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Wandering in the Desert

After Dave set his two new records, our World Record Encampment broke up. Dave had to go back to work in New Mexico, and Gary had obligations back in Kansas. Dustin and the boys went back to Phoenix. Belinda and I were left behind to suffer in the heat, waiting for a day with sufficiently strong winds and early morning thermals. With our friends gone and Larry's record broken, the excitement was over.

We felt cast adrift, sitting in our trailer in this almost-ghost-town empty of its winter Texans. With no other pilots to encourage me, I felt desperate. Would the conditions improve so that I could get my chance to break Dave's new record?

Before we had come to Zapata, Gary had forecast such consistent weather conditions that it had seemed every day would be a day to break the record. We were looking for that huge high pressure system to set up in the center of the Gulf of Mexico, bringing on-shore flow to the Texas east coast and warm, moist, predominantly southern winds throughout the state. But as that last week of July dragged on, the promised weather failed to show up.

I wanted to ride the southern winds far up into the Texas panhandle, but the high pressure was not centered in the Gulf where it was supposed to be — instead it was up near New Orleans. With the center of high pressure so far north, the winds spinning clockwise around the center were coming from the east here in Zapata, toward Mexico. We had only light winds, and the morning thermals were too weak to keep me aloft in my hang glider before noon.

July 26th, a week after Dave had gone so far, Belinda towed me up at the airstrip at 11:30. I knew it was late, but the conditions hadn't been good enough for an attempt all week, and I was anxious make any effort no matter how futile.

We'd come to Zapata expecting winds out of the south-southeast, but today they were instead out of the southeast. If I were to fly straight downwind I would soon have been crossing the Rio Grande. Every time I stopped and circled in a thermal I would drift downwind toward Mexico. I knew I would have to drive continually upwind to the east on each of my glides, as Dave and I had done on his record day.

With my late start I should have been finding some reasonably strong thermals, but all I was getting was weak lift. I had to concentrate more on staying up than on racing north, constantly searching to the east and west of my fastest course line for any lift that I could find, just creeping along. At one point I was down to less than 450 feet over a natural gas well, sure that I was about to land.

While it is a definite struggle to stay up when you're so low, it is also a great adventure. First of all, you are right next to the ground, so everything is going past you really quickly. The lift is usually quite light (the reason you are low to begin with), so you're not getting tossed around — although this is not always the case, as I had found out the week before.

Hanging low in light lift calls upon all your senses. You feel every bit of lift on your wings and do everything you can to get in just a little bit better lift. At the same time you just can't strike out in some direction hoping to find better lift, because you'll be on the ground long before you find it. You have to work whatever it is that you are in.

Your attention keeps shifting between the ground, with its potential landing areas and potential lifting areas, and the texture of the air around you. You can't pay much attention to the sky since any clouds are usually too far away to be of much help in spotting lift. You are right in the thick of things, with the earth twirling around below you. It is a lot like those flying dreams.

I struggled low for a good long time, maybe fifteen minutes of just hanging onto the barest indication of lift, before I slowly climbed out high enough to get into a reasonably coherent thermal. And this took time and detracted from the bigger goal. It took me an hour and a half just to fly the forty miles to the southeast side of Laredo.

Small cumulus clouds were forming near Laredo, and I could now find the lift more quickly with the help of these visual lift indicators. The lift was also improving as the day got later; I was now able to climb up high, to five thousand feet.

With the strong easterly wind component I'd been pushed right toward Laredo and the airport on its eastern flank. Normally I was required by law to stay six nautical miles to the east of the airport, to avoid controlled airspace. Frankly, given the steady stream of traffic at this airport, I wanted to stay as far away as possible from the north and south ends of the runways. But today, given the strong drift from the southeast, I had little choice but to head toward the center of the airport.

I was fifteen hundred feet above the top of the controlled airspace; at this elevation it was perfectly legal for me to fly right over the airport. While I was not that happy about being pushed so far the west of my planned course, it was pretty cool flying right over the top of the airport and checking out the whole busy scene below me.

Laredo is the biggest inland NAFTA port, and all aircraft bringing goods into the U.S. from Mexico must stop there. I could see plenty of general aviation traffic on the runway and taxiways. I was in little danger of interfering with airport air traffic, high as I was above the center of the airfield, since the air traffic would be low coming in from the north or south. I got to see quite a few of the big cargo jets.

Most of the time when I'm flying, I'm out over open ranch and farmlands. I rarely fly anywhere near urban areas because of the lack of landing areas near them. So it was quite a rare sight to be able to fly over such a busy airport, perfectly legally and safely, and be able to take it all in. I knew that down below were all those pilots who were taxiing airplanes. Here I was way high over them, just flying. Not "piloting" a hang glider, just flying.

The southeast winds pushed me northwest from Laredo up the Mines Road, which follows the U.S.-Mexico border along the Rio Grande for a hundred miles to Eagle Pass. Most of that distance was rough gravel road, which would make things a bit slower for Belinda in the truck down below. From Eagle Pass it would be another fifty miles on Highway 277, still hugging the border, to Del Rio. I figured I could follow this route all the way to Del Rio and then head toward Fort Stockton in west Texas — that was unless the winds shifted direction as I move northwest.

I was high over open and empty desert with just the dirt road way below me. On my left was Mexico; the road on the Mexican side of the border was a major highway. I found this totally strange, flying high out in that empty desert, which I knew was a highly charged military area — the border, and there was not enough traffic to justify a paved road.

While there was a staggering level of truck traffic in Laredo heading up toward San Antonio, apparently no one wanted to go to Eagle Pass or Del Rio. I later learned the reason: the road was gated further to the north to cut off all traffic going to Eagle Pass. In fact, this was considered to be a very dangerous area for travel, the province of drug runners and bandits.

The moist air from the Gulf was encouraging the development of cumulus clouds, which now appeared everywhere over my head and out ahead of me. But I was concerned that I was moving west, away from the Gulf air mass. I would have to fly quite a long distance west to get away from its influence, but there would be less and less moist air as I progressed further away from the Gulf. I wondered what air mass I would find myself in many hours from now. It seemed likely that the cumulus clouds would disappear and I would be left to hunt for lift out in the blue.

The sight of the beautiful cumulus clouds was alluring. It was a perfect day for flying two hundred miles — but I believed it was already too late to make three hundred. Finally, after much internal argument, I made the decision to land eighty miles out from Zapata. I just didn't think I could set the record on that day. I wanted to have plenty of energy to fly again on a better day.

I landed in a little area mostly free of cactus and Mesquite. There was no one out there, not even any evidence of the Border Patrol. I tried not to look up at the inviting sky as I broke my glider down and put it up on the truck.

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The next day I was out at the Zapata airstrip for another attempt. Again the thermals just weren't happening early enough for me to get going when I needed to, and I stopped after sixty miles. The skies filled with beckoning cumulus clouds, but I knew that I couldn't make three hundred miles that day.

After a week of only marginal opportunities, we broke camp. Belinda and I needed to get away from the heat and the frustration. I was unable to think straight about how to break the record, and pretty discouraged. Belinda flew from San Antonio to Nevada to visit her brother and I drove our truck to Roswell, NM for repairs.

But August 5th found us back on the highway to Zapata from San Antonio. We were both rested, and I was convinced that we hadn't even scratched the surface of what was possible at Zapata. When we arrived to find that Tiki Mashy and her driver Dale had just driven in from Hobbs and were already ensconced at Bob McVey's house, I felt my enthusiasm returning, too.

All during the planning period for the World Record Encampment, I had pushed hard on Tiki, a former women's world record holder, to come to Zapata. I had sent her all the advance weather data from Gary that pointed to great conditions for setting a world record. I wanted Tiki to retake her former record from the Australian/Swedish pilot Tove Heaney, but I hadn't succeeded in convincing her to come earlier. Instead she had chosen to go back to Hobbs, where she felt some measure of comfort, and where she and Hollywood had spent many summers together.

Tiki had recruited Dale, a novice pilot in her late forties who was living and working part time at Wallaby Ranch, to be her tow and retrieval driver for the summer. Since Michael's death Tiki had been working at the Ranch as a Dragonfly pilot, under Malcolm's protective eye. She and Dale had driven west in Michael's old truck, with the platform setup and winch they had used at Hobbs.

"Hobbs has been terrible this year," Tiki shook her head. "My longest flight so far was only a hundred miles — and that took me four hours. Jim Lee's been there all month too, trying for a record, but he's not getting any long flights either." Tall, and muscular, Tiki was a tenacious competitor and it hurt her to be missing out on the good flying.

I had thought Tiki a fool to go to Hobbs when we offered her the chance to come with us to Zapata. It was clear — to me, anyway — that she wouldn't get what she was aiming for in Hobbs. I started to fill her in on the Zapata area and what we'd learned so far about flying there.

"There are a few dirt roads north of the airstrip, but for the most part they're behind locked gates," I warned. "So you need to be at least two thousand feet over the airstrip before you start to head north. Don't let yourself get so far downwind that you can't make it back, unless you're over two grand.

"And if you do go down near the airstrip, just have Dale call the Sheriff to locate the keys and come open the gate. Dustin had to do that a couple of weeks ago, when he landed four or five miles from the airport. Bob McVey contacted the Sheriff for us, and a deputy got us through the gates. We had Dustin packed up and in the car within an hour. It's a three-mile walk out to Highway 83, so good luck trying to walk out with your hang glider and the rest of your gear, especially by yourself. The heat is a real killer."

The mesquite-covered countryside to the north of the airstrip had only a few areas big enough to allow for a hang glider landing. There wasn't a paved road for nine miles. If you left too low and didn't get up, the chances of getting to a road where you could be retrieved easily were quite slim. It was better to land at the airstrip and relaunch than to let yourself drift downwind chasing a weak thermal that might leave you stranded with over a hundred pounds of gear.

Next morning, a Sunday, Tiki and I were both out early towing at the airstrip, but neither of us found any lift. The early low cumulus clouds disappeared and we were left to flail about in the blue. Gary's e-mailed morning weather forecast had been accurate about early light thermals, but it was wishful thinking to believe that we could stay aloft in such conditions. After numerous attempts we quit around noon and hoped the next day would be better. Two hours later, the sky looked agonizingly beautiful as the ground heated up and thermals began to form.

Monday morning at 7:30 we rejoiced to see cumulus clouds already starting to form. Tiki and I both hurried to the airstrip, excited and ready to fly. As usual the clouds started forming very low, at about a thousand feet. They were quite thin and moving very quickly.

I towed up first at 9:45, but didn't find any lift. Half an hour later I tried again — still no luck. Tiki towed up right after me, but it wasn't working for her either. Once more just before eleven I gave it another try, and after fighting my way upwind to the south end of the runway was rewarded with a thermal.

This thermal was going up at a remarkable three hundred feet per minute and I was able to climb out to 3,400 feet. This was highest I'd been at this airstrip and it looked really good. I was drifting downwind quickly as I turned in the thermal. The lift was so consistent that I did not even get low, as I had on almost every day previously.

Unfortunately when I tried to zip up my pod, the zipper came apart so that my harness didn't support my legs. This was uncomfortable to say the least. After flying 35 miles and not being able to solve the problem with the blown-out zipper, I chose to land in a field on the south side of Laredo right next to the Rio Grande and the Mexican border.

Tiki had taken off just after me and I had listened to her on the radio. She entered a light thermal at six hundred feet and climbed slowly, letting herself drift quickly away from the airstrip. She thought she could continue to climb, but that turned out to be just wishful thinking. Without two thousand feet at the airstrip her chances of getting up were greatly reduced. Soon she was too far downwind to be able to make it back.

After letting it lure her out into No Man's Land, Tiki finally lost the thermal. She was now so low that finding another thermal before she had to land would be like pulling a rabbit out of her helmet. Because the area had so few landing possibilities she had to focus more on landing safely than on staying in the air. Soon she was on the ground.

I could hear all of this going on over the radio as I stayed high and continued toward Laredo. I was dealing with my own problems with the blown out harness zipper. Tiki now told Dale, her retrieval driver, to switch to a different radio frequency that they had previously decided to use while on the ground.

A ground frequency is sometimes used in order not to disturb pilots who are still flying with all the details of retrieval. Still, I felt Tiki was being overly solicitous of my feelings; I was the only other pilot there, and a little chatter aimed at getting her out of her predicament would hardly disturb me. As soon as Tiki switched to the other frequency I lost all contact with her.

Since she had gone down so close to the airstrip, and since Dale was dedicated to finding her, I felt that everything was surely under control. I assumed Dale would call the Sheriff to locate the keys and open the gate, as we had discussed. Thinking that Tiki was in no danger, Belinda and I went to an afternoon movie in Laredo. But we were mistaken.

Afraid that the authorities would charge money to help her get out, Tiki insisted that Dale was not to call the Sheriff. Without our help, Dale was now scrambling to find Tiki.

Tiki and Dale had been in Zapata only two days. Neither of them had a map of the area. Dale now had to try and find a road that would take her to Tiki, knowing only Tiki's co-ordinates and using her GPS. There were no through roads leading north from the airstrip, which was five miles east of town. Dale was forced to go back to Zapata and north on the highway to try to find a dirt road that might lead her back east toward Tiki.

After much futile trial and error, she was finally able to get within 2½ miles of Tiki — only to be stopped by a locked gate.

Now, normally 2½ miles is not that big a deal if you are walking out, but Tiki had to deal with her glider and her harness and her equipment. She was thinking about how she was going to get her equipment out, and not thinking about walking to Dale and the truck. Oh, and now it was after noon and the temperature well above one hundred degrees. Tiki had a water container with her but it didn't contain a lot of water. She had no hat to shield her head from the broiling sun.

Dale was frantic now, begging Tiki to let her call the Sheriff, and Tiki insisting that Dale find her and not call the Sheriff. Tiki was running low on water and walking out. She was no longer at the GPS location she had given Dale. She was already getting confused.

She hadn't been eating well over the last couple of weeks. A strict vegan, she had been unable to find or cook much food for herself in Hobbs. By the time she got to Zapata she was already significantly weakened.

Within a few hours Tiki had used up all her water and then spilled the last cupful. Her decision-making had deteriorated. She was beginning to suffer from heat stroke, no longer sweating as her body tried to preserve water.

Dale was still looking for a way in to Tiki, a way that didn't exist without the keys to a number of locked gates. She had lost contact with Tiki since Tiki's radio batteries had died, and she couldn't get through on Tiki's cell phone. She was on her own and under orders not to go for help. Finally Dale got a break — Tiki's truck had a flat tire. Dale now had no choice but to ignore Tiki and call the Sheriff.

Meanwhile Dale couldn't get hold of Tiki on the cell phone because Tiki was talking to Malcolm Jones at Wallaby Ranch in Florida. Malcolm was surprised to hear from the now-delusional Tiki, and he was more than a little worried by the time he got off the phone with her. He couldn't do anything from Florida, so he called us.

"What the Hell are y'all doing to Tiki down there?" Malcolm bellowed. "She says she's stuck out in the desert, but she's not making any sense!" Belinda and I had been wheeling a shopping cart down a supermarket aisle in Laredo, a good 45-minute drive from Zapata, when our cell phone rang. We did our best to reassure Malcolm, called Dale, then headed south wondering what was going on and what we could do.

Dale had reached the Sheriff's office and given them Tiki's landing co-ordinates. Tiki had been walking out, so it was not clear where she was now. It was after five, and Tiki had been wandering around in 110-degree heat for five hours. The Sheriff contacted a pilot to bring in a spotter plane to see if they could find Tiki.

Right next to the Rio Grande as it is, Zapata County is an area that sees many, many poor Indians from Mexico walking through the desert to try to get to San Antonio. Each year, a number of these would-be immigrants are found dead by landowners, overcome by the heat. The spotter was quite adept at finding people out there.

Tiki was now experiencing heat stroke and had lain down in the middle of a gravel road and lost consciousness. Fortunately, once alerted, the pilot quickly spotted her and guided the Emergency Medical Team to her. The EMTs had to cut their way through a few gates, but they were finally able to get to her.

When the EMTs aroused Tiki she insisted that she was just taking a little nap and that she must get her glider, harness and equipment. The medical techs and the Sheriff took her back to her glider and then drove Tiki and her gear back out to the highway where we were waiting with Dale and the flat tire. I counted nine Sheriff's cars, a few trucks, and the EMT truck. The whole Sheriff's department must have been there. It must have been a slow day.

It would take days before Tiki recovered from her ordeal. It was amazing how quickly her ability to reason had been impaired by dehydration and exposure. She had made all the wrong decisions, going against what she had been advised to do, and getting deeper into trouble with each step. We had been very lucky not to lose her.

The next day a ranch hand found an Indian who had died out in the desert walking north, just fifteen miles north of the airstrip.

The Border Patrol has an immigration station at Hebronville, about fifty miles north of Zapata – but it only monitors Highway 16. The folks coming across the border walk to get around this station. In that heat, walking fifty miles was murder.

