



Kenny Bryenton's Reminiscences on 40 Years of Hang Gliding

Article and photos by John Heiney

Kenny Bryenton was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1937. He is 69 years young, and more enthusiasm for hang gliding you will not find in one person. I interviewed him last spring while he was on his annual pilgrimage to Torrey Pines for the good springtime flying. After getting to know Kenny I cannot help but believe that he knows the Secret of Life. It appears to involve flying hang gliders and making people laugh.

JH: When did you start flying hang gliders?

KB: 1967 or '68. I am not sure. I would have to go and look in the archives of the *Tribune*. Of course I had to build my own back then. We didn't have anything like what we are flying now.

JH: Have you flown every year since you started?

KB: Yes, except for one year. I couldn't fly because I had a heart attack.

JH: How did you know how to build the glider?

KB: I saw a picture in a magazine. It was not quite to scale. It was more like a banana. I used one-inch tubing so I had to have two cross spars. I used rip-stop nylon and ski rope instead of cables. I had to put lots of supports on it because it was so willowy.

I flew it behind a boat first, for safety. I released it and flew down to the water. Then we started towing it on the beach behind dune buggies, and then the desert.

JH: With no parachute and no helmet?

KB: No parachute and no helmet. (Smiling, chagrined and shaking his head)

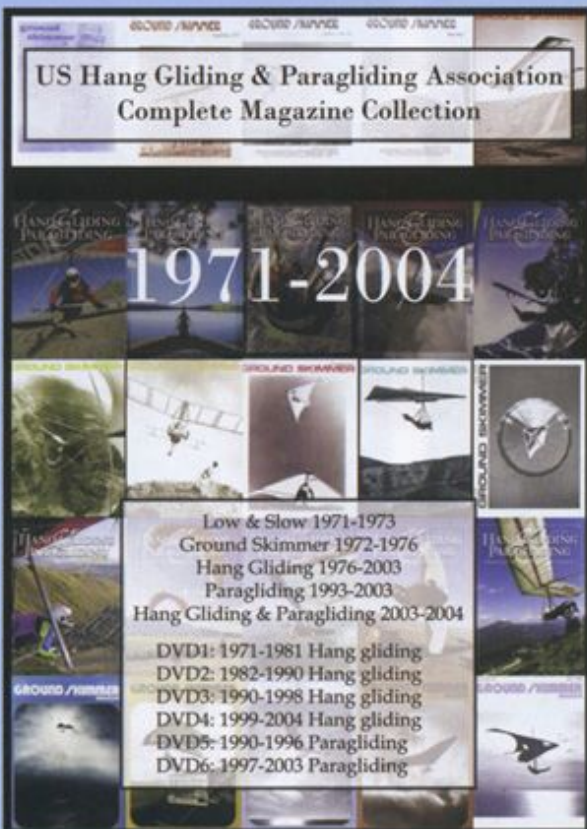
JH: Where did you first foot-launch your self-made hang glider?

KB: Almost a mile south of Balboa Avenue, on Genesee Avenue in San Diego. There is an apartment building there now, but there was a small hill there then. On the first flight I nose-dived. I made adjustments to the ropes to change the basetube position and got it to fly just perfectly. (smiles) Well...

I made several flights there, and then I looked for a higher hill. I found San Clemente Canyon Park and flew there.

JH: How long until you got a factory-made glider?

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KB: At least five years, but I made many more myself, each one an improvement over the last.

JH: Why have you continued to fly so long?

KB: Oh! How many people get their dreams fulfilled? I dreamed of flying.

JH: Where do you live?

KB: Ontario, Canada, but I plan to move back to Southern California.

JH: What sites do you fly when you are in Canada?

KB: I have flown Calgary, Thunder Bay, which is in Ontario, and I have flown on the East Coast. I finally got to fly on Prince Edward Island. The highest cliffs on Prince Edward Island are about 30 or 40 feet. Last year I managed to fly there in high winds.

JH: Do you fly as much when you are in Canada as when you are in San Diego?

KB: Not in Ontario. The only way I can fly in Ontario is by towing, and that is like kissing your sister, you know. I just have a scooter-tow and I can't get up high enough to search around for a thermal.

Then I have to impose on my non-flying friends to get me up there, and they all disapprove of my flying because my ex-wife has been sure I would kill myself. None of my kids were allowed to fly.

I have flown in Quebec, but there is no good place to fly in Ontario. That is why I am planning to sell my farm and move back to Southern California.

JH: Have you done any cross-country flying?

KB: The first time I ever flew with a parachute was at Big Black Mountain. It gave me so much more confidence that I was able to fly out of the valley for the very first time. I landed behind my buddy's house in Ramona, and I was just so excited. I was beside myself. I was so thrilled to be able to do that. (grinning)

JH: Do you know how many hours you have?

KB: Once I got over a thousand hours I didn't bother keeping track any more.

JH: Do you fly any other aircraft?

KB: I had my pilot license, but all the flying I like to do is illegal. I like to fly 50 to 100 feet off the ground and watch the



trees go by. At twenty thousand you can't tell if you are moving. I like to land out on the highways if there is no traffic, and land in the farmers' fields and land out at the desert and fly down through canyons and fly through the clouds. You are not allowed to do any of that stuff.

JH: Did you get in trouble for that kind of flying?

KB: Well, I did get caught. I'm pretty lucky, actually. My partner used to say, "I'd rather have your luck than a license to steal."

JH: Have you had any serious injuries?

KB: Just once. I had a concussion. I was soaring my modified home-built standard rogallo at Torrey Pines. My experimental applied trailing edge eventually made the glider uncontrollable. I got turned toward the cliff at the North Face. I might have gotten back in control, but there were some people standing at the cliff's edge. I had to continue the turn to avoid them and flew into the ground. I didn't know who I was, so they took me to Scripps Hospital.

JH: What is your philosophy of life?

KB: I try to be up all the time. I try not to be negative about anything. I always try to look on the positive side.

JH: Heard any good jokes lately?

KB: When Canadian geese fly in the "V" formation, do you know why one side is usually longer than the other? 'Cause there are more geese on that side.

JH: Do you have a most memorable flight?

KB: One flight was at Soboba



"I fly just for the sheer joy of being in the air." – KB

[Southern California]. I rode up the mountain in the back of a truck with Bob Wills at the wheel. I was never so scared in my life. We were going up so fast! I was a stock-car driver, so I was used to speed, but we were on a single-lane road, and we couldn't see if someone was coming from the other way. I got over to the side so I could bail out.

I was flying my own home-built Phoenix 6-B copy. The air was so smooth and so buoyant that I flew way out over Hemet. I had been up for three hours so I decided to land. At about 100 feet AGL I got a pop and instinctively turned in it. I got right back up above launch again! To get back up like that after having my legs down for landing was just a great thrill. I flew three hours and 45 minutes on that flight.

JH: Do you have a favorite flying site?

KB: I would have to say Torrey Pines is my favorite flying site, although I was really impressed with Point of the Mountain [Utah] for a smooth inland flying site that is just unbelievable.

JH: If you could change anything in your life, what would you change?

KB: I should have moved to California sooner.

When my dad bought me a motorcycle when I was 15, I was looking at a 125 cc. My dad said, "I don't know much about

two-cycles. Maybe we should get the 250 cc four-cycle." And stupid! stupid! stupid! me, I said, "I like this one." And I didn't have it a week and I realized it was too small. I could not take anybody on the back.

As it was, I broke my hand on the little one. If I had gotten the big one I might have killed myself, so it might have been a blessing in disguise. So actually I don't have any regrets. (smiling)

JH: When did you first come to Torrey Pines?

KB: The first time was three or four weeks after my first flight.

JH: Tell me about that day. What glider were you flying?

KB: I was flying a glider that I had built myself, which had no kingpost. I wasn't sure where the best place to launch was, so I launched from the North Face. Of course my glider wasn't very efficient, but all I had to do was get off. I think I was the most tense that I've ever been, because it was so high compared to where I had been flying. It was so sudden. One step and you were totally committed.

Everything went fine. My glider flew well. I flew down to the beach, and then I had the "hardly waits." I could hardly wait to go again.

JH: It wasn't so scary that day?

KB: No. I flew here almost two months



Kenny demonstrating his philosophy of life



before it was soarable. The first time that I took off here when it was soarable, other pilots were flying. Al Adams was here. I launched and for the first time I went up instead of down. I made a big wide turn at the end of the North Face and flew out of the lift band and landed on the beach. I was so upset! I thought, Darn, why didn't I make that turn sharper? I was so pumped up that I grabbed that glider and carried it up the trail without disassembling it. Al was flying over and he said, "I've never seen anybody do that before." I took off from the North Face and soared for a half hour.

JH: Who else was flying here then?

KB: I remember the Wills brothers, Chris Price, Bill Liscomb, John Lindbergh, Chip Creach, and Rich Matros.

Rich Matros's wife Becky was a very experienced driver. When Rich finally

got a big enough glider for two people we went to Horse Canyon. They flew about a half hour and landed. When I landed I ran over to see how excited Becky was after waiting all this time for her first flight. She had a glum look on her face, and I thought, What could have gone wrong? Just then in an inspiration I said, "Boy, I had to come down and land. I was afraid I was going to be sick. It was really turbulent up there." Her face lit up! She was afraid she would not be able to fly again because she had gotten sick. Normally I don't think that fast. (smiling widely)

Later Rich and Becky went to the Owens Valley and set an altitude record for two people on a hang glider of 18,000 feet.

JH: What does hang gliding mean to you?

KB: My wife was sure that I loved

flying more than her. She must be right, because we are divorced now and I am still flying. (smiling)

I think it is just what Leonardo da Vinci said. Once you have flown, you are not happy walking the earth. You just want to get back and fly more. It is probably the only thing I have done in my life that I would do if there was no one around to watch me. I do it just for the sheer joy of being in the air. I don't have to show off for anybody. I just love it.

JH: I have heard about those people who like to show off. What did you do for a living before you retired?

KB: I was an ironworker. Also, I had my own welding shop in Lakeside for seven years.

JH: On any day at Torrey Pines you can be seen talking to spectators in between your flights (which are numerous). You let them lift and get the feel of your glider and you explain how it works. Why do you do this?



KB: It's almost as much fun as flying to see their faces when they pick up the glider and they raise the nose and the wind picks the glider up off their shoulders. Just seeing the joy on their faces and the surprise, is worth not flying for a while. If I can bring a smile to somebody's face it is so satisfying to me. I always wanted to be a teacher, and I got my teaching credential. When you are teaching someone and they get what you are saying, it is such a feeling of accomplishment.

And of course I always start with the good-looking ladies. (laughing)

