poles. Trial by fire, but I made it down.

THE CHAPTER SIX



“The Chapter Six” Dave Cronk’s surf band, 1960’s

You won the first International hang glider competition in Europe. You were proclaimed “The Veltmeister”. Describe that event.

The first World Hang Gliding Championships were held in 1975 in Kossen in the Austrian Alps in. It is a beautiful place, and the launch is often made off of skis. Hang gliding had evolved by this time to an international sport, and there were over 300 competitors from all over the world.

A side bonus to all this was Leroy Grannis. He had become very interested in hang gliding photography, and traveled around the world with us to various competitions. I had worshiped Leroy as a young kid, and had always wanted to know him. He became my friend through this unbelievable course of events. Jim McKay from the Wide World of Sports was covering the event, and let us hang out with him at night.

~ flip to continue ~



Cronk flies over the Esplanade just above Torrance Beach. Geographically similar to La Jolla, and just as bright and equally beautiful, the Palos Verdes Peninsula rises dramatically in the background.

~ continued from former flip ~

We would blaze through the Alps at night in his BMW and go to his favorite Alpine haunts for beer, yodeling and harp music. Despite this, I managed to win the competition.

What about the obvious danger in the sport?

Hang gliding up to the mid-70's was essentially unregulated and was becoming riskier by the day. Hundreds of manufacturers had gotten into the business, and serious accidents and deaths were becoming commonplace. Most of the risks were caused by poor equipment design and poor training. I had justified my participation by believing that I was making the sport safer by incorporating sound design practice which included careful analysis and testing of the equipment.

Perhaps I was, but I had lost so many friends by this time that one day I just walked away from the sport.

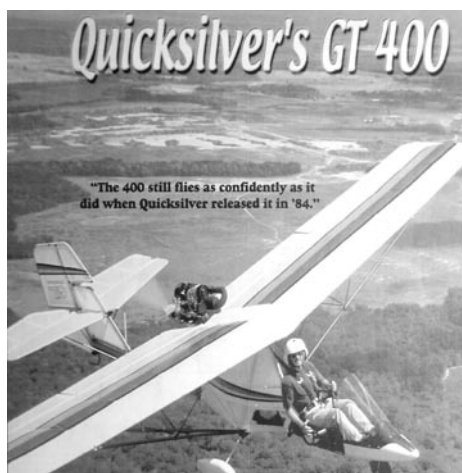
Shortly after this, in the late 1970's rigorous self-regulation came to the sport, and the equipment gradually became safer. Today the equipment is carefully tested and certified. Pilots are required to meet strict licensing requirements, and the sport is relatively safe.

How did your hang gliding business evolve into the Ultralight Aircraft business?

Around 1982 the Ultralight Aircraft movement began to really take off. One of my hang gliders, a semi-rigid wing called the Quicksilver was easily outfitted with a landing gear and motor. I got back into the business, which had moved to San Marcos, and things really took

off. Around 1982, a Texas group showed up and bought the business. I remained on as chief engineer, and business went wild with over 300 aircraft per month being sold. These Texas guys brought a whole new mindset. We had corporate aircraft, fancy offices, biz trips all over the country, and all manner of distractions. These guys were wildly out of place in SoCal. They were at once fun and ridiculous. They flew me to Texas and outfitted me with outrageous cowboy attire; hilarious stuff for a surf kid.

Under this new business banner, I matured the Quicksilver ultralight design and it went on to become one of the best selling aircraft of all time. Last I heard there have been over 10,000 of these manufactured and sold over a 30-year period. During that time I designed the first aircraft to be certified in the new FAA Sport Aircraft category, and it is still in production today.



David Cronk's design's are highly respected world-wide as evidenced by many cover stories on hang gliding, ultra-light aircraft, and even off-road dune buggies. These are but a few examples, that include "Scientific American" magazine.



Pictured above is an inflatable "Airbeam" structure without its skin covering. These Airbeams are used as structural supports for all type of disaster/charitable and military applications.

The longevity of your career as a premier designer and engineer of hang gliders and Ultralights was parlayed into a lucrative and challenging career with "Vertigo", a cutting-edge aerospace company.

One of my hang gliding competitors, Roy Haggard along with Glen Brown had started an aerospace business in Lake Elsinore called Vertigo. They were doing wild stuff for the Department of Defense, DARPA, NASA and JPL. They offered me a job that I couldn't refuse. I was given the task of heading up Airbeam structures projects. Airbeams are inflatable, braided tubes that are arranged into a framework that is covered with various skin materials to make an aircraft hanger or other large structure. These can be large structures, up to 90-feet wide that can cost in the millions. They can be deployed in hours instead of the weeks that competitors can take. It is clearly revolutionary technology.

Vertigo has given me the opportunity to oversee design projects for everything from satellite recovery systems to torpedo launch systems for nuclear submarines. Vertigo was recently acquired by Hunter Defense Technologies (HDT). I currently head up the Airbeam Shelter engineering group for HDT/Vertigo, which thrives around the world with international disaster, charitable and military groups as customers.

Your designs are featured in the Smithsonian collection. This is major recognition. Tell me how this transpired.

Yes, I have two projects in the Smithsonian; a hang glider and an Airbeam. The glider dates from about 1976

and was solicited by the Smithsonian for their permanent aerospace collection. The Airbeam is part of a traveling exhibition of the Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum. This exhibit showcases cutting-edge textile technology.

In addition to your multitude of talents in engineering and art, you also hold your own playing guitar. Tell me about picking up music as a side kick to your natural creative genius; what genre of music do you dig most and who are your main musical influences?

Well, back in the 60's when surf music burst on the scene, some of us got together and started a band. Key members were Steve Libbea, Kynn McCafferty and later Mike Deegan and Bobby Markland. We got pretty good and played all around Southern California until about 1970 when we drifted apart. We cut some records for Mercury, were played on American Bandstand, opened for the Righteous Brothers and generally had a great time. Make no mistake though; It was mostly for meeting girls. Steve Libbea and his brother Gene evolved into world class musicians.

I still pick on the guitar on a regular basis. I love any good quality music, including classical, bluegrass or any music with authenticity and character.

What are you doing today?

My wife Bobbi and I have a sailboat in Oceanside where we regularly sail and kayak. I still surf now and then, although most of my surfing is in the kayak. We



In a much fancier and less stressful environment, an Airbeam project was designed, developed and installed for one of the more recent Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awards ceremonies held in Hollywood, CA.

love hiking around the Southwest and have become amateur archaeologists and mystics. I have gotten very serious about landscape photography, but I remain deeply involved in design and engineering, and pursue any projects that I find interesting and challenging.



Bobbi and David Cronk-2010

Do you have any words of advice for the younger generations, and even older folk who are still struggling to attain some modicum of success and remain struggling in life.

I think to do well in life, you need two things: passion and curiosity. Formal education is just a tool in the process of fulfilling your potential. A young person might say "I want to be a great photographer", go to school to learn the foundations, and then start taking pictures.

I would argue that many of the best among us do it the other way around; their passion drives them to create images, then they are hampered by some mere technical problem. They resort to school or books to solve the problem. Passion drives everything.



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