

A TRAGIC BEGINNING

It was Danny who had introduced his older brother to hang gliding, back in 1977. On a trip to California, Danny had seen a pilot land his glider gracefully on an ocean beach: Mesmerized by the sight, he'd told Jim of his plans to construct a glider from an old parachute.

Jim, an aeronautical engineer and one-time pilot, had grave doubts about his brother's idea and convinced Danny that the two of them should buy a commercially made glider. They took a few lessons to get started.

Before long, Jim was soaring—both literally and emotionally—suspended thousands of feet high, rising, dipping, turning and spiraling. "Hang gliding is like that dream you had when you were a kid," Zeiset says, "where you stick your arms out like Peter Pan and suddenly you're flying."

The brothers took turns flying their glider, gaining confidence until they thought they were both capable of flying safely anywhere.

Then came tragedy. October 5, 1977: Jim takes the first flight, a launch from a meadow 12,200 feet high on Mount Princeton. After landing safely in a field far below, Jim changes places with Danny. Now Jim serves as the "retriever," following in a van his brother's soaring path in the sky.

Danny runs forward under his glider until the wind lifts him from the mountain. Almost immediately the glider tips, with one wing pointed skyward. Losing altitude rapidly, Danny disappears behind the mountain a few seconds later.

His heart racing, Jim tears down the mountainside in his van. The three-mile drive to the valley on the deeply rutted, twisting road normally takes 45 minutes to negotiate; Jim makes it in 17.



STEPHEN COLLECTOR

Zeiset's never far from a hang glider, even in his Salida, Colorado, office. On the oak-paneled wall behind him, a photo of Team Green.

He drives to the field he and his brother usually use for landing. Danny isn't there. He drives to their alternate landing field. Still no sign of his brother. Jim takes another road back up the mountain. About a mile later he sees a parked truck and a man talking on a CB radio. "Have you seen a hang glider in the area?" Jim asks. "Yes. One just crashed up there by those cliffs," the man replies. "The glider broke apart in midair."

Jim drives closer to the cliffs and parks. He runs a few hundred yards to a rocky spot near a tall, dead tree, where two hikers stand over the tangled glider. Danny is still alive but seriously injured, having plummeted 800 feet. His left arm and right leg are broken; his chest, partially crushed. He is semiconscious but delirious.

Jim follows the ambulance to the hospital. En route, Danny stops breathing. At the hospital, he is pronounced dead on arrival.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Danny was 27 years old. I was 32," Zeiset says, sitting in his green, high-backed office chair, his eyes surveying the evergreen forests on Mount Princeton from a distance of 13 years.

After the accident, he says, he was done with gliding, perhaps forever. With two young sons to raise and a company to build, he turned to other pursuits.

But the memory of his brother's accident remained. What went wrong? Zeiset was driven to find an answer. He knew that it was turbulence that had caused the glider to flip upside down. He concluded that the force of Danny's weight on the inverted glider had made the structure collapse.

Months after the accident, Zeiset learned of two new features

Watching the Skies: Top Hang-Gliding Sites Worldwide

Regardless of whether you fly yourself, competitions are fascinating to watch. At typical competitions, the sky is filled with brightly colored gliders spiraling overhead in crisscrossing paths. Enhancing the spectacle are the locations—most major contests have stunning scenery as a backdrop. Following are some of the prime gliding spots around the world:

NORTH AMERICA

Owens Valley, California. Almost all hang-gliding world records have been set in this desert valley east of the Sierras. The lack of humidity means few clouds and high visibility—ideal flying conditions. Starting from a launch site on the western

edge of the valley, pilots usually are required by contest rules to fly south past 14,494-foot Mount Whitney, the highest peak in the lower 48 states.

Telluride, Colorado. Every summer this former mining town hosts the unofficial World Aerobatic Championships, drawing some of the world's most daring pilots. Spectators can watch pilots execute fancy loops and rolls in Telluride's famous box canyon, a mile-wide gulch carved by glaciers from the extraordinarily rugged and colorful San Juan Mountains.

Henson's Gap, Tennessee. This site is home of the Tennessee Tree Toppers, the most active and best known hang-gliding club in the United States. A number of

launch ramps are built on the limestone cliffs of the rural Sequatchie Valley. The East Coast Championships usually are held at Henson's Gap each spring.

SOUTH AMERICA

La Rioja, Argentina. An international cross-country meet is held here every year, in which pilots attempt to set South American distance records in a high desert area. Like California's Owens Valley, La Rioja boasts conditions perfect for flying: low humidity, excellent visibility and consistently strong winds.

São Conrado Beach, Brazil. On the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, pilots launch from a hill next to the landmark statue of Christ,

which overlooks Brazil's largest city and its surrounding inlets. Empty of the usual hordes that crowd Rio's sands, São Conrado Beach is actually a grassy area for comfortable glider watching. Rocky ocean-side cliffs provide a stunning setting.

EUROPE

Fiesch, Switzerland. It's easy to see why the tiny town of Fiesch hosted the World Meet in 1988. Located in the heart of the Alps, it's not only a charming Swiss village; it's also surrounded by terrain that funnels mountain breezes into strong, dependable winds. Once aloft, pilots are treated to magnificent views of the Alps, including the nearby Matterhorn. —R.K.

invented for hang gliders: a system of wires called *luft lines*, which connect the center post to various points along the wing and make it more resistant to collapse; and a dive stick, an aluminum rod that keeps the back side of the wing turned slightly upward. If a glider starts into a nose dive, the force of the wind against the tilted back edge of the wing automatically rights the glider.

Zeiset also learned that some hang-glider pilots were starting to carry two-way radios for communicating with their retrievers on the ground. Most important, pilots had begun using parachutes.

With the new safety gear available, Zeiset thought, perhaps it was time to try gliding again. He also thought he could put his engineer's training to good use by helping to refine and improve the equipment. He would be combining his two loves—flying and problem solving.

A RETURN TO THE SKY

Dressed in his green nylon flight suit, Zeiset is standing on a rock cliff some 1,000 feet above the Sequatchie Valley, near Chattanooga, Tennessee. Behind him is his brand new glider, trimmed in green.

When Zeiset tried gliding again after Danny's death, he knew that he would keep on flying. The first flight brought back what he calls "the sensation of total freedom" that he had imagined over and over in his dreams. In the dozen years since, he has flown more than 2,000 times.

In a few minutes, Zeiset will launch his glider again. He is in Tennessee to compete in the East Coast Hang Gliding Championships. For this competition, Zeiset has driven his van all the way from Colorado; inside is a mobile phone that enables him to keep in close contact with his factory. Business has been good lately, Zeiset says. In 1989, a plant virus stunted grape growth in California, and vintners clamored for Zeiset's plant bands to use in grafting new virus-resistant hybrids. His company's revenues tripled during the next year.

But at this moment on a Tennessee mountainside, Zeiset is occupied not with business, but with the task at hand: showing a visitor all of his safety gadgets. Today more than ever, Zeiset is a believer in safety equipment. A parachute saved his life in 1987 when his glider collapsed during an unexpected thunderstorm in Colorado. He's also a fierce advocate of radios, never having forgotten the frustration he felt that day his brother flew out of his sight and Zeiset could not find him. Zeiset currently is working with another inventor to design a wing-mounted device that would detect the thermals pilots use to gain altitude.

In the meantime, here at the Tennessee contest, he tirelessly reminds the pilots around him to make sure that they are properly clipped into the harnesses that hold them in their gliders.

The pilots launch from the wooden ramp one by one. As each steps to the ramp, there is a hush among the others. The only sound is made by a constant breeze brushing the cliffs.

All eyes turn to the next pilot and his two helpers, each of

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whom carries an end of the glider. On the ground, the tipsy glider is awkward even for three people to manipulate. But then the helpers let go, and the pilot takes a half-dozen running steps and leaves the ramp.

For a second or two, the glider swoops downward, toward the valley, almost as if headed for a crash into the pine trees a thousand feet below. Then, the craft gains enough speed to lift the wing, and it curves upward toward the sky. Suddenly the once-awkward glider is transformed into a graceful, soaring bird.

In time, it is Zeiset's turn. He clips into his harness and carries his glider to the ramp. Seconds later, he leaves the ramp and floats down and then upward through an airborne arc of silence, floating effortlessly, dreamily, over the green, green valley below. ●

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Getting Off the Ground

If you've ever watched a hang glider take off from a mountaintop, you can understand immediately why people get bitten by the gliding bug. As Leonardo da Vinci said, "Once you have tasted flight, you will walk the earth with your eyes pointed skyward."

The thrill of flying is especially acute in hang gliding. A glider pilot is suspended in the air, drifting over the earth as if weightless. Spinning and turning, the pilot comes as close to actual flight as is possible for humans.

The safest way to sample hang gliding is to take a tandem flight with a properly rated pilot. Many hang-gliding schools offer tandem flights as a way of stimulating interest in the sport. In most cases, a tandem pilot will take you up for a half-hour or so for a fee of \$75 to \$150.

There is no shortage of hang-gliding schools; several hundred are scattered throughout the United States. You can find one by either checking the yellow pages or contacting the United States Hang Gliding Association (P.O. Box 8300, Colorado Springs, CO 80933; 719-632-8300). Of course, you should be sure that anyone you fly with has adequate credentials. The USHGA tests and rates pilots according to ability. So before you go up in a tandem or take a gliding lesson, ask to see a rating certificate.

As for pilot training, it usually takes five to 10 lessons to earn a "novice" rating from the USHGA. To prepare student pilots for the USHGA test, schools offer a combination of classroom and flight training. Students usually begin by running with

the glider on level ground. Eventually students work up to launching off a small hill, gradually moving on to steeper hills.

A student generally can qualify for the novice rating after about two hours of actual flight time. The cost of training is about \$75 per lesson. Some schools also offer complete packages that will get students rated, for approximately \$350.

Once you're rated, it's a good time to start shopping for a glider. Many pilots recommend that novices begin with a used glider that has been carefully checked by an instructor. A used glider often costs \$1,000 or less, one-third the price of a new glider.

By starting with a used craft, a novice—who is guaranteed at least a few rough landings—doesn't need to worry so much about inflicting the inevitable nicks, scratches and gouges on the glider.

It's also an excellent idea for any new pilot to join the USHGA. For \$49 a year, you get a monthly magazine plus \$1 million of liability insurance. The insurance protects you in case you injure someone or damage another person's property while flying. (Check with your own agent about medical, property and life insurance for yourself. Some companies won't issue policies to glider pilots.)

Local gliding clubs are great resources for beginning pilots. As a rule, pilots like to fly together—perhaps because, as a group, they're better able to find and maintain safe places to fly. There are more than 100 such sites nationwide that are insured through the USHGA.

—R.K.

