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## The AMA History Project Presents: History of the FLINN Family



Written by MMF (05/1981); Transcribed & reformatted by JS (12/2012)

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*Mary Margaret Flinn wrote the following for the May 1981 issue of Model Aviation magazine.*

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### **The Flinns at Sleeping Bear Dunes**

**A family vacation culminating in attainment of Level V of the LSF is the subject of this charming adventure story. And it was a squeaker. As recalled by Mary Margaret Flinn**

An eight-hour slope flight! This was the last task needed by my husband, Pat, to achieve League of Silent Flight Level V. He had gotten into the LSF Soaring Accomplishments Program at my urging in 1976. The tasks are graduated in difficulty from Level I through V, so that they are never beyond skills that a flier has at the time. As each performance level is accomplished, a voucher is sent into the Chicago office. By return mail the pilot receives another that challenges his skills to progress to a higher level. Pat had been working on the Level V tasks for almost two years. He was finding them to be not quite impossible, but very, very challenging.

We planned a family trip from our home in Dearborn, Michigan to what was reported to be the best slope soaring site in the Midwest, the Sleeping Bear Dunes Lakeshore National Park. The park is located on the northwest corner of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. The stage, we hoped, was set for success.

The drive across the state was enjoyable. We stopped and spent a couple of days relaxing with my college roommate's parents, the Durkees, in Fremont. From there we wandered up the lake shore, making lots of stops. Pat kept looking for high cliffs suitable for slope soaring. As we neared the dune area, we stopped at the Platte River KOA [Kampgrounds of America, Inc.] for a weather report from the two modeling couples camping there from the Ann Arbor area – Ken and Ruth Bates, Ken and Barb Shaw. Wednesday was supposed to be good, so Plan A was to give it a try the next morning (Wednesday, August 6<sup>th</sup>) at 10 a.m. Onward! Our motel was right at the entrance to the Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive. This was the access road up to the dune observation point near where we would be flying from. We found Karen and Don Patterson at the same motel, eating supper and cleared Plan A with them; all systems were go.

The next morning we flat-landers met the dunes for the first time. To us, they were awesomely dramatic. (Several times in the way distant past, continental glaciers had spread over this area, blanketing it with millions of tons of ice in vast sheets. The glaciers made and unmade, and as they melted, the ancestors of our Great Lakes were formed.) The prevailing west wind sweeps unobstructed across Lake Michigan, building up speed and force as it crosses miles of open water. Striking the steep shoreline bluffs of the high overlooks that rise 320 feet (98 meters) above Lake Michigan creates tremendous slope life. As we walked along the edge of the steep bluff with the wind blowing, stinging sand was thrown into our faces.

Our daughter, Maggie, thought playing in all that sand would be just fine. She was to be relieved of enduring the whole hoped-for eight-hour flight by the other moms, who took her swimming about noon. Maggie really loves the other three youngsters – Brian Bates, age three; Kristie Shaw, age two, and Amanda Jena Patterson, age two. Being eight years old, Maggie relished playing big sister.

All systems were go for the eight-hour flight – food, water, bug repellent, suntan lotion, first-aid kit, chair, rain gear, cameras; but someone neglected to clear it with “The Main Man.” The wind did well in blowing grains of sand around, but it could not support an RC Sailplane. Flights that afternoon barely averaged one-half hour, not to mention eight hours.

On the previous Sunday, Ken Shaw had completed a four-hour flight successfully, and they were all sure eight hours could have been easily accomplished that day. Pat was less than enthused on returning to the motel that night. The weather forecast for the remainder of the week was rain! There was no consoling Pat.

Of course, Maggie and I thought that was OK because we could go sightseeing. Pat acted like a wounded animal all Thursday, so we left him in the parking lot of the Dune Climb. Maggie and I climbed up the dune, hoping to reach Lake Michigan. We had lots of company, but it wasn’t crowded. Maggie had reserves of energy I had never seen before. “Older and wise” mom tried to take the straightest line between two points. Maggie just delighted going up and down each hill of sand. We never made it to the lake, but we really had fun. At one point a trail marker stated, “Two miles to Lake Michigan, three-hour round trip hiking time.” It was hard to believe, and we weighed our decision carefully. Some other adventurers continued on a bit farther and kept calling back their progress. It seemed like the lake should be just over the next ridge... it wasn’t. At this point, three hours would have put us still hiking after dark, so we reluctantly retraced our steps down the dune. We were determined to try again another day when we had more time.

All of the modelers and their families got a quite intimate look at the countryside by drifting down the Platte River in rented canoes. Pat and I paddled in the ends. Maggie and our old English sheep dog, Misty, who are almost the same size, sat in the middle. As we slipped along on the smooth current past several wooded stretches of undeveloped riverbank, the area’s natural wilderness could be seen again for a two-hour span. When we arrived at Lake Michigan, we swam in the narrow mouth of the cool, swift-flowing stream.

Later, farther upstream, we visited the Platte River Fish Hatchery. Here we saw the Coho Salmon that stock the lake and rivers of this fisherman’s paradise.

Another afternoon we visited the nearby Interlochen Music Camp. Young people from all over the world come here to spend the summer in the study of the fine arts and to use the area’s recreational advantages. While there, we enjoyed a dress rehearsal of a student symphony concert.

Friday morning was clear and bright. With Pat’s flight opportunities diminishing as the week was drawing to a conclusion, a marginal weather forecast had to be considered adequate for another attempt.

It had stormed Thursday night, and shifting sand had blocked the access road to the dune. The Park Ranger at the gate informed us that the drive would not open until about 1 p.m. *Big problem!* A 1 p.m. start, plus at least a half an hour preparation time, plus an eight-hour slope flight, would equal darkness. So we waited at the head of a long line of cars hoping for earlier entry. John and Trixi Vanderplow from Muskegon arrived and joined the waiting party. Finally, at 12:30 pm, the ranger opened the gate. I was driving, and at Pat's urging, I believe that we set a new Dune Climb record for the lowest E.T. in the station wagon class.

Pat assembled his 15-ft. wingspan version of Jerry Mrlik's *Astro-Jeff* design. This was the same plane that was an award winner at Toledo and was used by the Greater Detroit Team to win the 1980 Great Race V. (See Dan Pruss's RC Soaring column in the November 1980 issue of *Model Aviation*.) Nothing special was done to the three-channel Kraft equipment. The 1.4 Ah NiCads in the transmitter had been cycled, and four CC-size alkaline energizers were soldered together for the airborne battery pack.

The wind was light and coming at an angle out of the southwest. The winds were predicted to shift around to the west and increase to 15 to 20 mph. Consequently, a compromise of one pound of ballast was added. This brought the weight up to eight pounds and the wing loading up to 12 ounces per square foot.

At 12:55 p.m. on Friday, August 8, Pat tossed his plane off the edge out over the lake. Immediately, we were in trouble as the light lift was just enough to keep it up. We gambled on the weather man. After a tense 45 minutes (tense because, with such a late start, only one attempt would be possible) a more comfortable height was attained as the slope began to work in the rising, shifting wind. As the forecast had only been marginal, I had a minimum supply of rations, because I *knew* we would be down soon.

The National Park Service is somewhat reserved in the reception of model fliers. The spot designated for model Sailplane flights is not visible from the usual observation deck unless you know what you are looking for – and then it is distant. I would guess we hiked out nearly a quarter of a mile. The number of “all-day” cars at the small parking lot is requested to be kept to a minimum; consequently, Misty was left in our car a quarter of a mile father down the road in a shady turn-off.

Back to our flight in progress: everything still seemed against it. Pat had been flying for almost two hours. The monotony is relieved when Ken and Don decide that the lift is strong enough to support their two 1/2A Pylon Racers, sans engines. They proceed to put on an exhilarating display of aerobatics and Pylon Racing. Anything a plane will do could be done here, and for as long as the pilot wanted to do it – all without the greasy kid's stuff or the noise of an engine. Pat's offer to trade planes is answered with a curt, “Be quiet, and keep your eyes on your own plane.” His is agonizingly bored.

Ken Bates has a radio equipment problem, and his plane lands back a ways from the edge. The others go to help him look for it. Shortly, the four fellows return after successfully finding Bates'

undamaged fly-away plane. Pat would have welcomed a short hike of the dunes, as the endless blue sky and sitting has him almost in a trance.

John Vanderplow leaves, and Don Patterson continues his endless search for Petoskey stones. Someone else is wandering out our way. It is Walt Good, his wife, Joyce, and her sister. The Goods are retired now from Washington, D.C. They winter in Florida and summer in Michigan. Walt and his twin brother were the first ones to successfully do anything with radio controlled model airplanes years ago. He is also one of the partners that developed the Thermal Sensor. Walt chats with Pat for a while, and eases him over the “four-downer” (a point when it is very easy to give up). Pat gives Walt the long version of the 1980 Great Race, and his opinions of cross-country flying. This helps move the dragging time along. Then the Goods head back to civilization.

It is apparent we will need more food. I leave, and Maggie keeps a watchful eye on her dad. Force-feeding was the order-of-the-day – input equals output and output was not easy under the circumstances. I returned with more sandy sandwiches. Though one did not have to face the wind constantly, it seemed as though the sand penetrated everything. The plane was now so high and so far out over the water that you would think it would never come down. It was barely visible, and Pat was wishing he had added another pound of ballast.

Around six o’clock, Mandy and Karen Patterson brought some more food and rescued Maggie. Maggie had been with us since the morning, and now was only too happy to leave this oversized pile of sand.

One anxious moment came when Pat lost sight of the plane. He stood up quickly, and became faint for just a brief moment... just enough to lose sight of the plane. I called to the others to search the sky; it was sighted within two minutes. It had turned downwind, and had really traveled a long way. It was back over land when sighted, but still very high. Gradually, Pat worked it up and back over the water. Pat was then complaining of being cold! Back to the car for blankets. Time is now 7:30pm. Pat keeps fearing the sun will set before he finishes his time. By now, it seems as if it may well be a completed eight-hour flight.

A very big problem is in keeping Pat alert. There are four of us working on him, Ken B., Ken S. Don P., and yours truly. He is completely bored from flying, tired and punchy. All manner of cajoling and threatening is going on. I agree with Ken Bates’ observation: “It is not really how much skill you have to complete this task, but how badly you want it. It is a test of desire.”

The sun was starting to set. What a view! But wait, something is happening to the wind. As the sun goes down, so does the wind velocity, the lift, and the plane. Gradually the plane becomes larger and larger as it comes lower and lower. I tell him, “Come on, Flinn, you keep telling me how Sailplane pilots can get it up higher, and keep it up longer. I don’t know what you do to keep it up, but you better do it.”

His frustrated reply is, “I’m doing it, I’m doing it!” Nothing Pat can do will regain the lost altitude. Time is 8:30 p.m. Close only counts in horseshoes. Anything short of 8:55 p.m. means the whole day was just practice. The plane continues to lose altitude. Cajoling has given way to

desperate prayer. It is now 8:50p.m.; the plane is at launch height (probably 400 feet) above our heads.

The rules state the plane must land within 200 meters of the launching point to qualify. The ground crew calculates that if he can just hang on and risk a landing on the face of the dune, short of the water, it would be satisfactory.

If only the rate of descent would lessen. Now the plane is down to eye level. He is flying parallel to, and hugging the face of, the dune. The plane is so close that one could almost reach out and grab a wing tip as the plane floats by at just above stall speed – using the last wisps of lift. How he wishes that he could take out the ballast. We are so, so close. Comes 8:55 p.m. and the plane is below the top of the dune. The time is complete, but what about the plane? Pat flies it into a small ravine, then brings it around up over the edge to within the required closeness for a perfect finish at 8:58 p.m.

Wild cheering goes up from the ground crew and from the observation deck. The Goods and the Vanderplows had returned to watch the finish. They had informed the sightseers of what was happening. We had a real gallery up there watching.

It was still daylight out in the open over the lake, but in the window of the dune, it was dark. We were happy, but completely drained. That last hour was a real strain. That hike back seemed like miles. Had it not been a successful day, I am not sure that we could have made it.

Saturday was a new day, but the thermal soaring contest in nearby Traverse City started early. Pat was on Cloud 9. He did everything right without even trying that day. He was a Level V, and he punctuated it! He took first place with a 110-point margin.

Traverse City is famous for its Cherry Festival and crops of both sweet and sour cherries. That Saturday night, the six couples and four youngsters had dinner together. We celebrated the various triumphs of the preceding week with fresh cherry pie. It was a delicious end to a week we will all long remember in the sands of Michigan's Sleeping Bear Dunes.

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