

# FLYING FREE

An Interview With and Tribute To William Coleman Bennett  
(July 3, 1956 - July 25, 1996)



by Jim (Sky Dog) Palmieri

## COMMENTARY BY JIM PALMIERI

I love hang gliding and everything associated with the sport. Nothing compares to a two-hour soaring flight in big, fat, smooth thermals or the camaraderie experienced in the LZ after everyone has landed. The friendships and relationships that I have developed through hang gliding are an important part of my life.

Sometimes there is tragedy associated with the sport. It is difficult for me to understand why a pilot is with us one day and gone the next. If you are like me, losing a friend, a fellow pilot, just plain hurts!

William Coleman Bennett, Bill, was always a "Sky God" to me. As our Region 9 Director, Bill was involved in just about all aspects of hang gliding in Virginia, Maryland and the Washington, DC area. It always seemed that if the wind was blowing straight in, Bill would be set up and ready to launch or preparing to take a student tandem. Bill Bennett was always there for us.

During July, 1995, while at a picnic/fly-in held by John Lane at Smith Mountain Lake in Virginia, I asked Bill if he would consent to be interviewed for *Hang Gliding* magazine. When he agreed, I

sent him about 30 questions to answer. He told me he would get it done but would need some time. Bill was so busy with hang gliding and hang gliding business that I should have known that I would not get his answers right away. Every time I saw Bill, he would apologize for not having them, but would say, "I really want to do the interview. I have been working on some of the questions." I felt like I was imposing on his valuable time and Bill felt that he was letting me down on a commitment he had made. We both knew that if it was a choice between answering some questions or flying, flying would win.

During the July, 1996 picnic at Smith Mountain Lake, Bill and I talked at length about hang gliding, how he got into the sport, and how towing seemed to represent the future of hang gliding. I will

always remember sitting next to Bill under a gray, overproducing cloud with a boat and glider next to the dock. Bill seemed to be more vibrant that day. He was in excellent physical shape and was mentally sharp. He seemed 10 years younger. I was proud of what Bill had accomplished and of what a giving person he was. I was proud at that moment that Bill was my friend.

We joked about the unfinished interview and talked about ordering a new glider for me. For some reason I felt that if I bought a glider from Bill it would be better than getting it somewhere else, as if he would place a special magical spell on it and I would secretly obtain some of his outstanding flying skills. We all have our lucky charms.

As I left the picnic that Saturday night, Bill gave me a good-bye hug. Our souls had connected that afternoon. Little did I know that it would be the last time I would see him.

Upon hearing of his accident and death I was devastated. I had lost a friend, a good friend. Hang gliding has lost a caring member. Our sport has suffered a great loss.

After Bill's death I had lamented with John Lane about how Bill had not finished the interview and how difficult it was not to have said good-bye to him. I guess we say good-bye every time we meet. I am not good at dealing with death. I was too devastated to attend Bill's funeral. I celebrated Bill Bennett's life with a two-hour soaring flight in an early evening wonderwind. It just seemed appropriate. I also dedicated our new book, *Sky Adventures, Fantasies Of Free Flight* to Bill. It also seemed appropriate.

I shared my feelings, as did many pilots, on the hang gliding Internet forum.

On August 25, 1996, I received a call from Bill's sister, Leah Frank. She had just read all the postings about her brother on the Internet. She had seen my post about my flight and about the unfinished

interview. She told me that the family had found a partially completed inter-



Bill Bennett preflighting the glider as he readies to take Maggie Palmieri (author's wife) on a tandem flight at Empire Mountain, Virginia in June, 1994.

view. I would like to share it with you.

## UNFINISHED INTERVIEW

*Bill, I have known you since I first started hang gliding. As our Regional Director you seem to be everywhere all the time. You have made a great impact upon the local flying community. I am not sure that I know anyone else who has given himself to the sport of hang gliding as you have. I would appreciate it if you would consent to be interviewed for Hang Gliding magazine so that others in our flying community could get to know you as we do in Virginia. Who are you?*

My name is Bill Bennett.

I am 39 years old. I am a teacher of Middle School Technology Education and have been a Master Pilot since February 22, 1992. I am also the USHGA Director of Region 9.

*Bill Bennett is a well known name in hang gliding on both coasts. Has this legacy followed you?*

I've taken a lot of good-natured flak over the years because of this coincidental name thing. It's actually been quite amusing at times. I remember talking to a Novice pilot at the 1988 Nationals. After several minutes I realized that she thought she was talking to the famous "Uncle Bill" of Delta Wing. When I straightened the matter out she immediately got that "no free or reduced-price glider" look of disappointment and went about her business. That was just one of many instances of confusion that have arisen because I happen to have the same name as one of the pioneers of the sport.

*Do you have any notable mentors in the sport and do you consider yourself a pioneer of hang gliding?*

When I taught myself to fly in the isolated mountain country of West Virginia, other pilots were hard to come by. I read everything I could get my hands on from borrowed copies of the Southern California Hang Gliding Association newsletter to Dan Poynter's *Handbook Of Sky Surfing* and Michael Markowski's *Hang Glider Bible*. I don't consider myself to be a pio-

neer; all I was doing was following the lead of others, and at the time I was the only enthusiast in my neck of the woods.

Jim, you asked about my mentors. One individual stands out who played a major role in my development as a hang glider pilot. In 1978 a graduate student at James Madison University who had moved up from North Carolina began coming over to my house and flying my sites most every weekend. Stu Smith and I became friends. I was awe-struck by his skill as a pilot. He was never too busy to share his knowledge and experiences with a novice. In the early 1980's



*Bill Bennett (left) and student, Alesia (right) in Ohio on July 25, 1996. This was Alesia's first tandem flight (about three hours prior to Bill's fatal crash).*

Stu played an instrumental role in my gaining employment as a member of the Grandfather Mountain Flyers. The Grandfather Mountain years were definitive in my development as a pilot. (Note: See letter addressed to Mr. Hugh Morton, a month prior to Bill's death.) *Bill, please describe your first glider and your first flights.*

My first glider was a bamboo frame and plastic sail design called the BATSO. I purchased the plans from Jack Lambie for \$5.00. It was the typical early 1970's \$30 standard. My first training-hill flights were just what you might expect, ground skimming with a good measure of spills and thrills thrown in. I look back on it now and wonder how I survived without injury.

*I know hang gliding plays a major role in your life, but what other pursuits are important to you?*

I'm currently working on a Masters of Education degree which, in addition to

my teaching, keeps me really busy. I enjoy running and typically put in 15 to 20 miles per week. My other passion in life is traditional Japanese karate training, which has been part of my daily routine for over 23 years now. In this pursuit I still find time to teach children and adult classes for the local Parks and Recreation Department. I believe these activities help me maintain a good level of fitness which enables me to be more alert and responsive while flying hang gliders.

*I know that you don't consider yourself to be a pioneer of the sport, but what role have you played in establishing hang gliding in your area?*

I have pioneered quite a few sites and I derive a great deal of inner satisfaction from seeing people enjoying some of the sites I had a hand in opening. For example, the Spruce Knob site in West Virginia took me four years of negotiations with the U.S. Forest Service to open. I was motivated to open the site because of its

## Letter to Mr. Hugh Morton, Grandfather Mountain

Dear Mr. Morton,

It has been nearly 13 years since I was a member of the Grandfather Mountain Flyers and I want to thank you for the wonderful opportunity that was presented to me then. There are few experiences in life that can compare with those that I enjoyed when I was on the Grandfather Team. I often think about those days, the magical awesomeness of the mountain, and the many wonderful and kind-natured people that I met along the way. Of these things I have many happy memories and some very sad ones as well. Sometimes, in the far-off distance of my memory, I can see my friend Stu Smith as clearly as though he were here beside me. As often as not, I must dismiss these thoughts for the tears that they bring, and once again I can see only the happy days when the mountain is bathed only in warm sunshine and smiling faces. You provided a great showcase for the sport of hang gliding as well as treasured memories for many people. Wherever my travels take me, a little of the spirit of Grandfather Mountain goes too. Should I live to a ripe old age I shall consider those Grandfather years to be among the finest of my life.

Again, thank you very much and please extend the Grandfather Family my best wishes.

Very Truly yours,

Bill Bennett

3,000-foot vertical drop and because, on a straight glide, I could land on my grandfather's farm.

As one of the earlier pilots in my area, I

## THE EAGLE SCREAMED

by William (Bill) Bennett

The eagle screamed a shrill note as it spiraled skyward. Never had I seen such a beautiful creature. He was truly the master of this realm. He circled my glider several times glancing at me with piercing, vengeful eyes. I braced myself for an attack which could come at any moment. I cringed at the thought of what those powerful talons could do to my body. The majestic raptor circled a few more times before continuing on in the solitary search of his domain. I breathed a sigh of relief, and continued my flight feeling somewhat puny and insignificant for the experience.

I had flown in this area before and had observed the pair of eagles who had staked out a claim on this part of the mountains. They would often soar for hours and hours, taking in the beauty of the world that lay beneath their wings. Many times I envied them as I watched from afar where they shaped a thermal which would take them higher and higher, until they became barely visible specks in the vast ocean of blue into which I gazed.

At other times I would see them flying low on the ridge in close formation, intent, I supposed, on finding the catch-of-the-day or maybe just enjoying each other's company in the magical world of a fiery mountain sunset.

A handful of other hang glider pilots and I had seen this pair on our frequent sojourns to this remote area, and whenever we sighted them we never failed to be awe-struck by their majestic beauty and sheer artistry of flight.

These two majestic birds of prey were rarely seen in the absence of each other, which is one of the reasons I had become nervous on this flight. The male, which was the smaller of the two, had clearly shown annoyance at my intrusion into the couple's airspace. I knew that his mate could not be far behind, and that along with her larger size might come an aggressiveness to match.

I felt a good thump upon my wing and banked the glider into a nice 300-fpm thermal, and watched as the earth began to spin away from me with each lazy 360-degree turn. I was gaining the luxury of altitude which I could turn into speed in the event of a nasty encounter with the big female. I did not relish the thought of her talons ripping into the more tender parts of my anatomical back side.

Topping out at 9,000 feet I could see my goal at the end of the range. I kept checking the sky, nervously glancing all about for a glimpse of one of the great, golden-shouldered birds. As I coasted down the range I was able to relax and enjoy the pristine beauty of this land of high mountains, lush valleys and alpine meadows.

My goal had been the District Ranger Station of the U.S. Forest Service. Landing in the adjacent field, I walked over to the station to call my retrieval driver and apprise him of my location and flight. This done, I strolled outside with thoughts of enjoying what was left of the day by soaking up all that was possible of the vista that engulfed me. Instead I felt compelled to walk over and investigate just what a group of people dressed in Forest Service green, in a truck painted the same color, found so intriguing.

My mouth dropped open and I felt as if someone had driven a spike through my heart. There, hunched over in the back of the truck, a grim but concerned look on his face, the Regional Game Biologist was displaying the carcass of a once magnificent female golden eagle. As he stoically rambled on, I heard key phrases such as "recent kill" and "gun shot wound."

As my mind worked overtime, I receded in time, several hours, to once again see the solo flight of the golden eagle as she danced about me in what must have been a searing agony punctuated by the loneliness of the ages. Now I understood. What species but MAN could so callously separate this beautiful pair of raptors and so abruptly end their life-long companionship and all for the most selfish and petty of reasons, his own amusement? I can't help but feel that if the man who was responsible for this crime could feel, if only for a moment, the pain he had caused another living creature to suffer, his actions would have been different.

Months later I returned to this area and did not happen to see the lone eagle. He still haunts me to this day.

[This is an account taken from Bill Bennett's journal (1990-1991).]

can remember the intense effort that went into acquiring our sites, and from this perspective I would implore the newer pilots among us to bear in mind that the courtesy they show our landowners is a reflection upon everyone in the flying community.

*Would you please describe the numerous hats you wear in hang gliding and in the USHGA?*

I am very active within Region 9. As Director I try to travel and fly with as many different groups within the Region as I can. I feel strongly about knowing the pilots in Region 9. This enables me to fairly represent their concerns on the issues at the USHGA Board meetings. I maintain membership in the Mountaineer Hang Gliding Association, the Central Virginia Hang Glider Association, the Capitol Hang Glider Association, and the Maryland Hang Gliding Association where I serve on their Board as Flight Director. Other hats include functioning as Examiner, Observer, Tandem Instructor, AeroTow Supervisor and Tow Administrator. I take pride in my Instructor and Observer ratings because it allows me to issue all hang gliding ratings. We need more observers in the sport to support up-and-coming pilots. It all keeps me very busy but I do enjoy taking an active roll.



*Bill Bennett conducting an extensive preflight in preparation to launch his new Swift.*

This was as far as Bill got in answering the questions I sent him. As you can see, he was not only dedicated to the sport but truly in love with hang gliding and the people associated with the sport. With teared eyes and a saddened and heavy heart, I present this partially completed interview with Bill Bennett to you, the readership of *Hang Gliding* magazine.



## FLYING FREE

by Barbara Lou Sutton Bennett

From rags to riches in my heavenly home,  
I had few possessions while on earth I roam,  
With my Heavenly Father I'm safe and I'm free,  
A beautiful mansion he's provided for me.

I fly with angels every day,  
Heartaches and storm clouds have drifted away,  
If I tire of flying, my wings I just fold,  
I talk with my loved ones and walk streets of gold.

I don't need a thermal; I don't need a tow,  
I just spread my wings, and upward I go,  
I've broken my records for distance and time,  
For God's the lead pilot; I fly close behind.

I'm flying free, happily,  
I'm not held down by earth's gravity,  
So my dear loved ones, don't weep for me,  
You know that I'm happy, and I'm flying free.

*Written August 7, 1996 for my son, William Coleman Bennett (Bill)*

Wherever you are Bill, I miss you and will never forget you. You have changed the way I have come to love our sport.

[Note: The following paragraph is excerpted from a letter dated Friday, July 26, 1996 from D. Dean Leyerle, USHGA Insurance and Membership Services, to Bill Frank, Bill Bennett's brother-in-law.

Bill Bennett has been the Regional Director for Region 9 since January 1, 1993. He has the following Special Skills: Cliff Launch (CL), Flat Slope Launch (FSL), Assisted Windy Cliff Launch (AWCL), Turbulence (TUR), Restricted Landing Field (RLF), Cross Country (XC) and AeroTow (AT). Bill is also rated as both a Foot Launch and Tow Launch pilot and holds an AeroTug Pilot (ATP) rating which is for the pilot in command of the powered ultralight during an aerotow. Bill also holds a Tow Administratorship with which he can issue Tow Ratings and AeroTug Pilot Ratings and which allows him to appoint AeroTow Administrators. His Examinership Rating allows him to appoint other Observers. Bill Bennett has been a member of our association since March 25, 1980. On his initial application he indicated that he had been flying for "several months" when he applied. He has been a very active member of our association in all issues both prior to and after being elected Regional Director, especially in the field of aerotowing.]

*The author thanks Barbara S. Bennett, Leah and Bill Frank, Maggie Palmieri, Claire and Dennis Pagen, Gil Dodgen, Dean Leyerle, Gene Matthews, John Lane, Randy Newberry, Wayne Sayer, Felipe Anunategui,*

*Dutscher Sterling, the Capital Hang Gliding Association, the Central Virginia and Southwestern Virginia Hang Gliding Associations, the Mountaineer Hang Gliding Association and the outpouring of support from all his friends on the Internet and at the many flying sites within Region 9, for making this article possible.*

### Memories Of Bill Bennett

*by Randy Newberry,  
as told to Jim (Sky Dog) Palmieri*

Umpteen years ago, Bill and I launched from the old Big Walker Mountain site (near I-77), and proceeded to get our butts kicked as we headed down the ridge for a little X-C. We were both flying the first Sensors equipped with VG. Several times we'd go slack in our harnesses, but that's the way good days are sometimes. We sure as hell did not want to go down and land in this stuff. About 15 miles into this flight I noticed Bill heading out to land. This was not like him. He'd never give a few rowdy thermals a second thought.

He was over the prison and I knew he worked in the correctional system at that time, so I thought maybe he knew someone there. Maybe he wanted a job application. We carried CB radios in those days which remind me of today's cellular phones. "Bill, where are you going?" I asked. "Static... mumble... static... more mumbling... more static," he replied. Well, he looked like he was flying okay, so I kept on going. Later that day my driver picked me up with a note in his hand. "Pick up Bill at Bland Correctional Farm. Hurry!"

It reminded me of all the movies I'd ever seen in which someone was getting out of prison. Our old pickup truck came

to a stop at the big iron gates and disappeared momentarily as the dust caught up. As it cleared, the driver could feel every eye in every tower trained on him and the strange-looking cargo atop his truck. Did they know who he was? Did they know why he was there? Or did they think this was a homemade cannon or maybe some sort of battering ram about to bust through the gates to release criminals within?

Soon we could see two men walking toward the gate. One was dressed in blue jeans and a flannel shirt, carrying a large gear bag, and the other was empty-handed and wearing a suit. It must have been the warden wishing this wayward soul good luck, with a warning to keep his nose clean. As the big gates squeaked and swung open I almost expected Paul Newman to come walking out. Bill shook the man's hand, waved good-bye to the guards and walked out of there, head held high. He threw his bag in the back, climbed in the cab, and with a very serious look on his face (Bill was good at that) said, "It's good to be out."

Bill later explained that the pip pin that held the crossbar when the VG is in the loose position must have popped out in one of those fear-of-God-producing thermals (there is no such thing as an atheist on a turbulent flight). He discovered this when the VG string slipped out of his hand and went zinging through the jamb cleat all the way to the little knot he had tied in the end.

I didn't get to see Bill very often, but the memory of a visit with him would stay with you for a while. If I live to be 90 I'll still be able to see him coming through those large iron gates. ■



# Accident Reports

by Luen Miller, USHGA  
Accident Review Chairman

**Pilot (instructor):** 40-year-old male  
**Experience:** 20+ years, Master rating, Examiner, Observer, Instructor, Tandem Instructor, Tow Administrator, Aerotow Supervisor, all special skills

**Pilot (student):** 44-year-old male  
**Experience:** 17 years, Advanced, Advanced Instructor, all special skills including foot/tow launch and aerotow

**Site:** Gates Field, Garrettsville, Ohio

**Date:** July 25, 1996

**Glider:** Pacific Airwave Double Vision

**Cause:** Probable lockout on aerotow

**Injuries:** Unknown/Fatal

**Glider damage:** Unknown

Towing behind a Saber trike, the two pilots began a tandem flight that was to be part of a Tandem 1 sign-off. The student was acting as pilot in command, with the instructor as the passenger. Conditions were reportedly calm, warm, very humid, and post-frontal. The time was around 9:00 PM.

After a normal roll-out that was slightly extended by the trike pilot to allow the tandem glider to achieve more airspeed before liftoff, the flight began normally. The trike pilot observed the glider behind him to be slightly low and slightly off line. He reported the climb to be "a little slow, but normal for the weight."

Witnesses on the ground saw the glider yaw slightly to the left some time soon after it came off the dolly, remain slightly off line, then begin to roll harder to that side. At this point the tug pilot attempted to release, couldn't, and tried slowing to let the glider catch up, then speeding up to try to break the weak link. At some point the glider either seems to have entered a hard, arcing locked-out turn into the ground. There is a possibility that

the glider stalled in a steep turn as the line or weak link broke. The maximum altitude estimated for the steep turn ranges from 50 to 150 feet.

The glider hit the ground hard at a steep angle, left wing first. One pilot was apparently killed on impact, the other died a short time later.

## ANALYSIS

Until the investigation into this recent incident is completed, we can only come to some general preliminary conclusions.

The root cause of this incident seems to be that the tandem pilots couldn't or wouldn't release when a problem developed, and that the tug pilot was also unable to release the line from his end. The student pilot was reportedly in control of the glider during launch, and seems to have flown out of the range of acceptable parameters. If he was unable or unwilling to release, it was the responsibility of the tandem instructor to take over and release the glider.

It will probably never be known whether either glider pilot attempted to release, so we can't comment on whether they were following proper procedures. It is possible the instructor chose to attempt to fly out of the situation or allow the student to do so. It will probably never be known if the physical configuration of pilot and passenger prevented the instructor from taking control, or if there was some equipment problem with the glider.

If the glider pilot is unwilling or unable to release, the tug pilot normally should release the glider, and he attempted to. It was the eventual equipment failure (the release at the tug) that made the situation instantly critical and was probably the immediate cause of the fatalities.

We have two more fatalities because a glider couldn't be released from tow. Again, the fatalities occurred in a training situation in which a student pilot should reasonably not be expected to do everything perfectly.

I have suggested in the past that we need some method of automatically cutting free a glider under tow that isn't where it is supposed to be, and this is yet another example of why we need such a

device. I never imagined it would be two highly experienced pilots who would die for lack of such a system, let alone someone I knew.

I am strongly recommending formal review and analysis of releases and weak link designs for all methods of towing by the Towing Committee, and that recommendations on adoption or improvements be generated. I also strongly recommend that the newly available Link Knife be similarly examined and tested, and consideration given to use of it or other automatic line-cutting devices, especially in training situations.

I believe that from preflight through release we should have more standardized procedures in towing. More stringent parameters should be set for exactly how far a glider is allowed to diverge from a planned flight path before release by the glider pilot, observer, or tug pilot becomes an automatic reaction. And in many situations, such as training, the decision should be taken out of the hands of the pilot and release should be mechanically effected.

**Pilot:** 41-year-old male  
**Experience:** At least nine years, Advanced  
**Site:** Williams Peak, Colorado  
**Date:** August 10, 1996, around 3:00 PM  
**Glider:** Wills Wing RamAir 146  
**Cause:** Failed aerobatics  
**Injuries:** Head, internal  
**Glider damage:** Broken left leading edge near crossbar junction, bent keel, broken kingpost, broken upper cable

After launching and flying for about an hour and a half the pilot flew toward a large grassy field used as a landing zone. Conditions were described as consisting of "mid-afternoon thermals" and moderate to strong turbulence, at altitude as well as near the ground. The winds were of variable direction and velocity, generally north-northwest.

At an estimated height of several hundred feet above ground level the pilot performed a wingover. He exited the wingover into a dive of "extreme speed" and lost most of his altitude. At only 200