

A new worldwide sport began in Newport Beach.

In the mid to late 1800's and early 1900's men that were trying to figure out how to get humans into the air and fly were building various simple gliders in their experiments. These came to be called "hang gliders" because the pilot usually was hanging, by some method, below the glider and often launched and landed on his feet or attempted to.

After the advent of engine powered flight, as begun by the Wright Brothers, December 17, 1903, interest in the simple hang gliders faded away as we searched for ways to go higher, farther, and faster, in the air.

Fast forward to the mid 1960's and we find some widely scattered people who had re-kindled an interest in the very simple form of human flight that hang gliders could provide. Some of them were trying out their flying contraptions on a low beachside sand bluff at Dockweiler Beach in El Segundo. This localized activity tended to increase communication and cooperation between these few enthusiasts of simple gliding flight down from a low hill (like in-air skiing). Remember, this was pre-internet so connections between individuals, interested in similar things, was very much dependent on chance meetings.

Eventually an Olympic high jumper, Joe Faust, became interested in what was going on there and decided to start a little magazine titled "Low & Slow" to further increase communication and sharing of ideas among people interested in this simple form of human flight. Probably the closest to bird flight humans could get.

Meanwhile, my high school age son Matt and his friend Ernest (both model airplane builders) had found a set of plans, at the price of \$5, for a hang glider. This design was a diamond shaped kite-like glider similar to designs done for NASA by Dr Francis Rogollo. It was constructed out of bamboo and polyethylene plastic tarp. This general style of hang glider is commonly referred to as a "standard Rogollo" now, to distinguish it from more modern hang glider designs which are much higher performance.

Matt and Ernest found a supply of bamboo growing on the campus of Mesa High, where they both attended. They cut and dried it on Ernest's home roof. It was not long before the glider was built and since they couldn't access any hills steep enough to launch this poor performing glider, they took advantage of football practice. They would bring the glider out after school and get the jocks at football practice to run with a rope and tow the pilot and glider into the air for short flights. Matt and Ernest were not jocks so the extra muscle was greatly appreciated.

I had always been a model plane builder and flyer (especially model gliders) so I was interested in what these two kids were doing. When we heard, in early 1971, that there was an air show of sailplanes (not hang gliders) at the Perris CA airport we attended. There we met Joe Faust, who was sharing a vendor booth, and we immediately subscribed to his Low & Slow magazine. He told us that the world's first hang gliding meet was going to be held somewhere in our area on May 23rd that year. May 23rd was chosen because it was Otto Lilienthal's 123 birthday. Otto Lilienthal was a German aviation pioneer in the mid to late 1800's. His advanced research into bird flight, airfoil, and wing design, plus flight theory was the basis for the Wright's beginning work toward powered flight. They studied Lilienthal's writings extensively.

The location for this meet had not been selected yet, partly to prevent problems with various officials having advanced knowledge of the event. Finally, a few days before May 23rd, we got word that the hang gliding meet would be held on a hillside in Pacific View Memorial Park Cemetery, in Newport Beach. This hillside was accessible from a dirt road that would soon become San Miguel Drive. The property we were using was about to be developed into housing.

On the morning of May 23, 1971, more hang gliders and hang gliding enthusiasts than anyone had even guessed existed, showed up at that location. Even without the internet the word had spread. One person knew a National Geographic photographer who came out to photograph and do an article about the modern "birdmen".

Many of the gliders' performance was not up to getting airborne, foot launched, from that shallow hillside, so more hand towing by ropes was done. There were multiple designs present with one common biplane named the "Hang Loose". This was designed by Jack Lambe, a school teacher, who had one built by his students. He had, by then, drawn up simple plans which sold for \$3 so some others had also built them.

The hillside could be seen from MacArthur Blvd and during the day traffic came to a standstill there. The Newport Beach police showed up and asked to see the organizer of this unpermitted event. Everyone they questioned said they didn't know of any organizer and that these guys just all happened to show up here. In frustration the officers went to the owner of the cemetery and asked him to evict us from his property. He replied that he didn't have any problem with what we were doing and we could stay. It quickly became a common joke that he saw potential for future business in what we were doing. The police left after that.

The next day the FAA called in a private pilot who they found had attended the hang gliding activity. They had a serious problem with unlicensed flying, especially so near the airport. Because so many of the gliders had been towed aloft by runners with ropes he responded that they were tethered to the ground. The FAA officials breathed a sigh of relief (they really didn't want to have to deal with this) and closed the investigation. Several years later the FAA formulated rules that allowed hang gliding and without requiring a pilot's license (FAR part 103).

Due to the worldwide publicity the Nat Geo article provided, the interest in this "new" simple form of personal flight grew rapidly everywhere. Before the close of 1971 brand new businesses had been created as companies sprang up to manufacture hang glider designs. Wills Wing, in Orange, is still going strong. Later that year I designed, built, and learned to fly my own rigid flying wing hang glider I called the "Skysail". It had much better performance than the "standard Rogollo".

Although we all taught ourselves to fly in those early days, it was not long before hang glider flight schools also came into existence. Robinson Ranch, was at that time, a motorcycle park named "Escape Country" in South County. They added hang gliding to the park's activities and offered free admission to pilots flying in from the top of Saddleback Mountain, which many did. Hang gliding had moved beyond "low and slow". Soon serious competitions began being held at flying sites around the world. As they say: "The rest is history".

On the 41st anniversary of that first meet an official history marker was installed in San Miguel Park. It states that the event took place there, but it is about ¼ mile from the actual hillside where the meet was held. That hillside is now covered with houses and is a gated community, so placing the marker on the actual location was not possible. The history marker should have read; "near this site", rather than; "on this site".

Frank Colver, still involved in the sport of hang gliding.

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