

WORLD RECORD

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF

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PHOTO BY BOB HARRIS

by Patricia Valdata

The following is a reprint of a story which was printed in the Region 2 and Region 3 newsletter, reprinted with the permission of the author.

On February 17, 1986, Bob Harris, a glider pilot from Riverside, California, broke Paul Bikle's long-standing absolute altitude record by soaring to 49,009 feet in wave lift. Because the FAA says that Mr. Harris did not obtain permission from them to fly above 18,000 feet, his flight has been criticized by some glider pilots. Regions Two and Three DO NOT condone the breaking of FAR's; however, a magazine survives on the strength of its stories, and this is one heck of a story. It deserves to be told.

For five years, Bob Harris had been waiting for The Day. He made daily trips to a local university weather office to

check on atmospheric conditions over the Sierra Nevada mountains. He worked closely with Doug Armstrong, a meteorologist familiar with wave conditions. He worked with a partner, Jim Myer, a former U-2 pilot who helped him understand high-altitude flying. He practiced pressure-breathing in his living room. He practiced flying in wave, reaching ever higher, 35,000 feet, 39,800 feet, and finally after years of trying, he broke through 40,000 feet. Still, conditions weren't right for a record attempt.

Harris considered selling his specially equipped Grob. He became discouraged by the competitiveness of other pilots who were trying to achieve the same goal. On the morning of February 17, he was planning to take his son to the airport and to go with his wife, Susan, to

pick up a new Doberman Pinscher. Then he checked the weather.

The tropopause, the upper boundary layer between the troposphere and the stratosphere, was the highest it had been in the five years that Bob had been planning the flight. There was strong lee wave in the Sierras.

"My wife asked how the weather was, said Harris, and I told her it's the best parameters I've seen in five years." She said, "Go soaring, I'll pick up the dog."

When the weather is best for Sierra wave flying, it is raining in Riverside but bright in the desert. As Bob drove into the desert he saw a row of lenticular clouds stacked high "like biscuits or scones." He was sure others would get into the air before him, but when he got to the airport at California City he saw no signs of activity.

He was towed aloft at 12:50 p.m. "Very strong wave was working forty miles north in the Owens Valley but there were not signs of good organized wave at California City," said Harris. "We immediately headed north to Inyokern. I released just west of Inyokern at 1:30, at 12,500 feet I pulled spoilers and dove to 10,000 feet to notch the barograph, then put on my oxygen mask."

Harris had equipped the Grob with two 49-cubic foot high-pressure oxygen systems, each with its own MD-2 regulator. The regulators were connected to

a 3-way valve so he could use either one.

Harris continued, "Lift was between 1,200 and 1,500 feet per minute. I could see dust starting to rise off the Owens Dry Lake, 30 miles north, and the lenticulars just downwind were increasing in density. They were starting to form a solid mass from their separate 'biscuit' formation."

Lift was settling down to 600 to 800 feet per minute nearing 35,000 feet and I could see a very moist layer of 'scuzz' flowing over Mt. Whitney (14,000 feet) and cascading down its eastern slope into Owens Dry Lake."

Frost had begun covering the Grob's canopy and by 38,000 feet even the clear-view panels were frosted over. Harris began flying on instruments, using the compass and holding a radial from a nearby VOR to maintain his heading.

"By 42,000 feet the lift had deteriorated to 200 feet per minute, but then started increasing over 42,000 feet. My eyes were tearing and the tears were freezing so that white 'cobwebs' of moisture were forming around my eyes. I watched the altimeter pass 46,280 feet and I knew I had passed Paul Bikle's record, the lift was indicating over 500 feet per minute by then."

But at 47,000 feet indicated, one of Harris' oxygen systems malfunctioned, increasing the pressure to the point where he was unable to keep the mask on his

face. With only one system working properly, the decision to descend was an easy one. "There was no thought about going higher, with only one (oxygen system) to get home on."

"Had I not reached my limit on the regulator, I don't know how my physical condition would have continued at higher altitude. Generally, I felt in good condition. I could hear little popping sounds in my sinuses as little cavities were releasing pressure, although there was no pain associated with this. I also felt a little worm-like sensation on the calf of my left leg. This is termed parakinesis. Other than those two symptoms, I felt good."

At that altitude the outside air temperature was minus 80 degrees F (it was about 65-70 below in the cockpit) and the air pressure was only 1.8 pounds per square inch.

It took only about 45 minutes to descend to a less hostile environment, but when Harris tried to get back to California City, only 40 miles upwind, he was unable to do so, even from 30,000 feet. He landed at Inyokern at 4:33 p.m. and called California City for an aerotow back there.

Paul Bikle was no longer the holder of the world absolute altitude record.

Both Bikle and Harris agree that breaking the record took so long because it requires vigilance and dedication to watch the weather for the rare day on which it

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would be possible. Bikle, who held the record for only eight days less than 25 years, said of Harris, "I can't think of anybody who deserves it more. He went about it in a real quiet way."

Harris immediately became the center of world-wide acclaim. *Outdoor* magazine voted him one of the top ten sportsmen of the year for 1986. Harris traveled as far as Australia to tell his story. Then the FAA was told of his flight, and they plan to revoke his license, citing him for not obtaining permission to fly in the positive control area.

According to Harris and other area pilots, local pilots rarely contacted the FAA because it had been "years" since the FAA had granted permission for wave flights. Most of Harris' flight was over airspace normally controlled by Edwards Air Force Base, and he has a letter

of agreement with Edwards to fly in their area. Unfortunately for Harris, Edwards was not operating on the day of his record flight, and the FAA had resumed control of the airspace. The FAA, according to Russell Park, Western Pacific Region, claims there were all sorts of commercial airliners at that altitude. But the controllers in that area, interviewed by the Los Angeles Times, said "gliders present few problems for airliners." Harris claims he was flying several miles south of the jet lanes during the high part of his flight.

Bikle, also in a Times interview, said that flying gliders above 18,000 feet without FAA approval is "something that people have done all the time. If you spent all the time getting clearances, most of the time you wouldn't get them until after the (optimum weather) con-

ditions are gone . . . Bob's a victim of circumstance. There's a tremendous amount of pressure on the FAA by political sources to do something. When you set a record like he did, it puts it right out in the open."

Curiously, although Dick Rutan openly admits breaking FARs during the flight of the Voyager, another world-record flight, the FAA has stated that it has no plans to take any punitive action against Rutan or Yeager.

Currently, Harris and his lawyers are appealing the FAA's decision. "It was still worth it," he says, but rather than dwell on past achievements and problems, he is already looking ahead to the next project, in which long-time friend and partner Jim Myer will fly even higher.

By the way, Harris' wife did pick up the Doberman. They named her Lennie. ■

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