

Welcome Back Willy!

2009 Pilot Profile of Torrey Hawk Member Bill (Willy) Armstrong

by Bob Kuczewski



Willy Armstrong at Little Black in 2009

At 60 years of age, Bill “Willy” Armstrong can still remember every flight like it was yesterday. When I interviewed him for this profile, he pulled out the first of his many log books and began recounting some of his 2100+ flights and his 600+ hours of hang gliding. He's flown 93 different gliders at 43 different locations. Willy has been an Examiner, an Observer, and a Certified Instructor.

Willy was first introduced to hang gliding through David Hinds who was the training director for the Ultralight Flyers Organization (UFO) in the seventies. Willy went to one of the club meetings and soon found himself 30 miles south of Tijuana at the Cantamar sand dunes at the club's next outing. Willy and the group shared the club's training glider - the Valderain

Lead Sled (a 16 foot standard glider). Willy recalls, “It felt like it weighed half a ton, but if I ran fast enough I could ground skim over the dunes.”

Willy continued going to the Cantamar Sand Dunes with the club over half a dozen times in the next few months. Willy also attended a club fly-in at their 220 foot hill in Santee. Willy's log book from that date reads “First attempt from altitude higher than Cantamar. 2 flights 2 minutes, 2 stalls, one scratched shin, 90 degree turns left and right. UFO Barbeque”.

Twelve days and twenty flights later Willy was flying at Torrey Pines. That was July 25th, 1975, and Willy's meticulous log book recorded the conditions: “The winds were smooth, 8 miles per hour, straight in”. Willy's first flight at Torrey lasted 2 minutes and ended with a good beach landing. Willy hiked back to the top with his glider and flew another two minute flight with another good beach landing followed by another hike up. Willy was certainly determined to fly!

Those early flights launched Willy's life in hang gliding. The 34 years since his first flights have been filled with far too many stories and experiences than could possibly fit in this short pilot profile. But one of Willy's more memorable flights was his endurance record of 11 hours and 2 minutes at Lake Elsinore in 1978. The May 1978 issue of Hang Gliding magazine recorded the event:

At 5:02 p.m., it all came together for Bill Armstrong. The 29-year-old hang glider instructor had been planning his assault on the Continental hang glider endurance record for months but had been frustrated by bad weather and high winds on several attempts. Now, after a perfect day of flying, he settled into the Elsinore landing area for a graceful standup landing. An incredible flight of 11 hours and 2 minutes in an UP / Firefly “220” hang glider.

The happy, tired, and red-eyed Armstrong was still energetic enough to whoop and holler, as other pilots, who had shared the sky with him all afternoon, ran to congratulate his extraordinary effort.

Even with careful planning, record setting is a chancy business. Weather conditions are the main criteria for success. The unique warm easterly “Santa Ana” winds, necessary for record setting flights in Southern California's Ortega Mountains, usually come in the winter months, but the special conditions had been rare this year and only two good opportunities had presented themselves since Armstrong had quit his 5-year job, with the San Diego Police Department, to spend full-time flying, instructing and promoting hang glider meets. Armstrong's two previous attempts had been foiled by extremely high winds and a support crew who couldn't be located when the precise moment came. Between record attempts Armstrong had been working full-time promoting and organizing the “Palomar Open”, a western regional event to qualify for the national championship, and had sacrificed everything, even selling his gliders, to keep going in his newly-chosen profession.



Bill Armstrong in 1978



When the good Santa Ana conditions began shaping up late in the afternoon on March 15, Bill called Pete Brock at Ultralite Products and asked what was available for the record attempt. Armstrong had been hoping to fly a 192 UP Spyder but there were none in the shop. The only gliders available in Armstrong's weight range were a pair of Firefly 220's, awaiting delivery to a dealer in the eastern United States. Armstrong had never flown Ultralite's intermediate design, but said, "If that's all there is, we'll go for it. I'll see you at 9:30 tonight." Armstrong drove up from San Diego, met Brock at the Ultralite factory in Temecula, and they pulled the first glider available from the shelf. It was a brand new glider, with only a short predelivery test flight on it, and was scheduled to be delivered the following day. Armstrong and his wife Laura carefully loaded the Firefly on their little Volkswagen Bus and headed north to Edwards Canyon, about ½ hr. from the UP factory.

The warm, steady Santa Ana winds continued through the evening, sweeping all the clouds and haze from the sky, creating a perfect setting at the popular Southern California site, 1,700 ft. above Lake Elsinore. Armstrong parked the bus and took the glider to the launch point, so he'd be ready at the first signs of daylight. About 11 p.m. he got his first real look at the glider. A big light blue, white, black and brown Firefly was unfurled into the warm nighttime breeze. Very carefully they assembled the glider, did a thorough pre-flight check and staked the glider down, so it wouldn't blow away if the wind increased.

About an hour before launch time, he began preparing for the long flight. Bill's experience in long distance bicycle racing helped him prepare for the simple, but carefully planned flight program. "Keep it simple and lightweight," were Armstrong's watchwords – no variometer or complicated suspension system were utilized. Thermal underwear, Hang-Ten jeans, two extra shirts and a large lightweight jumpsuit, to minimize the drag on his 195-lb. frame, completed his flight wear. A small water-filled plastic bottle, similar to those used on a racing bike, was clipped to the control bar. Just before launch, he stuffed some fruit in one pocket.

He static checked the harness and launched at exactly 6:00 a.m. into "very marginal" conditions. With less than a 12 mph wind coming up in the cool early morning temperature, and the sun not yet above the horizon, Armstrong scratched for altitude in the sage-covered canyon, tensely waiting for the sun to come over the horizon and begin warming the Santa Ana winds.

Far below, camped in the landing area, the "regulars" who come to Edwards Canyon in Santa Ana conditions, were surprised to see the lone glider sweeping over the ridge tops in the early morning light. "I had the whole sky to myself for the early morning, but soon cars began packing up at the launch area, and I knew I'd have company." Within an hour or two the winds began to warm and the sky began to get crowded, as perfect "Santa Ana" conditions drew pilots from all over Southern California. Wind speed began increasing to 15 and then 20 mph, but thankfully no higher, so energy robbing turbulence was minimal. Within hours, Armstrong counted 30 gliders filling the skies around him. All morning long, pilots, knowing of his attempt, would fly up, wave encouragement, fly with him for awhile, and then head down for refreshments or lunch.

"It began to get so busy up there that I began to look for corners of the sky that weren't quite so crowded," said Bill. "The glider was flying well and the conditions were perfect, so I knew I had it, if I could just keep it all together. My main worry was just staying out of the way of other pilots. Pacing is the most important thing in any endurance event and there was a great temptation to 'go for it' and thermal up with some of my friends but I cooled it and backed off, trying to conserve as much energy as possible." By mid afternoon, Armstrong was cruising at 4,000 ft., high over the Elsinore Valley. The excellent weather conditions were holding and it was apparent that this record attempt had every chance of success.

By late afternoon, even more flyers had arrived, and those who had flown themselves out in the morning, were packing up or simply lounging around the grass-covered landing area, to see if Armstrong would last the afternoon. By 3 p.m. it was apparent he had it made and many decided to stay to watch the last hours.

Finally, with the late afternoon sun heading for the Pacific behind the Ortega Mountains, Armstrong made his descent, doing wingovers and 360's; he headed for his touchdown in a large grassy field at the entrance to the Cleveland National Forest. The big Firefly touched down at exactly 5:02 p.m. and the record was in the bag. Whistles, cheers and hand clapping greeted the happy Armstrong as he unhooked. Well wishers and friends surrounded the glider and pilots and frosty bottles of beer appeared to celebrate the occasion. There were many pilots in the surrounding group who had flown three and four hours that afternoon and were really impressed by Armstrong's feat. There was quite a bit of comment that Armstrong had flown without a vario or instrumentation of any type and he grinned and said, "Luckily, there were enough pilots up there to tell me where the lift was." Armstrong, complete with gear and helmet weighed 202 lbs., which put his wing loading at an almost perfect 1.13. "If I'd had anything bigger, it might have been tiresome to fly and anything smaller might not have made it early in the morning, when conditions were marginal. I really had to work in those first 45 minutes." he said. Armstrong's eyes were extremely bloodshot from



the long flight and he admitted that if he had to do it over again he'd probably fly with goggles or glasses to protect his eyes. Other than that, the flight went perfectly.

Although endurance records are not currently recognized by the U.S.H.G.A., an informal record has been kept.

The Guinness Book of World Records lists the longest flight by a hang glider as 10 hrs. and 18 min. set in Hawaii in 1974. There is however, a report of a flight by 'Mercury' in Hawaii of 14 hrs. Armstrong's 11 hrs. and 2 min. easily eclipsed the 'U.S. Continental record' of 9 hrs. set in Chattanooga, Tennessee some months earlier, but he now has the full intention of establishing a new world endurance record of over 24 hrs! The fact that Armstrong's new record was set with a brand new pilot / glider combination in an absolutely stock production glider, made the record even more impressive. "Next time we're going to build a glider that will be designed specifically for endurance work," said Pete Brock of Ultralite Products. Bill has proven it can be done with a production machine, but I'm sure that if we worked at refining the requirements for endurance flight, we can stretch the record much further.

- Hang Gliding Magazine – May, 1978



May 14th, 2009 – Willy prepares for his first hang gliding flight in 13 years.

Willy was absent from the sport of hang gliding for 13 years until this past year when he joined the Torrey Hawks Hang Gliding Club. Willy had logged many hours of flying at Torrey, but was a little rusty after so much time away, so on May 14th of 2009, Willy returned to hang gliding at the Little Black training hill. It was just like riding a bicycle for Willy, and he executed 4 safe and efficient launches and landings in his Spirit 220 at the base of the hill.

With his refresher flights behind him, Willy was ready to return to the skies at Torrey Pines. Willy got some help from Steve Stackable in making his Spirit 220 flight worthy. With help from Steve, Willy

replaced the flying wires, luff lines, and the hang strap on the glider. Steve also repacked Willy's parachute – just in case. Finally, on Thursday, May 21st, 2009, Willy was in the air again at Torrey Pines. His first flight was about 15 minutes fighting for lift the whole time. Eventually gravity won, and Willy had his first beach hike in at least 13 years. On Sunday May 24th Willy flew Torrey again and stayed up for 12 minutes and landed back on top. He's visited Torrey several times since those first flights and has flown on a number of occasions.



Willy at Torrey Pines (June 6th, 2009 with his mother and sister looking on)



Willy's first flight in 13 years.
May 14th 2009, Little Black, CA

In addition to his flying, Willy has been a supporting member of the Torrey Hawks for almost 6 months. He's attended a number of meetings (including the Torrey Pines City Park Advisory Board) and he's also supported the Torrey Hawks at a number of events (including a recent fundraising event to stop the power lines planned at Blossom). In all cases, Willy's love of hang gliding and his enthusiasm for the sport shines through.

Willy has also been working on some ideas to help introduce the sport of hang gliding to new pilots. His current ideas include:

- Making and Distributing Training DVDs for hang gliding
- Producing fine custom-fitted flight wear bearing the FLY® logo that he has designed and registered.
- Reopening the Torrey Pines Training Hill (photo below)



- Opening New Sites (like "Willy's Ridge" at Slab City, CA)



Willy introduces park visitors to hang gliding at Little Black (above) and helps attendees at the Sunrise Power Link Fund Raiser get a better understanding of hang gliding (below).



With so much history behind him, and so many goals ahead of him, I think Willy Armstrong will be another great addition to the Torrey Hawks Hang Gliding Club. So let's all join together in saying ***"Welcome Back Willy!!"***



With help from fellow Hawks member Doug Newby, Willy Armstrong launches at Torrey Pines on June 6, 2009