**Air Play**

This is a story about one aging soaring-pilot-wannabe’s early training in the culture of soaring. Soaring mixes playful and serious aspects of flying in a truly marvelous way. This is a story about playful aspects.

My soaring-pilot-wannabe status was established back in 1967. In the summer of that year my new wife and I were wandering by car around Europe before entering graduate school. Passing a grassy, fenced field in Germany one sunny afternoon we saw a little knot of people out in the middle. This looked to me like a model-flying group. I had flown a lot of free flight model airplanes from a lot of grassy fields over my childhood and knew a bunch of modelers when I saw them. I was very surprised when the group moved a little and I saw a single *really* big model airplane. It sure looked like a model airplane anyway, resting right on the bottom of its fuselage in the grass, one wing tip on the ground, the other up in the air. It was clearly a glider, but it was person-sized.

As my wife and I watched from the fence line, the people standing around the plane moved back, the tilted wings leveled, what sounded like a truck engine started up in a trailer across the field, and the glider leapt forward, climbing steeply, towed by a cable coming from the engined-trailer – just like the tow-line glider models I flew. But this model held people! High overhead and off the line, the interior framework of its long wings clearly visible against the bright sky, the glider floated into just the kind of broad, lazy circling my models were adjusted to do, floated up nearly to the base of a cloud, then descended in more circles and s-turns, finally crossing the road right over our heads with a hearty whishhing sound and landing in the grass.

I was transfixed.

But I was also 22, about to enter graduate school. Any involvement in gliding for me would have to wait.

I did join the SSA at least. Back in the USA I stumbled on a copy of *National Geographic*, January 1967. “Sailors of the Sky” spread across its first two pages a photograph to take my breath away: an all-white, slender, impossibly long-winged glider, flying towards the camera with the pilot tucked into the nose, smiling broadly. Behind him towered a whole cloudscape of busy summer sky. “Alone with the wind,” the caption said, “seven-time national soaring champion Richard H. Johnson of Dallas, Texas, rides the flowing mantle of a summer storm in his Skylark 4 sailplane.”

The article mentioned the Soaring Society of America. My sympathetic wife procured a mailing address, and under the Christmas tree in 1968 appeared my membership packet and two issues of *Soaring*. For forty years *Soaring* has come every month. I read every word. Usually several times.

In 1998, when my youngest son went off to College, I decided it was time to learn to soar. I scheduled a week at the Bermuda High Soaring School to let Frank and Jayne Reid – and their chief instructor, Jim Gager – make what I had been reading about come alive.

Instruction with Jim Gager was a dizzying round of short flights. I worked hard and Gager got to know me really well. He got to hear elements of my vocabulary that even my friends rarely heard and to see me wobbly and motion sick in ways I had never been before. The real show at Bermuda High, though, was in the clubhouse.

The clubhouse had four full-time residents. The most prominent was an English mastiff, simply the largest dog I had ever seen. Jayne assured me he was deeply gentle, clearly second fiddle in fact to the second dog of the premises – fleet, brown and white, like a hugely overgrown fox. “That’s the one to watch,” advised Jayne. A gray-white tabby cat lolled on the furniture.

The most authoritative resident of the office suite was a large, green-bodied Amazon parrot, who occupied a tall perch in a corner. The parrot had amazing indigo blue and orange feathers on the underside of its wings, which it periodically exposed in indolent stretches. But it was mostly distinguished by its vocabulary, a collection of sharp retorts it had undoubtedly picked up from excited conversations in the clubhouse. It would sit fussily idle for hours without a word, then erupt with a string of pithy remarks, sounding for all the world like a cranky, precocious child. It also called the dogs, with an ear- splitting version of Frank’s whistle. The sleeping dogs would leap awake, and not seeing Frank, curl around and lie back down. Neither the parrot nor the dogs seemed ever to tire of this drill.

I thought all the playful aspects of soaring culture at Bermuda High were confined to the clubhouse. I was wrong.

Saturday, October 31 was the second-to-last day of my soaring week. In the morning Gager announced that we would be finishing our flying earlier in the afternoon than usual. “Field activities,” was all he would volunteer.

As we flew our training circuits in the early afternoon, I saw cars trickling in to the airfield. By four o’clock there were a dozen. What was going on? Everybody seemed to know but me.

By five o’clock two 2-33s were staged one behind the other at the take-off end of the field. Two tow planes had been mobilized. It looked to me like a mini-contest grid. But what kind of contest could be flown at five o’clock in the afternoon?

Halfway down the runway, well out in front of the clubhouse, two men were walking around bent over, squirting white spray paint from cans. They seemed to be creating a big square. A target?

At the pilots’ meeting Frank raised a bulky copy of the *Federal Aviation Regulations*.

“Gentlemen…and Jayne, I give you Part 91, Section 91.15,” he intoned, “Dropping of Objects:

No pilot in command of a civil aircraft may allow any object to be dropped from that aircraft in flight that creates a hazard to persons or property. However, this section does not prohibit the dropping of any object if reasonable precautions are taken to avoid injury or damage to persons or property.

“We have taken reasonable precautions by putting the target well away from structures, the club house and hangars. We have even moved the fuel truck, which though far removed from what I would consider normal operations, suffered a near miss last year.” (Chuckles all around.)

“This is not a contest. There are no prizes. But we do have some special pilots.”

The bathroom door off one corner of the clubhouse opened and two costumed figures marched majestically toward the group. One was Batman, his ears sticking way up from his mask and his scalloped black cape flowing. The other was Superman, a little paunchy in his tight blue suit with its big red S, but with an equally impressive cape.

Pilots and accompanying crew members strode out the door and into golf carts, which bumped incongruously down the field toward the gliders, pilots’ capes fluttering behind. Jayne and another tow pilot climbed into a third cart and followed, while the rest of us ambled down the side.

The caped crusaders climbed into the front seats of the 2-33s, co-pilots into the rears. Canopies were lowered with bold thumbs-up gestures to the audience. The front tow plane roared and bounced into position and soon the first 2-33 was aloft. The second followed close behind.

The gliders released at about 2000 feet. The first shortly began a high landing approach, proceeding slowly down the side of the field, turning a square base leg well beyond the field’s end. But instead of extending spoilers and descending to the field as in a normal landing pattern, it sped up in a shallow dive. For a 2-33 at 700 feet, even a dive looks pretty slow, but the glider was clearly making a “high speed pass” down the field. I didn’t know exactly what to look for, but as the glider neared the target area, what looked like an orange basketball tumbled out from the front cockpit area and plummeted toward the ground. A blue arm waved. Bystanders hooted.

The orange sphere neared the ground and simply disappeared. I heard a small muffled thud. A pumpkin! Superman had dropped a pumpkin.

Gager ran out toward the sprayed square in the middle of the field while I followed at a distance. Pumpkin shrapnel was centered around an orange smear ten yards past the square. I looked up. The first glider had pulled into a real landing pattern. The second was entering its high speed run.

Following Gager well off to the side of the square, I focused on the front cockpit of the second glider. Sure enough, I saw it crack open, saw a much larger basketball than the first one rolled up on the sill, an akimbo of black arms, and then down it came. Gager and I stepped forward when it became clear where it was going to hit and were no more than ten yards away it did.

What I saw could best be described as an orange explosion. With a clear thump the pumpkin disappeared in an orange haze. I got a dash of wet, vegetable breeze. Pieces of pumpkin tumbled down the field.

Gager trotted out and confirmed that this pumpkin had indeed detonated inside the sprayed square. He turned toward the bystanders, now standing in front of the clubhouse, and put up his arms like a football referee signaling a touchdown. The group whistled and clapped.

I glanced around at the mess. “Do we need to pick up any of these pieces?” I asked him.

“Naah,” said Gager. “The raccoons and ‘possums will clean it all up tonight, though they might be a little noisy doing it. It’ll be a little Halloween treat for them.”