

The Amazing Flying Belinda

Belinda and I were thermaling in rough air at six thousand feet over the wheat fields just east of Farmer, a two-silo turnpoint seventeen miles southeast of Chelan Butte. It was the middle of July, the day after the 1995 Chelan Cross Country Classic. Belinda was working some ratty air a mile to my south, going up a bit slower than I was. I was hoping that she would join me since I didn't want to lose her now. Hey, we had just passed over where she landed on her previous longest cross country flight the day before.

The day had started off with a moderate northeast flow that kept the thermals away from the south-facing Between-the-Rocks launch on top of Chelan Butte. All week had been unstable, with the winning pilot at the Classic, John Pitt, averaging over a hundred miles for his four winning flights. Sunday was even hotter and the top of the Butte kept kicking off dust devils. We had to stand in our control frames to keep our gliders from being tossed about. On the previous day three pilots had not been able to keep their gliders on the ground.

Belinda and I lined up at the Ants-in-the-Pants launch, which is steeper than Between-the-Rocks. We figured we had a better chance to get off this launch in no wind conditions. It usually works, even when the thermals that normally hug the south face are pushed away. I had taken off first to test the conditions, and started climbing out to the south of the Butte. Belinda soon followed and, as is her normal style, thermaled up through four other pilots to ten thousand feet.

What amazed me was how she knew right where to go and how effortlessly she climbed. There was one sad pilot who refused to leave the south face of the Butte, continually circling right next to the rocks and never getting up. Couldn't he see that if he just went out a couple of hundred feet there was a nice fat thermal? Doesn't a northeast flow with no thermals coming in at launch mean anything to him? None of this confused Belinda; she went straight to the rising air and left those four pilots wondering what was their problem.

As we topped out, we headed southeast across the Columbia River gorge toward the power line junction, always a favorite spot for the first thermal on the flats. These Bonneville power lines are no low voltage affairs, and it's real easy to see where they cross.

Working our way up in this first thermal we could hear the radio chatter of various pilots struggling with the conditions and wondering where to go. We slowly worked our way to the east toward Withrow, a triangle-shaped burg marked by its grain elevators, following the dust devils.

Our driver, who was near Withrow, came back with a wind-on-the-ground report of fifteen miles per hour straight out of the north. We headed due south toward Farmer, getting lift every few miles and staying over eight thousand feet above sea level.

The previous day I had unfortunately left Belinda near the power lines when I wasn't getting any lift and needed to find some fast. I had been able to make a low save and have a long flight, but I lost Belinda. I couldn't provide her with any guidance on her first time out in this area of the flats. She ended up landing about half an hour after I left her, just west of Farmer. Not bad for her third cross country flight, and her longest to date. But today we would stick together.

Topping out at nine thousand feet near Farmer, I asked Belinda if she was ready to head southeast toward Moses Coulee. She hadn't gotten quite as high, but her thermal wasn't working anymore either. She glided toward me from my north as we headed out – her Wills Wing Super Sport just wasn't going as well as my Wills Wing XC.

Moses Coulee is a spectacularly desolate canyon with walls of black basalt. It, like all the coulees in eastern Washington, was formed when Montana Lake broke free of its ice dam at the end of the last ice age. The roaring water scoured the basalt layers that underlie the plateau east of Chelan. Black rocks are still scattered throughout the coulee, and only a straggly farm at one end makes it a semi passable landing area if you get low.

As I pressed southeast I noticed two spindly dust devils just to our north. I mentioned to Belinda that she might go back and check them out, since she still wasn't as high as me. This was a big mistake on my part. Belinda didn't find any lift near the dust devils, but now she was behind me and getting low as I arrived at the coulee and found lift.

Belinda doesn't give up, however, and was quickly gliding my way, encouraged by my report of lift. I could see her screaming across the flats way below me as I climbed out. Later she told me that she was at 2,500 feet – just barely above the plowed fields on the plateau – just before she made it to the coulee. She could see the farm over the lip in the coulee and was prepared to land at any moment. As soon as she came in over the black rocks in the coulee she hit a sidewinder of a thermal and put the Sport up on a tip. Within a few minutes she was back over 7,500 feet above sea level.

Together we worked our way further southeast along the east side of the coulee and into open farm lands. These brought fatter thermals that gave both of us a chance to relax and enjoy the view. We were soon climbing in the Beezley Hills west of Ephrata, a popular sailplane port, and the rising and open terrain made for continued comfortable thermals. Belinda repeatedly outclimbed me and I start following her to find the next thermal.

Heading off the south end of the Beezleys, we hooked our last big thermal and went on what turned out to be a final glide for about twenty miles, landing three hours into our flight, south of I-90 and east of the town of George. Belinda had flown 52 miles on her fourth cross country flight.

A few weeks later, the day after the US Nationals (a week of not so good weather), Belinda was at it again. This time she flew 35 miles, making the turnpoint at Sims Corner and gliding back toward the Butte to a recently cut wheat field just short of the Pothills. While other, more experienced pilots (this now being her fifth cross country flight) were going down, she lead the way east over no-man's-land to Mansfield, found a hard-to-work bubble south of Yeager Rock, and climbed out east of Sims. She then decided that it was time to call it a day when she was still seven thousand feet over the ground.

So what makes all this so amazing, other than the pure joy of flight itself? Well, for one thing Belinda was raised to be a girl, not a pilot. No junior or high school athletics for her -- no soccer team or swimming championships. She never learned to tough it out, suck it up, or deal with the constant stream of low level fear punctuated by some high level stuff that is the lot of hang glider pilots.

She never yearned to fly and didn't have flying dreams. For years I would go off flying, sometimes with Belinda driving but most often not. She enjoyed coming to the fly-ins at Dog Mountain, but never went tandem (until much later) and really didn't want to.

She decided to try paragliding in the early nineties because it seemed easy. It turned out that she liked the sensation of flying, but now she wanted to stay up. At age 39 she turned to hang gliding and learned to fly on the Oregon dunes at Cape Kiwanda. What got her through the first few months of learning to fly a hang glider, in addition to her own grit, were the soft conditions of the site, the fact that she had a small framed and light (42 lb.) training glider, and that her husband carried the glider up the training hill to give her as many practice flights as possible. I really appreciated the light weight glider.

Because she had a glider that was built for her (a Moyes Mars 150, originally designed by Steve Moyes for his wife and improved with 7075 aluminum in Europe by

Icaro 2000), she was able to avoid injury other than minor tweaks on the training hill. Injuries cause the worst setbacks when you are first starting.



Belinda flying the dunes near Newcastle, NSW, Australia, 2002

Belinda tells other women that you don't have to fit their image of an athlete to be a hang glider pilot. Hang gliding is available to all who are willing to make the effort.

Flying with Belinda was an incredible experience for me. It is so much different than being out there for yourself, often on your own. I loved watching and encouraging her. I marveled at her abilities and strength.

It's a great opportunity to encourage a beginning pilot, to help them overcome whatever feelings are in the way for them. I never gave up on Belinda and always let her set her own pace. It's been very rewarding.

A few years later Belinda quit flying in the prone position because of problems with her neck. She switched to a paraglider harness slung under her glider, which allowed her to fly seated. This position greatly increased the drag that the pilot and glider experience when flying, thereby reducing performance and her chances to go cross country.