

Oh, Icarus!

(or The Art and Adventure of Modern Hang Gliding)

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Remember those long, lost dog days in the summers of your misspent youth when you actually had time to lay back in a field and gaze up into the sky. If you were lucky, you might spot a high-flying hawk and marvel at what it must feel like to flow and soar on gusts of air, unencumbered by the surly bonds of Earth. How easy, you realize, it must have been for Icarus to become so overwhelmed at the thrill of flying that he forgot his father's warnings and flew too close to the sun, melting the wax that bonded the feathers of his make-shift wings and plummeting him down into teal blue waters of the Aegean Sea.

Fast-forward to today. Now it seems those childhood thoughts — those flights of fancy, if you will — are as far in our past as ancient Greek mythology. The hustle and bustle of our everyday lives, our cycle of life and livelihood, takes us farther away from those thoughts. Yet that sense of marvel remains deep in our collective psyche. What is it that wheeling through the clouds, suspended between heaven and earth represents to us?

Pilot, Marvin Presley

“Freedom!” says hang gliding enthusiast Jim Rowan. “Even if the flight only lasts five minutes, that’s a better five minutes than just about any other you’ll ever have.”

Rowan ought to know. He’s been an avid hang glider pilot since he accepted a college buddy’s invitation to go to California to learn the sport. That was over 25 years ago and the thrill hasn’t waned since. Today, Rowan is the top pilot at The Mountaineer Hang Gliding Association (MHGA), the local chapter of the United States Hang Gliding Association (USHGA), in Cresaptown, MD. That’s where you’ll find him and any number of other pilots from the tri-state area spending their free time; trying to catch the lift provided by thermals (the rising air above a large, heated surface – much like hawks or buzzards do) and ridges (the lift provided by upslope winds as they rise over a hill or ridge

– like water hitting a rock in a stream) for hours on end. That’s right! When conditions are right, forget about five-minute flights, or sled rides in hang gliding lingo. Experienced pilots can stay aloft for 2 to 3 hours or more, at altitudes of anywhere from a few hundred to, legally almost 17,999 feet, and cover distances in the hundreds of miles at speeds up to 70 mph!

One suspects that not even Otto Lilienthal, who made several thousand successful glider flights in the late 1800’s, or the Wright brothers who, a few years later, honed their flying skills using hang gliders, could have imagined how far — and how high — this idea could be taken. Modern hang gliding has evolved, with the advent and use of high tech instruments (including altimeters, GPS’s, variors, airspeed indicators, radios and parachutes), into what some believe is an adventure sport far less dangerous than one might expect.



Background photo: Pilot, Marvin Presley soars over mountains and valleys after time-consuming assembly and preparation (above inset).

Right inset: Marvin’s Harris Hawk, Boo Boo, is in training to soar with the hang glider.

Right photo: An almost vertical view of Marvin overhead.



“Sure, you have to have the adventure gene in you to do it,” allows Marvin Presley, MHGA’s vice president and a pilot since 1996, “but I got hurt a lot more often skiing than I ever have been hang gliding.” Which may be due, at least in part, to the fact that you’ll have to tackle a learning curve much steeper than a few sashays down the bunny run before you ever take to the air on a solo flight.

Indeed, a good first step is a tandem flight, where you’re strapped to an experienced pilot in a special harness and get to see firsthand what it feels like to be Superman — minus the cape. Next, assuming you’ve stirred the requisite ‘adventure gene’ and have the physical ability to trot at least a short distance down a hill carrying a 50 to 80 pound mylar or dacron/aluminum contraption, you’re ready to start the 5 to 10 lessons necessary to achieve the first of two USHGA pilot ratings — Beginner and Novice. This usually takes about 3 to 6 months, depending on the student’s innate ability and dedication, that prepares you for hundred-foot hills and flights up to 1,000 feet in relatively mild conditions. (“Ideally, you want wind speeds of 5 to 10 mph,” advises Presley. “Certainly not over 25 mph.”). From that point on, it’s a matter of fine tuning your ability to manage your flight, staying in the core of each lift and keeping your trim (that is, your center of gravity) in control. This is the art of hang gliding — whereas a beginner might spend his or her day sledding down from and then trekking back to the top of the hill, an experienced pilot may take the same set of thermals and ridges and sail aloft long enough to watch the sun set over the far horizon, in the company of a Harris hawk.

Pilot, Jim Rowan

Kris Kristofferson wrote that “freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” But, to the true pilot, freedom means the ability to circle, wheel, ascend and soar — ensconced in the therapeutic euphoria of the foothills of heaven.





With his "cocoon" attached, pilot Jim Rowan prepares for flight. The wing has a sophisticated electronic system including GPS, two-way radio, altimeter, temperature and airspeed. Once airborne he tucks his legs up into the "cocoon" and pulls the zipper up with a drawstring.

Background: This view shows all the cables, wires, and rigging it takes to keep the wing stable, in control and Jim safe.

Below: Jim soars at 1900 feet, enjoying the view.

