

THE BEGINNING OF HANG GLIDING AT TOBACCO ROW MOUNTAIN

(BASED ON THE IMPERFECT MEMORY OF BO FRAZIER, 2007)

I first saw a hang glider in the late 1970s on a lame television show in which the grandfather pulled out his homemade glider from the garage to show it to his grandson, who, of course, eventually took it out for a wonderful glide off a hill. All I knew was that I wanted to do that but I wasn't even sure what it was or if it was possible to find such a wing. The memory of that sight, for the time being, was stored in my brain.

For unexplained reasons, I have always had a habit of browsing through the classified ads in Sunday newspapers. While living in Altavista in 1979, a two-line ad jumped out at me: "Hang gliding lessons." I raced to the phone and called that number. I spoke to an instructor named Curt (can't remember the last name) who lived in Lynchburg. I got as much information from him as possible and found out that he was going to Big Walker Mountain that weekend for some flying and he invited me to come and watch. I threw the camping gear in the car and headed out that weekend. The winds were not right for Big Walker so I followed the pilots to a sight the name of which escapes me. What I do remember is that the launch was on a huge rock face and I watched in awe as the pilots assembled their wings and flew off into the valley, landing thousands of feet below. I was hooked.

I talked to Curt again about lessons but every time we tried the winds did not cooperate. He then suggested tying a rope to the bumper of his car and letting me try getting airborne in that fashion. I guess my survival instincts kicked in and I started to wonder whether I should be learning to fly with this guy. I had heard mention of Kitty Hawk Kites and lessons available there so the next weekend I headed to the coast. Unfortunately, all of their classes were filled to capacity and I was again deprived of my hang gliding lessons. I did, however, buy copies of some hang gliding magazines and found out about Lookout Mountain Flight Park. I called Matt Taber and scheduled a three-lesson package for the next month. With the internet still years away, I had little access to hang gliding information but I had bought a book at Kitty Hawk that I read over and over to understand what I was about to do. The lessons went well, my feet left the ground, and I was absolutely hooked. I paid Matt \$100 to lay away a brand new Bill Bennett Phoenix 6D, a spaghetti harness, and a helmet. I took a job delivering newspapers during the early AM hours to get money to pay for the glider and soon was able to go and pick up my wing.

The year was 1980. I hooked up with W.W. Richards, the Roanoke guru and instructor, and started hitting the local training hills in the Roanoke area. In the meantime, I had moved back to Lynchburg. I found out that there were a couple of other pilots in the Lynchburg area, including Curt, and I soon hooked up with them. To my surprise, there was a launch on the southeast face of Tobacco Row Mountain. The launch was significantly lower than the current southeast launch and the landing field was the large back yard of a resident in the valley. On my second mountain flight, I ran off the short ramp, barely cleared the trees below, and flew out into the valley. My "landing" ended less than gracefully in the top of a small apple tree in the landowner's back yard. After three or four more flights from that sight, we finally had to admit that

we just were not good enough pilots to land safely in that backyard and our gliders just would not carry us out to the larger and safer fields. So the site was abandoned.

My flying continued around all of the sites in the Roanoke area and at Big Walker, but all were at least an hour and a half from my house, and Big Walker was three and a half hours away. I had spent many years hiking around Tobacco Row and I just could not believe that there could not be a better place to fly on that mountain. A local HG guru to the north, Roger, quickly put that notion to rest, however, when I ask him whether he had ever looked for flying sites on that mountain. "That mountain is no good for hang gliding," he told me. But not being easily deterred, I kept looking and one day I was hiking along the top of the ridge and walked up onto a group of rocks that gave me a perfect view of the valley on the south side of the mountain. I immediately knew that I had found the place for an excellent hang glider launch. I searched the county records, found the landowner in California, and he had no problems with me cutting some trees and building a ramp. I talked to some residents in the valley and they were okay with me landing out there.

By that time it was 1981 and the two other Lynchburg pilots had pretty much given up flying so I was on my own with venture. I did not want to let the Roanoke pilots know what I was doing just in case the northern "guru" was right when he told me that the mountain was worthless for hang gliding. So I bought used lumber, cut trees, built a trail up to the launch including wooden stairs up the initial steep embankment. I carried the materials to the launch, built a long, wide ramp that I believed would be safe for me to use without wire assistants since I was the only local pilot. On the final day of construction, I took my glider with me. After the last nail was driven into the plywood, I set up, waited for a light cycle, and launched. The vario immediately started beeping and I climbed up in a large, gentle thermal. I could not believe it. I was right. Tobacco Row Mountain was good for hang gliding. I now had a flying site less than an hour from my house.

The southeast site proved to be remarkably reliable and pilots from other areas came to take advantage of my new site. But on those northwest days, I still had a long drive so I started looking the possibility of a northwest launch. Ideally, it would have been directly behind the southeast launch but the slope was not steep and it would have required massive tree cutting. After much hiking, I found the best possible spot, which also required a lot of work with a chainsaw. The potential landing fields also looked to be few and very far away. I was not sure whether it was going to work. Being somewhat of a loner and independent sort, I started to work alone, cutting trees and building a ramp. When I finished the ramp, it hit me that maybe I should have asked permission to land in one of the fields in the valley before getting the launch ready. So I headed to the valley, found the fields I saw from the top, and knocked on the door of the house nearest to the best field. For the life of me I can't remember that farmer's name, but I told him what I was doing and what I wanted to do. He stared at me stoically, spit some tobacco, and finally said, "okay." I then had my northwest flying site.

Magically, the first flight off the northwest side was just like the first southeast flight—a thermal right of the launch took me above the mountain. I could not believe my good fortune. I flew those sites hard for the years before I headed off to law school in 1987. They treated me incredibly well. I left them behind in 1990 with my move to Albuquerque but will never forget them and how precious they were to me. Better pilots than me have proven the potential of Tobacco Row, especially Nelson Lewis and John Harper, with their plus hundred mile flights. It's almost impossible for me to believe that it was 26 years ago that I first flew that mountain. I know that hang gliding has lost favor to paragliders, which I now fly myself, along with my hang glider. But I hope that the few dedicated hang glider pilots, and some spirited newcomers, will keep those sites open and alive. It would break my heart to travel back to Virginia to visit family and not be able to go up on Tobacco Row and see, and maybe even fly, those sites that served me so well.

That's my best recollection of how it all happened. Bo Frazier