



Photo: Sakiko Hasunuma

Martin at Asagiri, Japan, Mt. Fuji in the background, 1990

Flying Geezer: Hang Gliding at Age 70

By Martin Beresford

On this perfect late-spring day, I'm cruising in my Sport 2 at 1500 feet above the California coast near Fort Funston. It's a few weeks before my 70th birthday on July 4th. The lift is fat and smooth. The sun glitters on the Pacific Ocean from a cloudless sky. A thousand feet below, a red-tail hawk hovers over the cliffs. The views are absolutely breathtaking: the Golden Gate, the Marin headlands, the peninsula and San Francisco – surely one of the world's most beautiful cities. Thirty miles across the ocean, I can see the Farallon Islands, and thirty miles inland across the East Bay, Mt. Diablo. Sheer joy!

Later, in the LZ, a middle-aged wuffo strolls over. "Aren't you a bit old for this kind of thing?" he asks. "How did you get started? Isn't it dangerous? What keeps you doing it at your age?" As usual on such occasions, I can't think of a suitably witty response until hours later. But the answers to his questions are actually quite simple.

Fifty years ago, as a young army lieutenant in postwar Europe, I did a lot of parachuting – we were training to drop behind enemy lines in the event of a Russian invasion. That kind of "flying" was fairly exciting. But like many of us, I often dreamed of flying freely like a bird. Parachuting, by contrast, was simply a means of getting on the ground and into action as fast as possible. The real excitement started after hitting the ground – especially on night drops, when my first priority was to figure out where the heck we were, while assembling my platoon in the darkness ready to attack.

Years later, while working in the UK, I learned to fly sailplanes. I loved that kind of flying, too. But I always felt a bit too enclosed in the narrow cockpit, insulated from the immediacy of the elements. I imagined how much better it would be if I could somehow hang directly under the wing, the wind in my face, with nothing between me and the ground far below.

Fast forward to Hong Kong in 1972, where I learned to fly a Cessna, circling over the craggy peaks of the New Territories and the deep blue waters of the South China Sea. That kind of flying also was exciting, especially sharing airspace with incoming 707s, which in those days had to turn sharply a few feet above

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the Kowloon rooftops, on their final approach to KaiTak. But this, too, fell short of my dream of riding on the wind, soaring quietly on the air currents like a bird...

In those days I hadn't yet heard of hang gliding – though I'd seen Da Vinci's sketches, and knew about early pioneers like Sir George Cayley and Otto Lilienthal. But unknown to me, far away in California and Australia, modern-day pioneers like Bill Bennett and Richard Miller were already starting to apply Francis Rogallo's designs to develop our marvelous sport.

Fast forward again to the Japan Alps in 1975, where I'm skiing with my Japanese girlfriend. Suddenly, an announcement comes over the PA system: "Watch out! Clear the piste! There's a hang glider coming!" *What the heck is a hang glider?* I wonder. We wait expectantly. Then it appears, circling overhead – a beautiful rogallo, multi-colored like a butterfly, the sun glowing through its wings like a stained-glass window. The pilot circles toward the mountain, turns back into the wind and lands elegantly on skis right in front of us. I'm captivated. Now, at last, that's it! That's what I've been dreaming about!

Skiing over to the Japanese pilot, I ask him all about hang gliding and how to get started. He's very friendly and, on hearing that I've flown sailplanes, he offers to let me fly his rogallo off the mountaintop. Having never even seen a hang glider before, let alone flown one, thank heaven I'm cowardly enough to refuse his kind offer. Still, I'm instantly hooked on the idea of learning to hang glide.

In those days I doubted if my language skills were strong enough to for me take hang gliding lessons in Japanese. So the following week, back home in Tokyo, I started researching hang gliding schools in America. A few months later, at the end of a business trip to the USA, I spent four magical days learning basic hang gliding skills on the dunes at Kitty Hawk. My girlfriend insisted on coming with me so she could care for me if – as she fully expected – I got injured. She observed anxiously from a deckchair on the beach, binoculars and Chardonnay in hand.

Hang gliding, I discovered, was truly wonderful – the realization of one of mankind's oldest dreams. I left Kitty Hawk as proud owner of a Hang-1 certificate, with a strong desire to become, some day, an accomplished hang glider pilot. However, to achieve that goal safely required a level of commitment that was clearly incompatible with the 18-hour days that I was



A 1992 self-portrait above "the stables" at Fort Funston



Photo: Sakkiko Hasunuma

The pre-geezer Martin with his Falhawk "Create" on Asagiri launch, Mt. Fuji in the background,

putting into my business at that time in Europe, Japan and California. So for the next 10 years I concentrated on work, putting hang gliding on the back burner – apart from occasional brief trips to various training hills around the world.

By 1987 (back in Japan again, at age 50) it dawned on me that if I didn't make a serious commitment to hang gliding now, I'd soon be too old to get started. It was now or never! So, I somehow found time away from business to begin lessons

at Nishi Fuji, near Tokyo, followed by a highly enjoyable week with Sam Nottage on the training slopes at Poli Poli on Maui. Before long, I experienced my first soaring flight at Asagiri Kogen near Mt. Fuji – the first time I actually went up in a hang glider rather than down. What a thrill that was! The lift was strong and smooth, and the views above Mt. Asagiri were stupendous – from the snow-covered Japan Alps far off in the West to Mt. Fuji just across the valley, the emerald-green paddy fields below, and the Pacific Ocean shining in the east. Now I was really hooked!

The written exams for a Japanese Hang-3 were a bit challenging – especially the technical vocabulary. But once I'd passed, I began flying regularly with my Japanese mentor Sekiya, at the Nishi Fuji Hang Gliding Club, a friendly and supportive group who made me welcome as the only "gaijin" in the club.

To cut a long story short, following the Japanese market crash in 1990 I started a new business back in San Francisco, where I was lucky enough

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Photo: J/m

Japanese mentor Sekiya poses with Martin and his Spectrum at Dunlap, California, 1992



Photo: Sakiko Hasumura

Martin at Asagiri, Japan, Mt. Fuji in the background, 1990

to meet many wonderful hang gliding friends. They introduced me to our great local sites – Funston and Tam – and to the joys of flying and camping together at mountain sites like Hull, Slide, Hat Creek, Lakeview, Dunlap, Sylmar and the Owens (where my first flight took me almost straight up to 17,000 feet). I learned a lot from excellent instructors like Andy Whitehill, Wally Anderson, and Pat Denevan, and I still benefit enormously from constructive criticism and advice by fellow pilots – much needed, often received and always much appreciated!

Well, my “Big 7” birthday came and went (celebrated across America with the usual fireworks...). Getting old, they say, isn’t fun, but it’s sure better than the alternative. I enjoy other sports – skiing, sailing, tennis, running – but in the end, there’s nothing quite like hang gliding. Still, as a minor concession to creeping decrepitude, I gave myself a Falcon 3 for my birthday – a delight to fly, and even lighter and more forgiving than my beloved Sport 2. Also, I’m spending more time nowadays flying familiar coastal sites instead of more challenging XC flights.

So today I’m sitting in my study doing email, one eye on the PC monitor, the other glancing across the Golden Gate at the inviting cumies forming over Mt. Tam. A friend calls: “Come on, Martin, let’s go flying!” How can I resist? We meet at launch. It’s blowing straight in at 15 knots and the turkey vultures are

soaring. My friend launches into elevator-like lift, almost straight up to 2800 feet, cheered by Oohs! and Aahs! from a group of friendly wuffos. I follow, and we soar together over the mountain. The views, as always, are stunningly beautiful! Over the mesa, a hawk hovers in the westerly breeze. Far below, kiteboarders carve long white furrows on the ocean, sparkling in the afternoon sun. This is sheer bliss!

After a couple of hours the wind shifts, the lift weakens, the hawk disappears, and we fly out to land on Stinson Beach. The kiteboarders, always considerate, move offshore when they see us setting up our landings. Later, perched on a

rock back at launch, we watch a gorgeous sunset over the Pacific. We can hear the distant roar of the breakers rolling endlessly down on the beach, as we enjoy a beer and swap highlights of today’s flight – a reminder of how lucky we are to be living in this beautiful place, enjoying this wonderful sport.

So I guess the answer to that wuffo’s question is quite simple: I keep on hang gliding, despite the rigors of advancing age and decrepitude, because I love this sport – for the joy and beauty of flying itself and, perhaps even more, for the comradeship and support of many wonderful friends in the hang gliding community. There’s an old saying: “If you want to make the gods laugh, tell them your plans.” Yet I dare to hope that, with a bit of luck, I may still be hang gliding when my “Big 8” comes along...



Martin and his UltraSport at Fort Funston, California, 2003

Photo: Geoff Rutledge