

Epilogue

Success Breeds More Success

The news of the new world records set in Zapata quickly spread throughout the worldwide hang gliding community. Of course I wrote about it in my online e-zine, the Oz Report (<http://ozreport.com>), but there were plenty of others who picked up the story. I wrote an article for Hang Gliding magazine, and the European hang and paragliding magazines published notices about the new records.

Betinho Schmitz, a top Brazilian hang glider pilot, resolved right away to come the following year to Zapata and set the flex wing world record. Red Bull energy drink was sponsoring him, so he started talking with them about a proposal to do a video of his record attempt.

Many U.S. pilots contacted me about coming in 2001, and I made up a list of potential invitees. I wanted to be sure that the top competition pilots were encouraged to attend our second World Record Encampment, especially some top European pilots.

We decided that with so many pilots coming to Zapata we'd have to get a Dragonfly to aerotow everyone up early in the morning. At the Florida meets the following April, I spoke with Manfred Ruhmer, the flex wing world champion. He hadn't seriously considered it before since he had never done any cross-country flying outside of competitions, but he quickly decided to come. We scheduled two two-week sessions, so that pilots attending the World Championships in Spain could fly to the U.S. in time for the second session.



The first session started off on June 23rd with weather that was conducive to long distance flying, and many of the participants exceeded their personal bests. On June 28th, Mark Poustinchian flew 369 miles to break my world record. He launched a little after 11 AM on a day that didn't look that good — just a few cu's starting at 10:25, and strong winds out of the south — and ended up near Abilene.

On June 30th, things looked particularly interesting. We had gotten really excited looking at the forecast the night before, since the winds looked right. But there was one problem: high vertical air movements were predicted to occur in the afternoon northeast of Sonora, the signs of a cumulo-nimbus cloud.

I got off to a nice early start, and the conditions were the best I had ever experienced. I'd flown a hundred miles by noon and two hundred miles by 2:45 PM. I was hours ahead of my previous best flight. It felt like I could fly five miles. But as I approached Rock Springs

up on the Edwards Plateau I could see clouds piling up on top of other clouds fifty miles to my north. This looked bad. A thunderhead could suck all the lift out of the sky for hundreds of square miles.



Hoping that the clouds would not continue to climb, I headed northwest toward Sonora. The clouds continued to climb high and I knew that I was going to lose my best day. My only hope was to go west and try to get around the storm. I took a sharp left turn to the west and flew forty miles along Interstate 10, hoping to outrun the clouds. Another cumulo-nimbus cloud formed to the west of the original cloud and there was just no way to get around both storms. All the other cu's were wiped up and the lift disappeared. I landed in disappointment near the freeway.

The weather conditions deteriorated for the next couple of weeks as the first crew headed home and the pilots coming from the Worlds showed up. Every day the skies were blue with very few cumulus clouds. The winds were light.

These relatively poor conditions didn't stop Manfred Ruhmer, whose longest flight before he came to the World Record Encampment had been 130 miles — as a task in a competition. Manfred flew at every opportunity despite the poor prospects for a new world record, improving his personal best. He was able to build up to 224 miles in less than perfect conditions.

Manfred had just won his second world championship in a row, in Spain. Kathleen Rigg, the highest scoring female pilot in the Worlds, teamed up with Manfred and was getting long flights also, although not as long as Manfred's.

Paris Williams, the number one ranked pilot in the U.S., Bo Hagewood, the U.S. National Champion, and Kari Castle, the Women's World Champion, all arrived from the Worlds along with Andre Wolf and Betinho Schmitz, the top pilots from Brazil.

Of course we were all hoping that conditions would improve. And on the evening of July 16th, after two weeks of nice — but not very long — flights, it became clear that the next day would be the day.

On that night the predicted temperature soundings for Zapata, Del Rio, San Angelo, and Midland showed a strong push of moist air up from the Gulf of Mexico, spreading over Texas during the night. At dawn cumulus clouds were expected to start forming at Zapata and throughout the state. It looked as though the clouds would stay with us for the whole day.

The winds were predicted to continue blowing out of the southeast, as they had every day of our encampment. They wouldn't be wrapping around and coming from the south later in the day up near Uvalde, but rather stay straight south-southeast all day long.

When we got up before sunrise the cumulus clouds were forming right over the airport, just as predicted the night before. They continued to form in the early morning and this encouraged everyone to get to the airport early. We phoned Dustin Martin, who had flown 214 miles on the 16th and was still in Rocksprings. After his driver had turned around and left him he had been forced to spend the night sleeping in an abandoned storefront in his harness. He told us ruefully that the cu's were there and flying by over his head.

Although we pulled into the airport before eight that morning, we weren't sure when we should launch. One would hate to launch a little too early and miss the best day of the encampment by landing early in lift that was still too light. The weather conditions so far this year had not lived up to our high expectations, and we were really nervous about wasting a good day by making a bad decision.

Gary Osoba, my fellow WRE organizer, was bent on holding us back. Last year he had worked to get us going earlier each morning, but now he was worried that we were leaving too early in conditions that wouldn't keep us up.

We had been experimenting with our special Dragonfly, custom-built with an especially powerful engine. We were able to launch two hang gliders behind it, one of the pilots using a shorter rope to maintain separation.

Mark Poustinchian and I got into the air at 9:30 on a double tow to 6,500 feet. I foot launched, hooked to the short rope on the right side of the airstrip, instead of taking off from the cart. There was a lot of tension about this early launch, and in the hurry and confusion I kicked my harness' zipper, jamming it. After towing all the way up I had to dive back to the airport, land and fix the zipper.

Mark would end up landing out near Laredo, so maybe that was a stroke of good luck for me. I didn't and still don't think of it that way.



Next up, Manfred and Paris Williams took a tow to cloudbase at 3,300 feet and released at ten AM. The cloud base was the highest we'd had that year for so early in the morning — normally we would expect the clouds at that time to begin at two thousand feet or so. I waited on the ground for Bo Hagewood and Curt Warren and then Andre Wolf to tow. It was agony. I had wanted to be on course an hour earlier. I knew Manfred was ahead of me and that it would be hard to catch him.

My turn finally came at 10:30. But as I was pulled up I broke a weaklink at only 590 feet over the airport. No way did I want to land again, only to wait again for other pilots to launch in front of me. Kari Castle was all ready and waiting to launch next. I willed myself to stay up in the little dribbling thermal that was drifting quickly to the north away from the runway.

The clouds were streeted up — I could see six streets to my left in addition to the one over my head. All the streets were headed from Zapata right toward the Laredo airport and its controlled airspace. I knew I would have to circle up to near cloudbase, then immediately begin jumping streets to get to the east and around the airspace.



This was the first time during the 2001 WRE that we'd seen the kind of streeting that we had anticipated. As one of the WRE organizers I had been feeling very responsible for the unresponsive weather, and it was a great relief to finally see morning cloud streets.



Meanwhile Manfred and Paris were racing under and across the cloud streets as happy as pigs in mud, thinking that they had better get out there way in front. As they approached Laredo the streets and the clouds suddenly stopped and they had to put on the brakes. Quickly the race was not to the swift, but to the patient.

Since I was behind these guys I had the advantage of better conditions as I approached Laredo. I too outran the streets as I got out thirty miles from Zapata, but there were wisps of cu's to help me continue and get closer to the leaders.

Once they had navigated east around the controlled airspace around the Laredo airport, Manfred and Paris saw the clouds pointing northwest out of Laredo toward Del Rio. With no clouds along Highway 83, our usual route, they chose the left-hand path and got back under the clouds.

Thirty minutes behind them, I saw that clouds were now forming a little bit to my right, letting me take a route five miles to the west of Highway 83. The clouds weren't streets like they had been between Zapata and Laredo, but they were there and provided all the guidance I needed to the good lift.

We'd gotten a late start. I was quite concerned that it was too late to set the record. I had really wanted to launch at nine AM, but perhaps Gary was right and conditions hadn't been right that early. I'd had difficulty getting east around Laredo, so he was probably right — but I sure would have liked to see what we could do on a day when we got started at eight.

I could hear Paris and Manfred talking occasionally on the radio, and now they were a hundred miles out. By now it was one PM and I was 86 miles out, flying as fast as I could up Highway 83. I later learned that Paris was low at this point and Manfred was near cloud base. They had seen the clouds forming to their right as they flew toward Del Rio, had abandoned the river route, and had flown back over near Highway 83.

Hearing that Paris and Manfred were just ahead of me, I pushed even harder. The cu's were thick, with some streeting out of the southeast, and I wanted to race. I passed Catarina, the first little town north of Laredo, cut the corner where the highway jogs over to Carrizo Springs, and sped past Crystal City. At this point there was little need to turn in anything under seven hundred feet per minute. Manfred was also racing as fast as he could — he would be hard to catch.

I was racing under thick clouds, only stopping if I found really strong lift. I sure wasn't having to search for any lift; it was everywhere. Just north of Crystal City at 130 miles from Zapata, I caught Paris and Andre Wolf, who had launched about fifteen minutes before me. Paris was having troubles with his VG line, a rope that controlled the sail trim of his glider — he couldn't pull it tight and was forced to fly much more slowly than usual.

I had been able to race up to this point, but now I had to slow down. The cloud streets had stopped as and I was in a blue area with a lot of sink. Paris, Andre and I were struggling, me for the first time. Manfred was off to our northwest about fifteen miles away, quite a ways west of the highway.

I got quite low and turned down the volume on my radio to cut down on the distractions. I didn't hear Paris telling me that there was a thousand foot per minute lift just off to my right. Instead I dove off to the west into the mesquite covered grazing areas to get under some clouds. It was a real slog before I finally found a thermal, and that thermal was on the edge of being really scary. I knew that I needed it bad, but I also wanted to leave it as soon as I got high. Most of the thermals in Texas, even the strongest ones, have nice smooth edges. There was nothing smooth about this baby.

I was way to the west of Highway 83, right behind Manfred, and the lift was good. Both of us were on a track that led over tiger country far to the west of Highway 55, far from any traveled back country roads, up into the hill country with very few places to land. It would be at least a day's hike out from any area where you might go down.

Manfred wasn't looking down; he was looking at the clouds and ignoring everything on the ground. The clouds were outstanding. Not too thick, almost all of them working, and their elevation was rising very nicely throughout the day. The hill country is almost all rock, gray swirling rock, and in the late afternoon it bakes. You don't want to land there, but it sure is good for flying.

We were all on the same radio frequency so we could each hear what the other pilots were up to. At intervals we would each report our altitude, and our distance and bearing back to Zapata. Every twenty miles or so I would hear Manfred's brief broadcast and I could tell if I was gaining on him or not. So far, I was losing ground.

Andre and Kari Castle landed in the area I had found difficult, 155 miles out. Bo and Paris were also at that point, just behind Manfred and me. Bo was flying on our track, but Paris was sticking to the east over Highway 55 as he continued to struggle with his stuck VG. The considerable force required for him to pull in his base bar to maintain even moderate speed was wearing him out as he continued to fall behind — he agonized about whether to land, but the abundant lift kept luring him on.

The hills were baking, and there were little puffy clouds everywhere. Unlike Manfred, I was looking down — and I observed very few suitable landing areas. But the clouds were a great source of encouragement, and I just kept going with them. The fact that the hills were all rock helped me believe they would keep working for me.

A little over two hundred miles out, we left the hill country behind and got up onto the Edwards plateau. The ground had risen two thousand feet since we had left Zapata that morning, and was now at 2,400 feet. Once over the plateau we got back into friendlier landing areas and even better lift than the hill country. Of course, it was later in the day, cloud base was rising, and the thermals, which had been quite nice, got even fatter.

Both Manfred and I followed a downwind northwest route that took us south of Rocksprings. We hadn't seen a town larger than a few hundred people since we'd passed Laredo. We flew over ranches, open rangeland, and every now and then a paved road. We were drifting up toward Midland, but still had a couple of hundred miles to go to get there.

Manfred's ground speeds on glide continued to improve into the high sixties and approached seventy miles per hour. He was now averaging fifty miles per hour, including climbs.

The countryside was almost totally empty. We had missed almost all the small towns and gotten to see an incredible amount of nothing. We hadn't flown over any cultivated lands since La Pryor, 135 miles out, and wouldn't see any again until near Big Spring, at 380 miles.

By around four o'clock the cloud streets had become better defined, and the clouds were now higher but fewer. Although the wind was pushing us northwest, I could see that the cumulus clouds to our west had thinned; we would have to drive north-northwest in order to stay under any clouds. I could tell that Manfred had figured this out too and altered his course, when he reported a more southerly bearing back to Zapata. There were cloud streets off to our north and that's what I headed for.

I could see the dry line way off on the western horizon. There would be cu nimb's over there late in the day, and cirrus clouds coming out of the tops of those clouds — but too far away to affect us. I continued racing under the cloud streets in the thoroughly enjoyable evening air, getting slower but still solid climbs under almost every cloud. I could run straight under cloud streets for ten miles at a time, still staying in lift or light sink.

Flying in the late afternoon air is the most enjoyable feeling — and when you combine it with the solid fat lift, cloud streets, and a reasonable tail wind, it is the best. At that point it seemed both Manfred and I had a chance of setting world records. Manfred looked like he would get four hundred miles, and I was wondering if I would have enough day left to do the same.

North of Big Spring at about 8:15, Manfred left light lift and headed for the next clouds hoping for something better. But the clouds had finally stopped working for him and he landed at 8:30 — 435.4 miles out, past Lamesa, Texas, north of Big Spring.

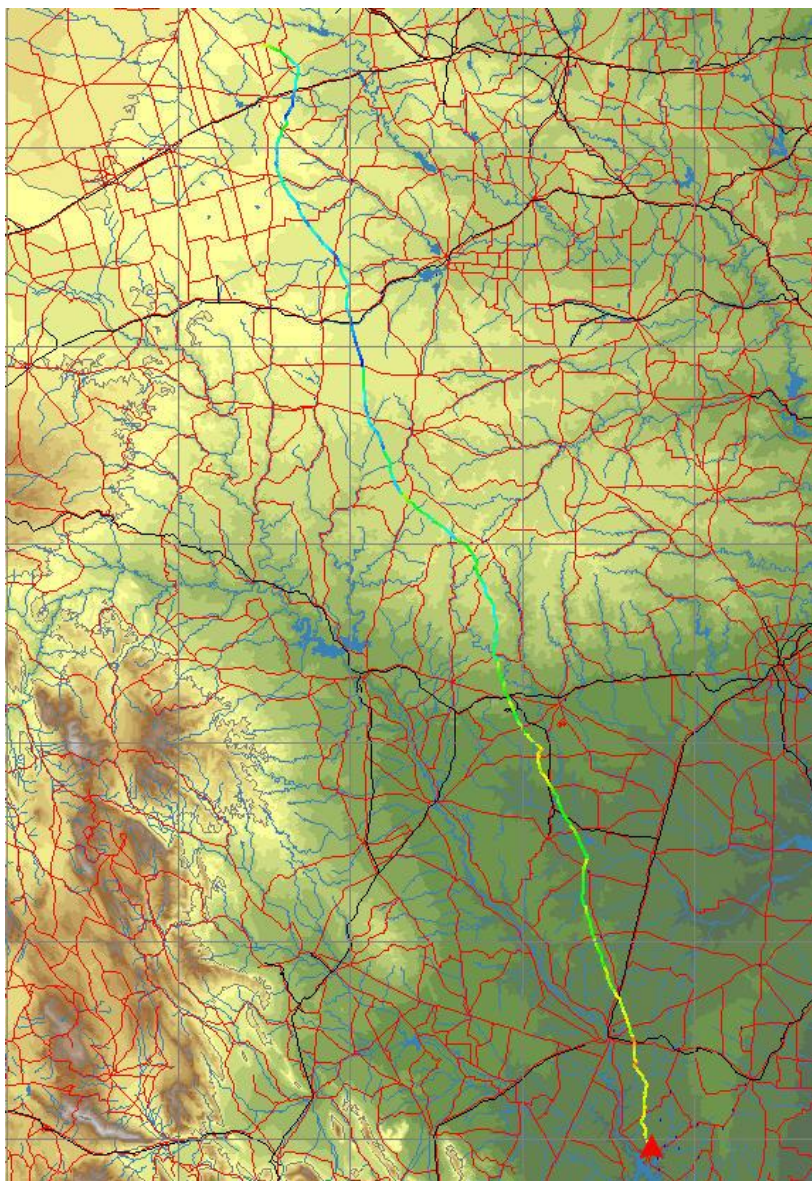
At 8:30 I was still working lift under a very small cloud, and when I topped out I headed northwest, trying to get to Highway 87 where it led north out of Big Spring. I landed at 8:44, nine minutes before sundown, at 407 miles out.

Bo flew 308 miles that day, to match Larry Tudor's record. Paris, despite his aching arms, flew 318 miles. He held the new flex wing world record for only a couple of hours, until Manfred landed.

I landed next to a farm and sure enough the farmer came out to find out why his horses were making so much racket. He seemed pleased to find me; and he and his wife invited me in and were happy to sign my record application form. Belinda showed up a few minutes later, having driven long and hard across a major chunk of Texas.

Manfred also landed near witnesses. His driver and Kathleen Rigg, who had been picked up where she landed 120 miles out, arrived soon after. We all got together in Big Spring for a very small celebration at a fast-food joint, one of the few establishments open after ten o'clock. Comparing notes over our soggy French fries, Manfred and I agreed that the day had been great but not perfect; with a better wind direction we both thought that flying five hundred miles from Zapata was possible.

Manfred and I weren't the only ones to set new world records as the weather in Zapata improved. A few days later on July 20th, Kari Castle set the Women's World record for distance to a declared goal, 217 miles.



On July 26th, David Glover set the new rigid wing distance to declared goal record at 220 miles, taking a photo of College and Llano streets on the northeast corner of town in Rocksprings.

David said later, "The Velcro on my harness blew out just like the last time I flew, this time 35 miles into the flight. After six hours of a quite painful flight I landed on the outskirts of Rocksprings. The couple who own the thousand-acre ranch where I landed brought me water, beer and helped me break down the glider. They insisted on fixing a home cooked catfish dinner along with more beer and drinks. They offered me a shower and bed for the night. Could it get any better? Dick and Pat Herschap win the hospitality award for wayward hang glider cross-country pilots."



On the same day, Betinho broke the longest standing distance world record in hang gliding, Larry's Tudor's distance to goal record of 304 miles. Betinho flew 311 miles to Mertzon to set the record. He was high there, but he could see overdevelopment to the north so he decided to land.

Josh Cohn had set the new distance to goal record for paragliding two days previously, along with the new American record for distance – two hundred miles, just shy of Godfrey Wenness' record, 208 miles. Josh set the distance to declared goal record at 192 miles, and then kept going trying to make two hundred. He just made it.

Kari set the women's distance record at 250 miles on the same day Josh set his record. She had wanted to really smash the previous record (Tove Heaney, 230 miles) but she is now more aware of just how difficult that can be, even in a place like Zapata.

.....

The World Record Encampment has become a regular thing. In 2002, despite heavy rain in Zapata and record flooding up in the Hill Country, seven world records were broken.

Godfrey's paragliding distance record finally fell to Dave Prentice, who only got to enjoy it for 24 hours before Will Gadd went further still, 263 miles to be exact. Pete Lehmann and Mike Barber both made the same distance to goal world record at 321 miles out at Big Lake (the place where the movie *The Rookie* took place). Mike had a heart-breaker when he bested Manfred by flying 437 miles – but unfortunately not more than one percent further than the old record, so not an official new one.

Lacking the strong southeast airflow that makes Zapata what it is, we went after triangle records and out-and-returns. Jim Lamb set a record for the newly-defined Class 5 rigid wings, flying the hundred kilometer out-and-return at 34.36 kilometers per hour (21.35 miles per hour). The Italian Alex Ploner broke both Class 2 and Class 5 records by flying a hundred kilometer triangle in one hour and 48 minutes for a speed of 35 miles per hour – greatly surpassing the existing world record of 21 mph. And Bo Hagewood broke the flexwing 100-kilometer triangle speed record, completing the course in a little under two hours and 27 minutes for a speed of 26.3 miles per hour.

When pilots start challenging each other and learning from each other – and when they have the right conditions – who knows what can happen. It seems to me there's no end in sight.

~~~~~