

Chelan Classic 93; a learning experience

Chelan, just south of the Canadian border in Washington State USA, will be the site of the 1994 Women's World Championships. The flying here is referred to as "therapy flying" by some regular Owens Valley pilots; *No "big" mountains, lots of roads, places to land and friendly dust devils!*

Spurred on by this description, June 93 saw three members of the Avon HGC (layabouts and wasters section) setting out from San-Francisco with four months of excellent adventuring ahead. Our first destination was Chelan with the intention of competing in the 1993 XC Classic Competition.

Background

Chelan is a resort town and a popular weekend destination for the residents of Seattle. Its main attractions, the beautiful Lake Chelan and the Columbia river, make it a great place for water sports. For us, its attraction was just outside of town; Chelan Butte, a 3750' high hill crowned by microwave and fire-watch towers. Controlled by The Chelan Flyers Club, the Butte supports a number of take-offs, with names such as "ants-in-your-pants" and "the green monster". Easy dirt road access and spacious rigging areas make the Butte ideally suited as a venue for large competitions.

To the east and south of the Butte are the famous Chelan "flat lands"; an area of dry farmland which are at almost the same elevation as the Butte itself. It is this area that has earned Chelan its reputation for excellent XC flying. The "flats" are separated from the Butte by the Columbia River Gorge, which is over a mile wide. It must be crossed on most XC flights, and can prove quite a trauma for first-timers. To the west of the Butte lie the 8000'+ Cascade Mountains, which contribute to Chelan's excellent climate by keeping Seattle's renowned wet weather at bay. To the north lie wooded mountains that extend almost endlessly into British Columbia.

The Chelan Cross Country Classic competition has been around since the 70's, and was at first based on flight duration and spot landing. Pilots went to Chelan because it was an excellent place for a holiday. They would take-off on the lakeward side of the Butte during early mornings or evenings when it was not "too rough", and land on the lake shore. Only in the early eighties did people realise that noon was a good time to launch and that cross country flying provided an exciting form of competition.

Soon pilots like Kevin Bye were winning the week long Classic "meet", with flights of over a 100 miles, everyday! (The longest flights to-date have been a little over 150 miles.) It didn't take long before pilots and crew became tired of all the long retrieves, so another competition format was called for. They didn't want

to incur the extra expense of having timers at launch and landing, so a race to goal was out. Three years ago they decided on the present 6 day, "open distance, triangle and out-and-return, call-it-in-the-air" format.

With this format pilots are free to choose their own flight direction for the day. To make things easier, especially for the scorer, a list of valid turn-points is drawn up at the start of the meet. Allowable triangles may not all be FAI, but they do have turn-points that can easily be identified on photographs! If over 50% of the last leg is flown then a multiplier is applied, 1.33 for OAR's or 1.5 for triangles.

The flying

Day 1

We arrived at Chelan in late June a few days before the competition was due to begin. Things did not start well, as our first trip up the hill was nearly our last!

Convinced that I was on the wrong dirt track, I reversed a few yards to a turning without taking proper care. The resulting rapid lean to the left informed us that I had driven off the track, and we were in imminent danger of tumbling down the side of the hill. Our newly acquired Ford Bronco was half-on, half-off the track and leaning at an angle of 45°. My terror, at the thought of our truck crashing down the hill and mangling our gliders along the way, was alleviated when fellow pilots arrived and towed us to safety.

The flight that followed gave me a good view of the local terrain, especially the daunting Columbia River Gorge.

Lessons: American cars are wider than European models.

Remember to look whilst reversing!

Crossing the gorge each day could prove to be interesting.

Day 2

Mike, (who had rescued us from the cliff yesterday), suggested that we fly XC together. His wife was going to pick him up and Nick Romanko, who was not flying today, could follow her to retrieve me. What could be simpler? We gained height straight above take-off and I followed Mike tentatively across the gorge.

On the other side we both found a good thermal. Gradually he pulled away from me as he was leaving lift well before it topped out. I looked at my map, and then at the ground beneath me. They were both flat and featureless, except for a grid of dirt and tarmac roads. Unfortunately the ground didn't have any writing on it. I had no idea which particular road I was above, there seemed to be so many! I pressed on in search of a major road junction in order to orientate myself.

I flew over huge flat brown fields with only a few isolated farms. Swirling through

many of the fields I could see dust devils spiralling upward. I found them comforting as they indicated thermal activity was plentiful.

Eventually I managed to equate my map with the panorama beneath me and headed for the main highway junction at Farmer, with the intention of landing and catching a lift back with Nick. I chose a large brown field next to a farm, so that if all else failed I could phone in my position. The landing was a good one, thanks to a passing dust devil which helped me judge the wind direction. I was mentally congratulating myself as I flared and sank up to my ankles in dust. What had looked like hard earth was the sort of stuff that you find inside your vacuum cleaner bag. Now I could see why there were so many dust devils, the dust was so fine it didn't take much to get it whipped up.

The 100 yards to the farm took me 45 minutes of sweaty trudging. There was dust everywhere, on my glider, on my harness, in my eyes and in my mouth. To compound my misery my Camelback had split during the flight depositing its contents on my back. I was parched! Following the tone of the day, I found the farm boarded up and lifeless. Still I'd only flown 16 miles, I'd be back in Chelan in an hour or so, wouldn't I?

Six and a half hours later I was back at the campsite, thanks to the generosity of some power-boaters who drove 20 miles out of their way at 11pm to get me there. It had been a nightmare retrieve, no response to phone-calls, hardly any traffic, few who would give me a lift, and those who would were only going a few miles in my direction. At 12:15am I grabbed a tin of Coke from the machine and sleepily set off to collect my glider.

Lessons: The gorge is not that much of an obstacle. Phew!
Look ahead for signs of thermal activity. If the day is booming it may not be necessary to ride each thermal to the top.
What may only be 16 miles by air can be a long way by road.
Land as close to the road as you can in brown dirt fields unless you want a dust bath!
Always arrange a phone in for retrieves.
In hot places carry as much to drink as possible.
Plan things better.

Day 3

The first day of the competition. As often happens, the weather knows when people are really depending on it.

Today the wind came from the west, a bad direction for the Butte. The west side of the Butte faces the lake, hence upwind thermal activity is reduced. There is a good NW and SW take-off, but in a westerly it is a case of waiting for the wind to swing onto launch and going when you have the chance. Those pilots who got up and away did so by catching thermals on the east of the Butte, in rotor - a place no self-respecting UK pilot would fly. As the wind was light I copied their

example and got thrashed to the LZ (landing zone) with the half of the field that didn't get away.

Lessons: Even if it is rough, stick with it if you are going up, you may not get another chance.
If you see others going up off launch get in the air, you will not get a better indication of where the lift is.
Sometimes you have to modify lessons learned in Britain and do what the locals do!

Day 4

Today all three Brits were flying. Myself and Mike Bowring were in the meet and Nick was flying for fun. We had nobody organised to drive retrieve.

It was westerly again, but this time I beat the lee-side thrashing. Once over the gorge I flew down the main highway to Mansfield, one of the few "towns" on the flatlands east of the Butte. I could see gliders ahead of, beneath and behind me, things were looking good. Sure in the knowledge that I would get picked up if I had to land, I bumbled along following the highway, life was great.

At the thirty mile mark, the road turned north and south. Looking east I could see the blue waters of Banks Lake. My map told me it was nearly ten miles to the next major road. I hung around at the junction and watched as other pilots went by me to the east. 3000' below I could see that some gliders had landed. I was dithering. I decided to try and follow the road south, cross-wind. Needless to say I didn't get far, but I did managed to land on a patch of grass next to another pilot and his waiting retrieve crew. I was back in camp early that evening.

Lessons: Don't dither.
Fly the air, not some pre-chosen route that is impossible given the conditions.
Commit to a long retrieve if you want to do well in competitions. I lost out on distance due to worries about getting back. If possible have a retrieve organised.
Even on grass, de-rig on the A-frame unless you want to fill your sail full of fine brown dust!

Day 5

I was smarting over my stupid decision to land early the day before. Today would be a better day. I'd do well.

Similar conditions to yesterday had me scratching for height for over an hour above take-off. Eventually I gave up trying and headed out across the gorge with what I hoped would be enough height to make the crossing. I made it, but with only 800' agl. Still, "this was the flats, I'd have no trouble getting up." I struggled to 1200' and floated east. Inevitably I got lower, and landed next to the main road

after flying just 7 miles. I watched from my field as other pilots circled overhead. Within five minutes some buddies pulled up and offered me a retrieve. I was grateful but had to endure being driven in pursuit of Jeff Bowman who'd flown 42 miles.

Lessons: Fly the conditions, if it takes time to get up then so be it. Don't go off half cocked.
If you have room in your harness, carry ground-to-air missiles for those times when you have to land short!
Always carry a paperback, it helps to pass the time.

Day 6

By now I had given up all hope of being up with the leaders on the scoreboard. Today the wind was lighter and pilots were mumbling that conditions were more typical. Maybe a triangle would be on, I thought.

Getting away was a breeze and I was soon over yesterday's place of sorrow with 2000' to spare. I had a triangle in mind as I headed for Farmer, never making more than 7000'. Above my chosen turn-point everything was going up and I made cloud-base at 10,000'. As planned I headed now for the second turn-point and arrived just below 9,000'. All around me the cumulus were building nicely, conditions were obviously improving. Noting the changing conditions, I decided to go for a larger triangle and headed off to a new second turn-point.

The clouds were forming into streets as I took the photo at my new turn-point, nicely tucked away up amongst the wisps. I headed home, bobbing along between 9,000' and 11,000'. 10 miles out I stuffed the bar in and whizzed along a cloud street, eager to make it in before an approaching rain storm. I was elated, this was it, this was what I'd come for!

I made a perfect aircraft approach to the LZ and landed having flown my first decent FAI triangle, approximately 59 miles. I was on a high. I packed up quickly to avoid the rain and went for a pizza with some friends from New Hampshire. A great day!

Lessons: Being positive pays.
Have a goal but don't be afraid to modify it if things look better or worse than expected.
Other pilots had flown a triangle that was not much of a deviation from an OAR and had scored more than me! It pays to study the rules well, don't assume anything.
A pizza is an expensive way of eating bread and cheese.

Day 7

The wind was from the lake, thermals would be hard to find.

I joined the queue on the NW take-off and we watched as pilots already in the air searched for lift, some were going down! Then to the right, pilots started to climb and the queue started to empty. I launched as soon as I could and screwed in beneath the climbing column of gliders. This one thermal proved to be a boomer and it took most of us to cloudbase where we set off across the gorge. Soon I was on my own. I decided to follow the drift to my favourite turn-point, Farmer, and make my next decision there.

At Farmer, I debated whether to try another triangle but decided that the drift was too strong for that; I went for open distance and headed SE. The only other pilots I saw were below me, but I was sure that there would be others ahead. The track was an easy one as there were many roads heading south. As I approached Moses Lake, I could see the airport where Jumbo Jet pilots are trained. I could make out a Jumbo performing touch-and-goes. With over 5000' agl I got closer and closer to the airport. The Jumbo was still flying circuits as I circled by overhead. Then to the south I caught site of another Jumbo only a few thousand feet below me. I'm not sure if he saw me but he passed right underneath me. In the right or not, I pulled in and tried to put some distance between me and the Jumbos. Thankfully I soon found lift and circled up once more.

To the south the clouds now disappeared, but a line of them could be seen running east along the main freeway. I chose to head east under the clouds rather than head out into the blue. After about 15 mins I caught site of another glider 4 miles ahead of me. I resolved to try and catch up as he/she probably had a retrieve organised. By the time I caught up they were down to about 1000', with me about 300' lower. We continued to search for lift as we floated east. Eventually we went on a glide together. I landed in a big brown field and watched as the other glider used their extra height to gain an extra 1/2 mile or so. I derigged and walked to the freeway.

I'd lost my potential retrieve so I stuck out my thumb for a lift. Within 5 minutes an old station wagon pulled up, billowing clouds of blue smoke. I was bundled into the back with two kids on a old mattress, and driven off in the direction of Moses Lake. As we passed the "No hitch-hiking on the freeway" sign, I explained that I was from Britain and that I had flown a hang-glider from Chelan, 123 miles by road (74 miles by air) away. It turned out they were going to Seattle to take the old man in the passenger seat to hospital for cancer treatment. They'd drop me at Moses, still 110 miles from Chelan.

I was happy to be off the freeway. They fed me Coke and chocolates and we chatted about life. At Moses they said they'd take me a little further. A couple of hours later we were in Chelan. I couldn't believe my luck. I'll never forget the generosity shown to me by that family from Idaho. The retrieve of a life-time, it was as good as, if not better than, the flight. I collected the Bronco and Mike and headed off to find my glider.

Lessons: Hitching can be fun, especially with friendly natives around!
Once again being positive pays off. Choosing the route under the

clouds had gained me 4-5 miles on those that dove off into the blue. If I hadn't tried to catch up with that other pilot in the hope of a retrieve, I would have probably been able to conserve my height and glide further. Worry over retrieves is still causing me problems. Idaho doesn't seem to have very strict MOT laws!

Day 8

The last day of the competition. The wind was from the SW on launch. Randy Adams, who was amongst the leaders, said to me that today could be a day for abandoning the flatlands and flying north up the Okanogan Valley towards Canada.

I crossed the gorge low but got up easily on the other side and watched as gliders headed cross wind to the east. I went NE, finding it easy to stay within 1000' of cloud-base. At Bridgeport, I decided to turn north into the mountains, on a route that would follow the Okanogan Valley and the main road. The route to the NE would have taken me into the mountainous Colville Indian Reservation, while the route east was without a major road for 25 miles.

Having crossed the river at Bridgeport, I met up with local pilot Lenny Baron and we set off together. We flew over one hapless soul who had landed in no-mans-land on top of the moors to the east of the valley. I was thankful that it wasn't me down there, and hoped that he was in radio contact with a retrieve. Sometimes we were less than 1000' agl but each time we found a saving thermal. At Okanogan town we found abundant lift. Lenny stuck to the hills on the east side of the valley whilst I, still concerned about retrieve, flew down the centre. Neither of us seemed to have the advantage.

Up ahead I could see a great wall of cloud that looked threatening. Thoughts of mountain thunderstorms crossed my mind, so I approached the cloud with care, watching for signs of Cu-Nim activity. I found lift, but nothing that threatened to suck me irrevocably sky-ward. I flew low under the cloud expecting to be on my final glide. I lost no height as I emerged into a "British autumn sky". Here the lift was light and I made little progress before picking a field for landing.

I landed into a head-wind! The cloud had been convergence! To have flown along it would have meant a flight over high forest with no roads, so I didn't feel too bad at missing it. The farmer was very friendly and proudly showed me his feeder for the humming birds that buzzed his porch. He insisted that I use his phone to call in my landing position - I obliged.

It started to rain as I walked to the main road to hitch a lift. The instant I reached the road a truck with a glider on the roof pulled up looking for Lenny. They offered me a lift and we found Lenny 8 miles further north. A good flight (62 miles) and a retrieve - what more could I want?

Randy Adams had gone east at Bridgeport and flew 132 miles to win the day and

steal the meet from Dave Little. I'd started badly, but thanks to the rule that only the four best days' scores count, I'd pulled myself up to 6th place out of 40. The flying had been fun and I'd made friends with many people I'd never have otherwise met. What a great sport this is.

Lessons: Advice from experienced pilots before you fly can help you make decisions during the flight, but don't treat it as gospel! Randy Adams had re-evaluated his decision when he saw the line of cloud to the north and struck lucky with a change in wind direction to a westerly further east. Think, and use what you know about weather conditions to your best advantage.
A little luck can help!

Overall Lesson

Making mistakes is all part of flying XC. Don't dwell on those mistakes, recognise them and use what you have learned to improve your subsequent flying. You'll maybe make the same mistake again, but every lesson needs a bit of reinforcement!

I'm told that 1993 was not typical, the distances were not nearly as far as have been flown before. It is usually very consistent in July, with big air, blue days and people topping out at 10,000' to 12,000'.

If 1993 was a bad year, I just have to be there during a good year! The 1994 Classic, organised by the Cloud Base Country Club of Seattle, will be held just before the Women's Worlds - June 29 through July 4th.

Thanks to Davis Straub for his help in writing this article.