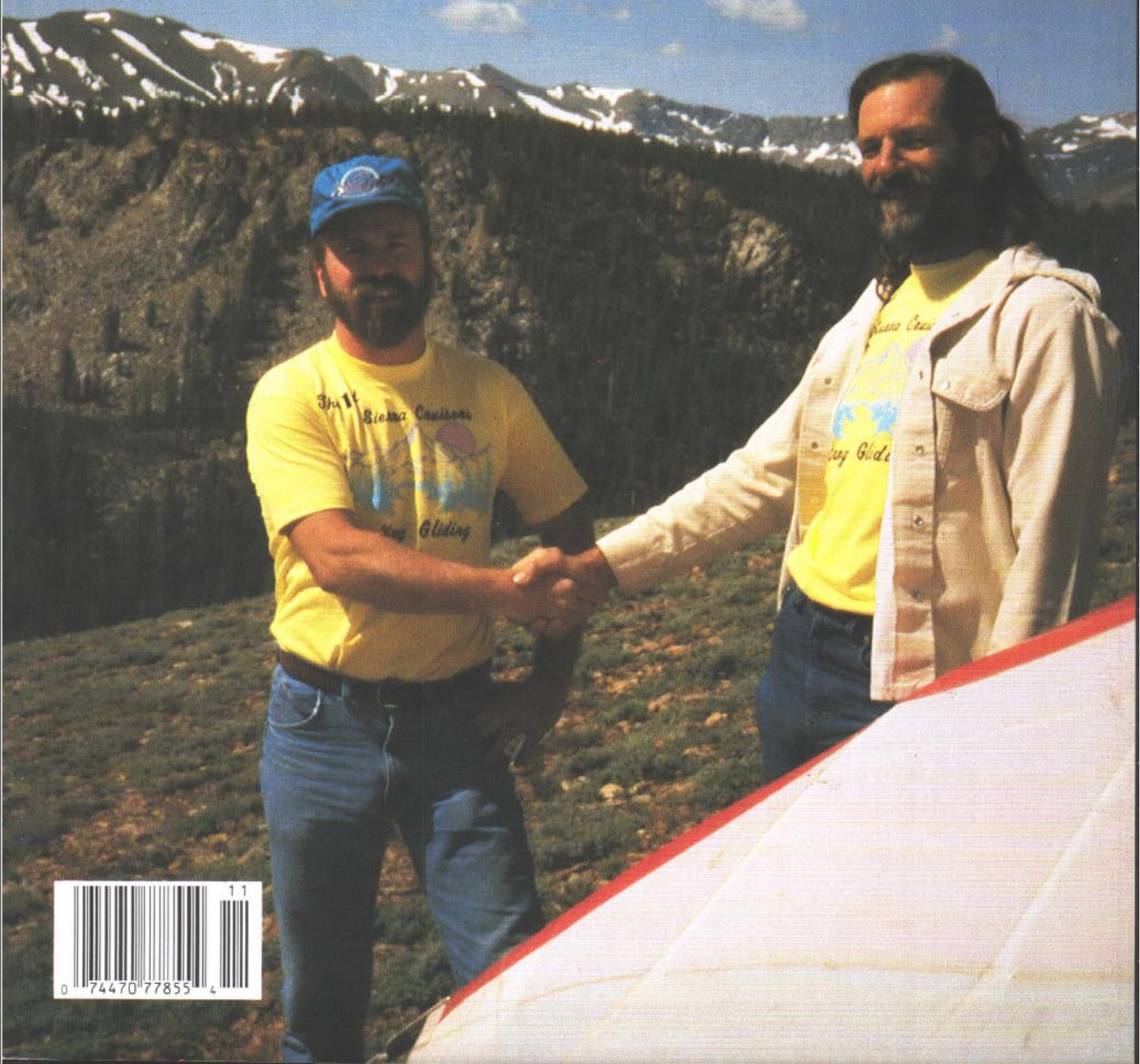


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Hang Gliding

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Looking down on the imposing Sierra from 17,200' — not many landing areas. Photo by David Sahl.

The Crossing



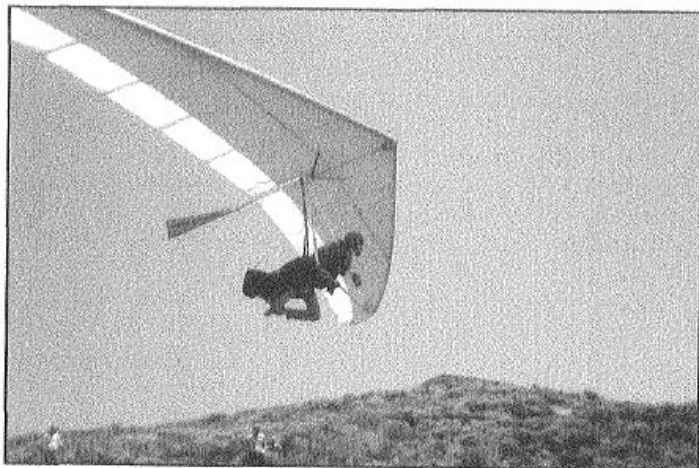
Left to right: Shannon Raby, Mary Mendence, Ken Muscio.

This is a dream that has been pondered and planned for years.

by David Sahl

There are feats that rank high on the list of seemingly impossible ones. For years pioneers dreamt of crossing huge obstacles to find a new world, to find gold, or to experience the adventure of the unknown. The Sierra Nevada mountains are the same mountains that the Donner party attempted to cross, the mountains in which Mark Twain hiked hundreds of miles of trails in dense forest and rugged wilderness. This flight was such an adventure — dreamt of by most west-coast hang glider pilots for years and years, and now experienced by two.

photo by David Sahl



Ken Muscio launches on the eastern slopes of the mighty Sierra.

photo by David Sahl



Shannon Raby launches in preparation for the incredible flight.

"I have been talking about and dreaming of crossing the Sierra since 1979. I would definitely take this flight over a 400-miler! Crossing miles and miles of 'no-man's' land takes gumption. To take the route they took, I would want a sailplane and 20,000' of altitude before I would go."

— Tim Morley

"In all the time I've been associated with hang gliding, this flight is in the top 10 for sure. You have to fly in the Sierra to truly understand just what a formidable obstacle they present."

— Ken Brown

A small band of pilots from the Mother Lode Sky Riders from McClure gathered on the eastern slopes of the formidable Sierra Nevada mountains in the early hours of May 24. Clouds are just beginning to form over launch. You could feel the excitement in the air. Those who came to fly knew this was going to be a great day. The first pilot to take to the air, Wally Long, launched in very very light conditions. The plan was that those in this first group would help each other find the lift. Shannon Raby launched on the heels of the first pilot and flew close in any piece of lift that was there. Ken Muscio launched next. All three flew for several minutes close to launch in light lift. Then it started to happen.

The lift got stronger and they started to climb. On the ground we could hear: "I'm at 10,000' in strong lift." Then it was 12,000' then 14,000' and they were drifting toward the west, back into the canyon. All the other pilots began to launch one after the other, including myself. Now the reports were from 15,000' and farther back yet. In no time Shannon and Ken were at 16,000' and still climbing. Those of us who were now glued to our radios could hear the ever-increasing excitement in their voices.

Shannon was heard to say, "Let's head for Clark's Fork." Ken replied, "It's only 10:30 in the morning, let's wait and see what happens." It was only minutes later that they were both above 17,000', still climbing and still drifting back farther into the Sierras. Looking down at Kennedy Meadows from 17,000' Ken and Shannon almost missed it as a possible landing area. It looked like a tiny dot nestled amongst the great Sierras from this altitude. Both pilots

knew that there were no landing areas beyond this point that were going to be accessible, but with all this lift, all this altitude, and cloud streets setting up they knew what they had to do. This is what makes a cross-country pilot: deciding to go for it. They radioed back that they were heading west.

As is always true with any great flight, a great driver is involved. Mary Mendence began the chase on the ground. Mary later reported that she was worried about being able to find Ken and Shannon. Having been raised in California and being familiar with the Sierras, she could visualize them way back in the wilderness for days and days, lost without food, and with her searching and searching. None of the other six to eight pilots in the air felt they wanted to venture back into the canyons of the mighty Sierra. At one point I was at 17,200' and had drifted way back. I couldn't see anything but snow-covered wilderness. I didn't see anything that even resembled a landing area. I thought to myself, "These guys sure have got a lot of gumption."

Radio reports now referenced landing areas or lack thereof. They flew over Barn Meadow, then Eagle Meadow. The rugged terrain just seemed to glide past beneath them. It was at this point, still above 15,000', that they decided they could make Dodge Ridge on a glide. It was happening. They were, in fact, crossing one of the greatest mountain ranges on earth. Now gliding well above the inversion layer in the smoothest air imaginable, they continued west, crossing over the Dardenells and Double Dome Rock 6,000' below. This was the final glide of final glides in buoyant air with

a light tailwind. Mary was in hot pursuit just below the two "Sierra Cruisers." Shannon and Ken now were gliding west, maintaining a 200' to 300' per minute sink rate that matched the slope of the Sierras. The air was as smooth as silk. This final glide was over 20 miles.

As the Twain Harte area began to come into distant view, Shannon's heart began to race. You see, Shannon lives there. Shannon's father, Dempsey, follows his flights more closely than most parents. He almost always has his scanner on to listen to the radio transmissions. And on this day he was listening. He has no way to talk, only to listen. Out of the corner of his eye, Shannon spotted what appeared to be some sort of signal mirror in the general area where his dad lives. "Is that you dad?" The mirror flashed again. It was. Shannon radioed to Ken that his dad was flashing them and was listening to their every move.

Ken was getting low and needed a landing area. He radioed to Shannon, asking him to show him how to land at the golf course at Twain Harte. Shannon began giving advice on an approach when Ken interrupted to say, "No, I mean I want you to *show* me how to land there." As luck would have it for Ken, Shannon found a thermal which forced Ken to land first. This is a par three course, with small fairways and tall trees. Ken reported that it was tight and exciting to land there.

Shannon was next. As he pulled on the speed and headed down the fifth fairway toward the green, golfers on the green pulled the pin for him. He had a perfect stand-up landing right on the green. They had done it.

They had launched on the eastern side of the majestic, mighty Sierra Nevada mountains, crossed over the highest peaks, and landed on the other side. The crossing had always been thought of as being made from west to east, but on this day conditions were perfect for the other direction. Total flight time was three hours. They were the first to do what had been dreamt of and planned for years.

The celebration began and continues to this day. Shannon's dad was at the golf course in only minutes, snapping pictures and swelling up with pride for his son's and Ken's accomplishment. Both pilots expressed feeling a kind of euphoria about the feat. As Mark Twain put it: "The air up there is very pure and fine, bracing and delicious, and why shouldn't it be, it's the same air the angels breathe." ■

To set a goal and achieve it, that's a dream come true. It was as if God said, "So, you want to fly over the Sierras. Okay, here you go: perfect conditions, nice drift, high cloud base and a driver. The three-hour flight seemed like 10 minutes. All in all, this flight brings to mind the dreams of other pilots who still live on, Dan Racanelli and Dick Cassetta, talking about crossing the Sierras from Dunlap, and Dick telling me it could be done.

Eric Raymond told me how Dick Cassetta drove him back into King's Canyon and pointed out this tiny landing zone in a canyon. Eric just said, "No way, Dick."

This flight is dedicated to their memory and to those of us who not only dream, but enjoy the beauty of true flight — hang gliding.

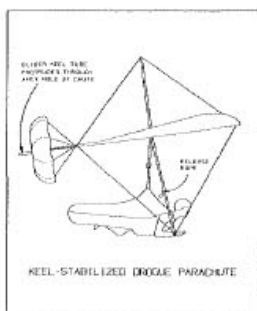
Credit where credit is due:

To God, my parents, my wife Alyshia, and to Ken for being a true friend and one of the best pilots around. To Mary for driving, and to the person I have to thank for teaching and showing me a safe and competitive way to fly, my friend Jerry Kern. Also thanks to Ra-Tek Precision Sheet Metal, U.S. Software, and M.H.G. Supply Co. for sponsorship.

— Shannon Raby



Ken catches Shannon as they thermal at 16,000'. Photo by Ken Muscio.



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