

## so there I was.....

So there I was, in the Owens Valley. The place of legend where daring deeds were done by those mystical beings of the record books; Tudor, Lyons and Castle. Somehow the mountains looked smaller than I had expected. But what they lacked in size was made up for in heat and dirt.

But appearances can be deceptive - it's a big country with big air. The town of Bishop is just over 4000' asl and is at the northern end of the valley. All those recording breaking flights you've read about from Horseshoe Meadows (60+ miles to the south) involved crossing the valley from west to east around Bishop to maximise time spent over the mountains. To the north of Bishop the Sierras head off towards Yosemite and the valley floor rises, whilst the White mountains on the eastern side of the valley run north for a further 30 miles into Nevada. The Whites rise to 14000' and never drop much below 11000'. Peak to peak the valley is 26 miles wide at Bishop with the flat valley bottom being about 10 miles of that. If you are losing it on the Whites there is a looong glide to the road.

I never got to fly from the famous record breaking meadows, all my flying was done from the Whites on a take-off called Gunter. If it was closer to home I'm sure it would be swarming with BBC drama boys filming Doctor Who, as it bears an uncanny likeness to their beloved quarry. The take-off is 4000' above the valley and is gently sloping and gravel covered. (As are most of the foothills, it's just that this one has a road up it.) If they really wanted to,

50 pilots could take-off together as there are no obstructions other than the rare boulder or even rarer tree/bush. I guess this is one of the reasons why they held the 1991 US Nationals there and why it will be the venue for the 1993 worlds.

Now I have to confess that I was there for the nationals and that I came 109th out of 125. Oh well, I had fun and learned the joys of having my camera and radio fail, and the value of not giving up even when it look like a certain downer. Hell, I was even 77th into goal on the first day. The next day I learned the value of consistency :- ( But I digress.

The first few days were hell. No, the flying wasn't hell, just the bit before take-off and after landing. The valley floor was in the upper thirties/forties by early morning and the sun was punishing even with factor 10+ and a hat. "Look for a tree and land by it" was my plan for the first few flights. Life at take-off was fun too. Thankfully it was a few degrees cooler, but the sun was even more powerful and rigging on a scree slope took a bit of practice. For a body used to getting its O<sub>2</sub> at sea level, life at 8000'+ proved to be tiresome, even walking 20 yards upslope left me breathless. And I haven't even mentioned the dust and grime.

But after three days I started to really enjoy it. I loved the pleasant warmth, the thin clean air, the honest dirt of the desert floor and the uncompromising blue sky. (This was probably helped by fact that I'd remembered to drink gallons of water. Sun-stroke and

dehydration are real dangers and are very very unpleasant, I'd had them a month earlier in Oregon and should have known better.)

The flying was fantastic, classic stuff. On the mountains thermals could be found in textbook positions 90% of the time. For the run down to the end of the Whites too much height was as big a problem for me as too little. On the first day of the competition my oxygen system ran out when I was at 16,700' (a bad choice of system but that's another story) and I was unaware of it. I became hypoxic. Luckily, I was on my final glide to goal and was down to earth within 30mins or so. But I had the grandad of all headaches and was to suffer other effects thereafter. Other pilots were flying at 18,000' with no oxygen at all and claimed no ill effects, but once over 12,500' I needed it to avoid tunnel vision and hyper-ventilation.

After the first day all my time on the Whites was spent below the peaks, going no higher than 12,000' to conserve oxygen. Whilst the majority of pilots were up at 17, or 18,000' those of us below the peaks would zoom along going from gully to gully, sometimes only 50ft above the ground on a few of the flatter spurs. Flying in this fashion I'd overtake many pilots before Boundary Peak at the end of the Whites was reached. I'd then have to gain perhaps 5000' in one of the many "standing" thermals before heading off into Nevada.

The competition was organised as a daily race via turnpoints with an air start. The air start is interesting and at a place like the Owens where it is relatively easy to stay up

over launch, is a good way of getting 125 pilots starting at the same time. In order to have "started" you have to have a photo of a large tarpaulin that was unrolled at the start time, a couple of miles from launch at the base of the Whites. Pilots could take-off anytime from 45mins before the official start. Serious competitors aimed to be over the tarp as it was rolled out. When first mooted it was said that there would be problems with huge gaggles of pilots converging on the tarp at the same time and weaving all over the sky as they tried to take a photo. As it happened this was not a problem, as the gaggles that did form were spread out over 7,000'+. The gaggles that were a problem were the ones that formed above launch about 20mins before the start. A stack of seventy gliders is an astonishingly pretty sight, from the ground!

To avoid the gaggles those with stamina took off early, cowards late. I took off late and was usually at the start gate 15 mins or so after it opened. Unfortunately my photos of this wretched tarp failed to come out on two days, so I scored two zeros. The problem was never resolved, so I'm still not sure what was wrong with the shots. This was especially galling on day four, as I'd had my legs out to land right by the tarp but had found a 10,000 footer to take me up. On the way up I'd photographed the thing from less than 600' agl.

The finished involved flying over a line between two wind socks, in the correct direction and under 600' or at a height at which the timers could read your wing number. It was surprising the number of top class pilots who arrived at goal with

thousands of feet to spare and then complained about not being credited with crossing the line whilst flying at 3000' agl. Being a time keeper at goal was a terrible job.

We were very lucky with the weather, losing only one day out of seven to high cross winds. On the second to last day I burned off 10,000' to land next to one of the Canadian pilots that I knew well. For a chat? No, my chosen route was blocked by a lovely little CuNim that was producing perfect forked lightning every few minutes or so. Others braved the cloud's edges or chose a route over no-roads-land and made it nearer to goal. I was smart and landed by the road to make it easy for a retrieve. It was a popular spot with many pilots stopping to offer me a lift, but confident that my driver was zooming to collect me I declined. An action I was to rue as I lay in the dirt at 10:30 pm, five hours later, wondering what the @\*&% was going on. Eventually I was collected by my driver, (who shall remain nameless) who had returned to base earlier after being told by some Ozzies that I had been picked up. I was not the only one in the desert that night as some of those choosing the no-roads route had a long wait too.

Landing in the Owens and surrounding desert was on the whole a piece of cake. For the most part there was an easily identifiable breeze and a fairly stable layer of air close to the deck unless you landed as a thermal triggered. After Canada where the wind direction on landing was always a lottery this came as a relief and eased the concern I always get as I approach terra-

firma. This was helped by the fact that the terrain was mostly treeless, and out of the mountains either flat or gently sloping with only the odd telegraph pole or sage bush to hit. Retrieve was easy too, as long as you landed next to the main road, which was the only road worthy of note.

The place definitely grew on me. By the end of my time there I knew I would be returning some day. The flying is special, even in late August. Typical thermals were off the clock and once established it was simple to climb at an average 8up+. Closer to the "hill" things could be a little upsetting if a gnarly one was found that would try and turn you inwards. But thermals like this could be left well alone in the confidence that a more friendly one awaited over the next spur. I'm told that earlier in the year the air is even "bigger" and "gnarlier" but for me it was not too upsetting, I've had rougher times at Westbury in a northerly!

If you get the chance to fly the Owens take it. Don't be put off by the horror stories. The horrors are real, but if you are careful and listen to what the locals tell you about conditions I can virtually guarantee that you'll have the flight of your life.

**Chris Jones**