

By Dustin Martin

# 137 mile XC from South Mountain

I'm sitting here in the library on a Saturday. The wind is nw on south mountain. I waited until I was sure there would be no cycles and then left as the clouds started to look really good in the desert. So I will write a little something.

I drove up to South Mountain on Tuesday for the first flight of the week after leaving Mingus disappointed on Sunday. The wind was hard over the back at Mingus and Bill Lemon had just smoked me on Saturday with his 135 miler to Petrified Forest. So I set up on South just hoping to fly and get the horrid turn out of my new glider. Wasn't looking forward to wrestling with it for a long flight-maybe just an hour or two.

I checked out the launch and saw that the flags in Ahwatukee were already west at 5 or 10. So I decided to go at 11:15 to avoid getting pinched. Waited for a little while through light west cycles then took off at about 11:30 and headed over to the bowl and picked something up all the way around the corner on the west face. As I circled it got better and at 4000 I pulled the cord and headed for the usual first stop at Pecos and 24th st.

I found a slow thermal while still above 3000. Worked it up at about 300 fpm on the averager to 4000 then headed to the next stop at Gila River Casino. Finally found a broken thermal there and slowly worked up to 4000 while chasing the core around.

Following the usual ritual, I now headed for the Riggs/I-10 intersection and on the way ran into a dust devil that I worked for a bit and then decided it would be best to leave before something wierd happened. At Riggs Road I found a thermal in the usual spot just southeast of the intersection. It was decent at maybe 400 on the averager. It was still very early, but the day was shaping up to be weak and humid with low thermals. I only got to 5000 in this thermal-it's rare to not make the 6000 ceiling at this location.

The decision was made to abandon the Superior-Globe route because it didn't seem likely that I would be able to make the hop over Apache Leap into Globe. (11,500 minimum in my book with a good tailwind). So instead of ending another flight at Superior airport with six hours of daylight left, I decided to take the Tucson route and see if I could land at Marana Airport and get a ride home with the mechanic there who happens to have a nice rack on his car. The next glide was followed by a low save and some scratching up to 5000 again over Bapchule. I headed toward the Sacaton truck stops and the foothills nearby. Nearly landed twice on this reservation (bad news) but finally found 600 up to 7400 feet and used this to glide past Casa Grande. I topped off to 6600 about five miles downwind and then glided towards the east end of the Eloy airport.

By now the wind was shaping up to be perfectly down I-10. I spotted a dusty NE of the airport and wrestled with it to about 4500 then decided to leave in hopes of something better over the dirt fields to the southeast. I pulled the vg and headed out. Spotted another dusty several miles ahead and headed in that direction. I was too low to get there with safe altitude to work it, so was counting on the lift upwind and downwind of this one that always seems to accompany the big dust devils down here. Sure enough I found a solid 500 average about a half mile upwind of the tractor that started the first one. As I circled up and drifted downwind of the tractor, I watched the dirt get pulled into my thermal and then saw the dusty spring up as soon as it hit all the dust around the tractor. I think I got to about 7000 in this one and then glided toward Picacho Peak. I was down to 4000 a couple of miles in front of the mountain,

so I started drifting in very light lift hoping to drift far enough to be able to glide past the Ostrich farm in case I sunk out. The ostriches go crazy when you fly over them and I don't think the owner likes us either. I very nearly landed just before Picacho but found a little something at about 200 feet and drifted over all that desert that I was trying to avoid. I stuck with it because it seemed promising and it did finally get me up. It improved to about 500 on the averager just as I drifted across the east face of the highest peak. I took it to about 7000 and left as it dropped to about 200 fpm.

It was only 2:45 so I was psyched and started to race a little. I picked up another thermal at Pinal Air Park and followed a hawk around until I found the core. This increased to about 800 average and I left as the lift dropped off to about 200. I crossed the Santa Cruz river and if you look straight down as you go over, it looks like you're flying over the plains of Australia with little bushes here and there and those trees that look like umbrellas every once in a while. Just across the river bottom I got the best thermal up to this point. I climbed at about 600-800 fpm and just as I reached 9000 I was drifting past Marana Airport on the west side.

The decision to continue was not very difficult as it was not even 3:30 at the 80 mile mark (not very impressive at most sites but very exciting from south mountain). I had looked at the map once when towing at Newman and knew there was some road heading around the west side of Tucson and the Saguaro National Monument (quite unlandable). I found it and pulled the vg for one very long glide. The air was very buoyant for about the first 5 miles and I was able to maintain for at least this far by just following the lift line. This took me a bit east of course line but was still worth it. I crabbed back over landable terrain for the next ten miles with no lift at all but a very nice tailwind.

I again very nearly landed in a field just off the highway at about the 100 mile mark, but found lift as I covered the downwind edge of the field as a last chance. I drifted with this to about 4000 (ground level now 2500 feet) and then exited as I saw some dusties spring up in some dirt fields to the south. The lift here wasn't as strong as expected but there was no danger of landing and the slow climb gave me time to check out the landing possibilities to the southeast. They were looking pretty slim and the only ones within reach were right in the airspace of Ryan field which I was now drifting over at 8000 feet (ceiling 4200 for those of you who are ripping out your sectionals). I could now see the massive tailings ponds on the east slopes of the Sierrita Mountains. They would do if I had to land.

As I drifted and scratched and maintained, the glide angle to Green Valley was becoming more realistic. Finally, I searched a little downwind and found a core going up to 10500. As I climbed, half a dozen A-10s flew by at the same altitude heading for Tucson. I left this lift after drifting for ten plus miles and headed for the massive open pit mine ahead. I could see a large plume of dirt extending up ahead of me to about 15000 feet. Arriving at about 6000, I found this thermal and climbed to about 10500 again and set my sights on the farm valley to the south along I-19. It was now about 4:45 and the lift was as good as ever.

I was approaching a dead end, however, with a storm line about 20 miles ahead running the entire length of the border (hundreds of miles). I was unwilling to cross over Box Canyon or even approach these mountains without a driver or someone who knew where I was (I'm not a local but there doesn't seem to be much traffic passing the Box LZ). So I headed down the

highway in the cool air at 10000 feet and enjoyed the view of Mt Wrightson and the green and red tinted foothill to the west. This mountain which goes way above tree line was quite intimidating with the lightning and cumins to the southeast. It was now apparent that I had the altitude to glide a lot farther into this storm than I should. So I just kept pushing right along and watched for signs of gust fronts. The wind on the ground was still showing NNW. I glided into the shade of the anvil which was eerie and started looking for the most distant field I could make. I encountered some textured air which felt a bit humid and this was that exact moment that I should have turned back a few miles and land in the perfect smooth NNW but I just pulled in to about 50 mph to start losing altitude while still gaining distance. I even picked up another thousand feet when I got down to 5000 feet in a nice thermal (stupid and another sign that I was going to be thrashed by a gust front since I was thermalling in 100 % shade at 5:15 pm).

I noticed rain falling on the east slopes of the Tumacacori Mountains to my SW and immediately pulled out with the intention of gliding a few more miles and landing. As soon as I pulled the vg I felt the SW wind hit with its associated turbulence. I started spiralling down as fast as I could from 6000 feet but this wasn't doing much good with all the air being wedged upward now. Eventually I got down far enough to see the trees getting tossed about down below. I estimated about 20 mph and got upright at about 200 feet. I was being tossed about with marginal control and as I approached 10 feet the left wing and nose dropped. I pushed out a bit but didn't do much of a turn correction. I think I was pretty much preparing for impact which didn't help the outcome. The left wing touched and I spun about 90 degrees and whacked in on the new glider. I felt pretty terrible since this was totally preventable if I had kept on flying. Oh well, now to break down in this moon dust in an increasingly turbulent wind. Got the thing in the bag and put on my hitchhiking face on the nearby frontage road. A few slowed down and then gunned it as they got nervous. Finally some lady stopped and I hopped in the back of the truck. We went to her house on the hill above my LZ and I made all the calls. I finally arranged a ride and then settled in for my stay. They fed me and we watched the storm dissipate and then a really cool sunset over the Tumacacori Mountains. This house is really decent with a back yard that slopes right down to a perfect launch over the river below and many LZs. My ride arrived and we shoved the glider through the sliding back window and tied it on the tailgate. Worked perfect and we made it home at 1:30 am. Distance was 137 miles. Nearest town was Tumacacori. More importantly the distance was two more miles than Bill Lemon did on Saturday, but definitely not worth flying into a storm for and a lesson learned.

If this won't bring more pilots to South Mountain, then I don't know what else to do. These flights, to me, are more rewarding than any flights I have done up north and this flight in particular is probably one of my favorites. It's only 100 degrees for about a half hour on launch and then my vario was saying between 65 and 85 degrees for the entire 6 hours. This is a huge contrast to flying up north and quite pleasant. With the humidity and warm temperatures aloft, it felt exactly like flying in Florida. Obey airspace rules, watch for airplanes, call South Mountain Park (262-PARKS) if your car will be there overnight (they had the notar searching for me Tuesday night since I never picked up my car).