

# Bill Cummings – 34 Years of Hang Gliding ... and Counting!!

Bill Cummings is one of those rare pilots who started flying ski kites in the 70's, later transitioned to foot launch ... and is still alive and flying to tell about all of it.

Bill first saw hang gliding at Makapu in 1970. At that time he was in Hawaii on R&R during his 2-year tour in Viet Nam.



Bill Cummings in Viet Nam



Bill Cummings on a rare snowy day in New Mexico  
*Las Cruces New Mexico, – December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

After returning from Viet Nam, Bill visited Cypress Gardens (Winter Haven, Florida) with his wife Terry. That's where he first saw Bill Moyes doing "pop starts" from either Larry and/or Perry Love at the Cypress Gardens show. Seeing hang gliding from behind a boat immediately captured Bill's imagination because he already had a boat himself.

Bill soon found himself reading a Popular Mechanics article about hang gliding in California. He began researching the sport through the Arrowhead library system and ordered everything the library could supply on the topic.

Eventually, Bill met Don Rey through a common interest in CB radios. Don had already tried to build an early prototype hang glider, but never completed the project. When Don and Bill discovered their common interest, they set out to take lessons together. Both had been laid off during the winter months in Minnesota, so they decided to seek work in sunny (and flyable) Florida. Don and Bill are friends to this day and have flown together all of these years. They've partnered on expenses ranging from various to harnesses to gliders to winches over their lifelong friendship.



Bill Cummings' first flight in Winter Haven Florida  
(January 1978)

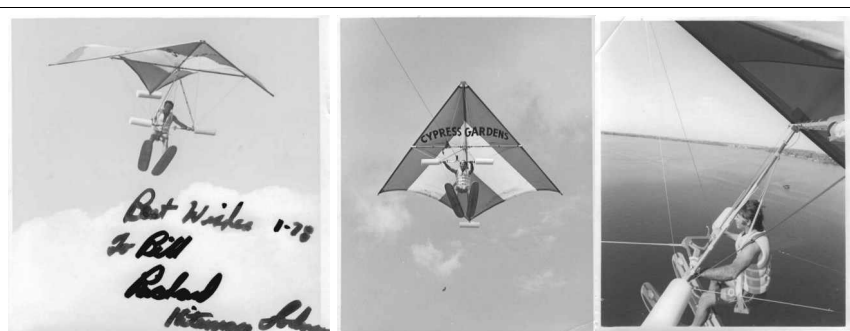
Once in Florida, Bill and Don took lessons from Richard “Kite Man” Johnson at Winter Haven Florida. In January of 1978, Bill took his first flight at a lake just behind Richard's house. During that flight, Bill recalls thinking that 30 feet was about as high as he'd ever want to go. The training fee at that time was \$35 an hour (including all equipment). Bill and Don both had about a dozen flights during their

week-long training in Florida. They both decided that it was worth buying a glider, so they went in 50/50 on ordering a Moyes Midi 220 from Richard. They took delivery in Minnesota after tracking its circuitous shipping route throughout the United States.

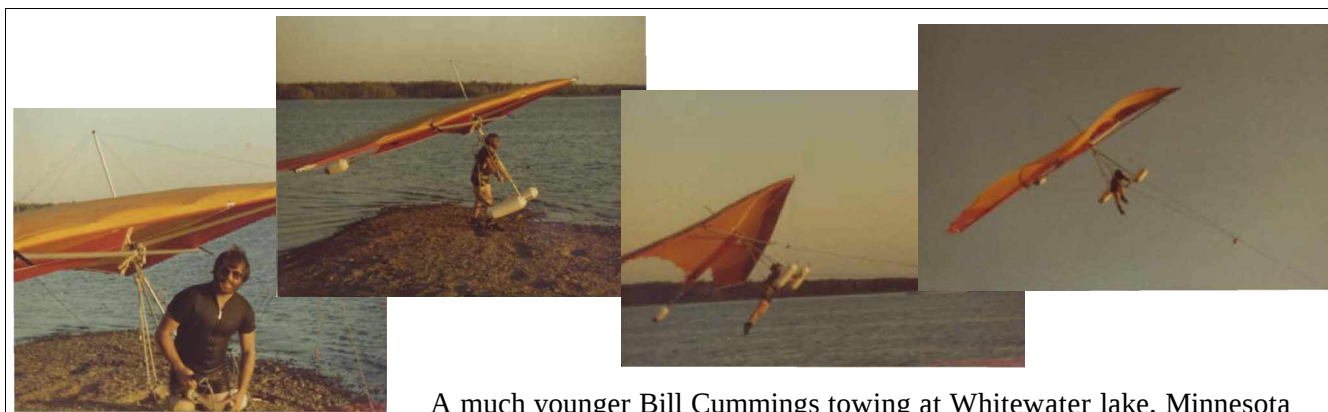
The first order of business with their new glider was to wait for the local lakes to thaw out enough to fly. So in the spring of 1978, Bill and Don rigged up Bill's boat with a tow post, Johnson in-line release, a few hundred feet of polypropylene (2025 lb breaking strength) line, and started their flying.

When they first assembled their glider, they hadn't had any experience with the deflexor systems, and so they thought they should make all cables (including the deflexor cables) equally tight. This turned out to be a disaster making the glider almost uncontrollable. Don shot into the sky as Bill tried to keep the tension constant. Don dove to the water skipping off the surface and stripping the trick skis off his feet and ripping his hands from the control bar. He rocketed back into the air basically out of control. Bill remembered the quote “When in doubt, release”, so he did. Don went into a whip stall from about 100 feet hitting the water straight down. Don was OK, but the glider suffered two bent stainless steel down tubes, a bent wing tube, and a tear in the wing tip sail.

After repairing the glider, they contacted Richard about the “unbelievable controlability” that had been advertised for the glider. A little discussion revealed that Richard was amazed they could survive flying that glider with the deflexors fully tightened. After fixing this, the glider did, in fact, have “unbelievable controlability”.



Photos of Richard “Kiteman” Johnson - 1970's



A much younger Bill Cummings towing at Whitewater lake, Minnesota

Bill and Don continued their towing for hundreds of flights gradually increasing their tow line length finding that the longer lines made for easier flying. They did both deep water and pop start flights with the old swing seat configuration. For a long time they landed on the water. Eventually they worked on zero-speed landing in the water which gave them the confidence to begin landing on the beach. They also began working on “pop starts” from the beach in 1978. They found that the wings-level pop start configuration worked remarkably well. In fact, they found that even if the boat was too fast and

stripped the bar from their hands, they'd still be able to swing forward to re-capture the bar when the climb-restricting V-bridle leveled out the glider along the tow.

In late 1979 Bill and Don began teaching Bill's wife Terry on their Moyes Midi 220 which proved to be too big for Terry. So all three took another trip to Florida for Terry's training with Richard. Even the smaller glider proved difficult on skis, so Bill skied alongside (on one ski!!) to hold the wing tip level while Terry took off. Bill skied along the side of the boat while Terry flew her pattern behind the boat. Eventually Terry got her advanced (H4) rating and ended up outsoaring Bill's own altitude record (10,000 ft.) by exactly ... 80 feet.

Bill and Don began their free flight soaring in Lake Pepin along the Mississippi river. That section of the river is about a mile wide with cliffs on either side. So Bill and Don began to tow up in front of the cliffs and then release to soar the cliffs for flights of about an hour each. They'd often make 5 soaring flights each on a good day.

Eventually, Bill and Don began experimenting with foot-launching from a mining waste rock dump in northern Minnesota. The deep snow helped mitigate their early experiments (aka face-plants) and they kept the floats as snow skis during this phase of their self-training adventures.

In order to start flying prone, Bill and Don built a vertical harness from heavy "Duluth Tent and Awning" strapping (famous for the well known "Duluth packs").

Bill and Don began site explorations of all the local mine dumps in the area. They hauled their glider to the tops of the hills and foot launched. In those days the mine dump areas were pretty clear for landing almost anywhere.

In addition to experimenting with many of the more traditional forms of launching and towing, Bill has even enlisted his wife Terry (also an accomplished pilot) to "kite" him by hand as shown in this 1985 photo taken by Donnell Hewett.



Bill Cummings with his prone harness over Whitewater lake in the early 1980's.



Terry kiting Bill at Padre Island on an 800 foot rope, February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1985 (photo by Donnell Hewett)



Over the years, Bill accumulated an impressive catalog of articles written in local publications about him and his flying adventures (see additional document files for a few samples).



**A small sampling of the articles featuring Bill, his wife Terry, and their friends over the years.**

In addition to his actual flying, Bill has also contributed to his local club and has been involved in a few video projects. Among his published videos are instructions on how to set up a glider without injuring your back and this humorous video titled “I’d Rather be Flying” where Bill stars as a runway maintenance volunteer who falls asleep and dreams of flying his heavy equipment through the sky.



**Bill Cummings starring in the “I’d Rather be Flying” video.**

Currently Bill has logged well over 4000 flights and nearly 900 hours of air time. Bill has flown in Washington state (including Chelan Butte), the Mississippi River Valley, various lakes in Florida and Minnesota, towing at Point of the Mountain, Hensen's Gap, North Dakota, and his home state of New Mexico. Bill is a member of the Rio Grande Soaring Association (RGSA) in New Mexico and the Torrey Hawks Hang Gliding Club in California. Bill is also a member of both USHPA and the US Hawks national hang gliding associations. Bill began teaching towing before USHPA even endorsed towing, and Bill's list of gliders includes: Moyes Midi 220, Moyes Mini, Moyes Maxi, Moyes SP, Magic 3, UltraSport, and Sport II. But aside from Bill's deep and rich history in the sport, Bill is first and foremost a pilot ... who just loves to fly.



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