

WA Open Distance Paragliding Record Broken Accidentally by Rod Merigan

I had already spent a couple of weekends in Wyalkatchem getting in some short flights; my previous best were a 15 km and a 16 km open distance and a 4 km out and return.

I had planned to try and fly a PB; I did not expect to break any records.

In the end it was only the support from Mike Dufty, Rob Dunlop and the rest of the retrieve crew that got me over the line.

I drove up early on Sunday wanting to be in the paddock before 10 am, so I could get in at least a couple of flights.

The forecast was for SSE 25 kmh easing to 20 in the afternoon better than Saturday, which I suspected had been blown out for paragliders. On the way up I had a good look at the way the farmers laid out their paddocks and I noticed that most of the hill tops had exposed rock and had trees around them, a good way to identify thermal triggers when high over the flatlands.

I got out to the paddock around 10 and found the guys had started early, Justin and Dave were getting in some flights from the northern end of the paddock and Mike, Eric and Kate were still parked halfway up. The wind had been a little variable in direction so they hadn't as yet decided on where take-off was and where to leave vehicles.

I ate half my lunch then as I had been caught out the week before flying on an empty stomach, it's hard to thermal whilst dry retching. I parked at the northern end of the paddock and got my gear out. I helped Justin and Mike hook up whilst I started to lay out my gear. Eric was having some difficulty in the strong conditions so I gave him a hand as well.

After Eric had decided it was a little strong for him and packed up to wait for the wind to ease, I spent the next 30 minutes trying to untangle the mess a gust had made of my glider. I was finally ready to go at 11.30 with a water bottle in one harness pocket and a packet of snakes in the other for a sugar hit if I felt unwell.

The wind was still quite strong so I set up for a reverse launch. Eric and Dave helped keep my glider down during some strong gusts and on the next lull I inflated turned around and "go go go". I was lifted off pretty well straight away and climbed with little penetration. When I hit about 800' above take off, I got a thermal I thought I could work and pinned off.

I was still pretty low and concentrated hard on staying in the lift it seemed to be pretty wide and uneven down low but as I climbed I found it was easier to find cores. I just circled around trying to feel what was happening sometimes tightening into turns when a wing kicked up or flying more crosswind or upwind.

I realized after a while that I was flying a lot longer upwind in the thermals, that just circling meant I kept falling out downwind. So I decided on a strategy of flying upwind in the thermal until it peaks

left turn feeling for any extra pressure in the left brake indicating more lift tightening if necessary keeping the downwind leg shorter and probing the lift again upwind and crosswind. It's hard to fly circles in rough air but if I found a core I would just lean into it and go for the ride.

I climbed to about 3500' and had drifted about 5kms NNW when I decided to go on my first glide. I got my GPS out and checked my ground speed I could get about 62 kmh heading NNW, I continued on this heading and looked for something that would trigger a thermal. Those paddocks are pretty barren north of take-off and the only trees were around some farm buildings so I headed towards them and circled in anything that looked promising. I got another good thermal off the farm and climbed again to 3500'

Listening to the radio I heard Mike and Justin out in front and heading up the Wylie /Koorda road I kept heading NNW to pick up the road and a retrieve.

I worked every bit of lift I could, not wanting to get too low. When I got to the Wylie/Koorda road I realized why Mike and Justin were heading up that way. There are two huge salt lakes straddling the road so, not wanting to be out in the badlands, I followed the road north.

I headed towards Cowcowing having to work hard at finding lift I was getting down to 1500' approaching the town and thought I might be landing so I made some radio calls while I still had some height and found Rob and Eric were driving out to retrieve me. Just south of Cowcowing I scored again, this one really started to work and I climbed to 4000' in about 7 minutes I started to stretch my glides as I was getting good thermals along the way.

Rob and Eric caught up with me halfway from Cowcowing to Koorda when I was working another thermal off the right hand dogleg in the road. Mike had just landed somewhere north of Koorda and had been picked up by Kate and Justin and the crews were organising to meet and swap cars.

Koorda started to look like a good goal as I had been flying for 1.5 hours and was feeling a little tired. I was just south of Koorda and getting low so I headed for SW corner of town where there were some large grain bins and some adjacent paddocks for a landing. As I came over the grain bins just under 800', the vario went off and I climbed away, eventually it developed to 800 fpm and I had a rough ride to just over 5000'. It was going higher but I didn't feel too good and I started to dry wretch. It was reasonably smooth, so I felt comfortable taking one hand off the brakes while I got my snakes and drink bottle. I had a quick drink and managed to get the bottle back into the side pocket but I had to let go of my brakes. I grabbed a snake and decided that I would stuff the rest down the front of flight suit and avoid flying to long with no hands on brakes.

I started to feel better and looking out about 7 kms, I spotted a farmer ploughing a paddock. He was working from the outside in and was ploughing the centre third. There was a dust trail following him around and drifting upwards so I set off on a nice long glide. I arrived over the top of the tractor at about 1500' and started searching downwind for a thermal.

Right on cue I picked up another good thermal again up to 800 fpm I climbed to about 5000' and headed north. I followed the road north catching thermals off farm buildings and another dogleg in the road, I managed good climbs and didn't go below 2000' Mike and Dave were now chasing me and soon had me visually.

I had to refold my map so more hands off flying and I realized that my map was about to run out of coverage. I called my ground crew and advised them that after the intersection of Mollerin and Burakin roads I had no more map. I could see this huge salt lake and I would need some navigation help to find some suitable roads to follow.

I was looking around for my next thermal when I spotted a dust devil about 500mts west and upwind. I was still at about 2000' when I approached the dust devil from the downwind side. It wasn't that rough and I soon cored some air at 1000 fpm this was fun and I started to explore how big it was. I had been doing left hand turns all day so I reversed my turn, unfortunately I did this on downwind side and I suddenly fell out of the core.

After going up at 900-1000 fpm I must have flown into some still or sinking air. The brakes went suddenly slack and I looked up to see a very soggy glider and its leading edge rolling inwards. I gave a long hard pull on the brakes and leading edge of the glider rolled out in slow motion, you could see the air roll forward and the leading edge unfold, then, all the lines went tight and the glider opened with a bang. I didn't feel too much G loading but after the recent repair I checked all my lines were still there and had a practice grab for the reserve.

Everything was fine so I looked around for the dust devil and climbed to just over 5500' ato. I continued north following the North Mollerin road until Lake Moore I was thinking that I am getting close to 100 kms that's not a bad flight so I radioed the ground crew and asked which way to go and that I was getting tired and thinking of landing. Mike told me the record was 120 Kms and that it wasn't that far to go so I decided to press on.

I looked to east of the lake lots of bush and low lying ground, which had 25mm of rain recently. It looked a lot better to the west, so I headed crosswind. Every time I hit a thermal I would circle in it until I felt I had drifted to close to the lake, and then I would head west again. In the meantime Mike and Dave were trying to find a road they could get north on and catch up with me, the recent rain had closed some close to the lake.

Mike and Dave advised they could get up the Kulja central road so I headed to a group of farm buildings that were close to the road and about a 7kms glide heading NW. I was dry retching again so I had a drink and started to think that 100 kms would be fine that if I didn't get a thermal at the farm buildings. I could land near the road and I wouldn't have to walk far. I reached for a snake, some sugar to keep me going, but I couldn't find them. I had left the under arm zippers open on my flight suit and somewhere during a machine washer ride in a thermal they had fallen destined to become sheep food.

As I flew over the farm at about 1200' I was looking for power lines and a suitable landing site, but I ran into another thermal and with encouragement from the ground crew I continued on. I climbed to just over 5000' and in the cold the GPS started beeping with a low battery. I turned it off to save it until just before landing. I looked to the north whilst on glide and saw the road just stopped about 10 kms ahead the GPS said I had flown just over 110 kms from take-off just before I turned it off

That was it I was stuffed, out of roads and the ground crew said they were stopping at 120 kms and I would have to walk back to the car. So I turned on the GPS again if it went flat, bad luck, Mike's GPS in his car was reading within a km of mine, that was good enough. It wasn't the conditions, I flew

through some decent lift before I landed, I was too tired to continue and I would have had to fly crosswind some 20kms over serious badlands to pick up the next north road that could take me anywhere. I had a retrieve crew below me so that settled it, I flew to the end of the road and landed at 3:55pm , 4.3 hours after take-off for a straight line distance from pinoff to landing of 124.6 kms.

I suppose there must have been a bit of luck that I always got a thermal when needed, but I tried to plan ahead, to glide to likely thermal triggers. Sometimes I got bubbles along the way, and early into the flight I worked them all. I figured staying high was the best option, as the day progressed I grew more confident in finding lift and stretched my glides. This cross country flying is hard work, you have to concentrate on coring your thermals, keeping a mental picture of where the thermal is, where you are and where you're going. Then keep up contact with your ground crew. You definitely need to prepare, I didn't dream of flying this distance and so I had no idea what I was flying into, I hadn't studied maps that far north and, after flying for 100kms, I found that there is nothing there but a dirty great salt lake with nowhere to land. It was only my ground crew that got me to the record by being able to advise me of roads etc.

Without the encouragement and support of the ground crew I doubt if I would have made it that far, my thanks again to Mike, Rob, Justin et al

Some other stats : Best climb 1020 fpm Max height 5500' ato, Best ground speed 66 kmh. Glider Gin Bolero DHV 1 Harness- Sup Air Evo Pilot total time including this flight 44.2 hours Club Cloud base Paragliding Club Western Australia Rod Merigan Perth