

John Heiney and 45 years of Hang Gliding

Cloudbase Mayhem Podcast 218 — John Heiney

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English

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Show notes

John Heiney started hang gliding in 1978 and he's still going strong today. His photographs of free flight have been on more than 50 magazine covers. He broke the Guinness World Record for looping in 1988. And then he broke his own record again ten years later! He was crowned the world aerobatics champion four times. He's a machinist; diesel rabbit aficionado (he's driving his fifth these days); hang gliding instructor, has more than 40 wings in his garage; worked on numerous commercials and films; designed gliders; was a test pilot; stunt pilot and has invented dozens and dozens of camera mounts to capture the magic of flying. His incredible flying stories span over four decades. Grab a cold one and kick back, you're in for a treat.

The post #218 John Heiney and 45 years of Hang Gliding first appeared on CLOUDBASE MAYHEM.

Transcript

[00:00:00] **Gavin McClurg:** Hi there, everybody. Welcome to another episode of the Cloud-Based Mayhem. Just got back from a short trip out to San Bernardino in California to do some training with Ben Abruzzo and Dave Harrington. Dave and I are supporting Ben in the upcoming X-Pyr this June, flipping the roles here a little bit with Ben after all the many, many years of training and support he has given me in the Red Bull X-Alps. That was a lot of fun. And the other purpose of the trip was to go out there and do some podcasts. The first one is released to you here today with John Heine. Heine has been flying since 1978. He is still passionate about it. He's got 40 hang gliders in his garage. We had an exceptionally fun talk out at his shop.

[00:00:47] He's a machinist, a diesel rabbit aficionado. He is an incredible photographer. He builds all kinds of crazy mounts for hang gliders. He's been photographing the sport. Since the beginning, he's got over 50 covers in Pilot Magazine and many, many others. He's done a lot of commercial work. He set the Guinness Book of World Records for looping and then did it again, beat his own record and talks about that. Along with all the looping, John was also a very competitive aerobatics champion back in the day. He and Mitch went head-to-head many times, of course. We talked about some of that history and how he got into it and chasing the sky crack from upside down.

[00:01:35] There's a lot of fun names in this one. A lot of the legends. This is, I guess, one of our legends talks. We talk about Larry Tudor and Mitch McAleer and Jack Lambie and David Kronk and a whole bunch of others. Tom Price and safety and wing testing and just a ton of good stuff. I've got to talk to more of these guys. The stories could just... I've got to fill an encyclopedia. This was a lot of fun. Many thanks to Mitch McAleer for shouting me some questions on this and giving me some ideas. I had a great trip, some great flying and had a wonderful talk with John Heine. Enjoy. Just talking about Larry Tudor, the fun story that I heard.

[00:02:22] I don't know what year it was, but they were having a big contest in Owens Valley. It was late. It was late in his career. And for the

[00:02:32] **John Heiney:** first time, the organizers decided to call a different kind of task than they'd ever called before. The task was from Gunter, I believe, up to the end of the range. And then normally you'd go off the end of the range to the north or northeast or east towards Tonopah. But they decided to send them east a ways and then back down the valley behind the Whites, which is, I think, Fish Lake Valley. Yeah. To a town. Goldfield, I believe it was. Ghost Town or something. Yeah. And it turned out to be a really tough task. And just about everybody landed out shortly after they turned on that southerly leg, the last southerly leg. And Larry Tudor, a couple hours later, comes in to goal.

[00:03:23] And it just points up the great talent that he had. When he was all by himself and nobody else to compete against or anything, just Mother Nature, he could make it. He could do it. He seemed incredibly tenacious. You know, we were down in Texas a few years ago. We were having a run at the distance record, you know, going down to a place that Osoba and all you guys found back in the day. And he just showed up. You know, there was a crew that came down from Colorado and there was Larry. He just... As psyched as ever. He just wanted to be part of an effort. And, but he's,

[00:04:03] **Gavin McClurg:** I think he's got incredible, he had to, there was a paraglider, he got really hurt a few years ago, Eric Reid, who was really competitive for many, many years up in the Bay Area. And they called him the Badger, you know, cause he just, when conditions got brutal and everybody sank out and nobody could survive, he would, he'd make it. Yeah. Larry kind of seemed like that. Yeah. That was Larry. That was Larry's talent. I think he said he'd take five aspirin before he'd launch when he's trying to make a long flight. For what? I couldn't stay in the air for a long flight because it just got too painful to, to be prone, you know, which is not a normal position. Sure. Hold your head up all that time. And so...

[00:04:48] Just proactively anticipating the pain. Yeah. Interesting.

[00:04:51] **John Heiney:** I think

[00:04:51] **Gavin McClurg:** he would do that just so he could fly

[00:04:53] **John Heiney:** comfortably longer. Wow. And, you know, that's a little dangerous to do. To do that kind of thing. You know, aspirin is, we used to think of it as harmless, but you know, we know more about it now. Right. Right. I mean, wasn't he the first to break 200 and 300? He did both, didn't he? I think so. Yeah. His first long one was 221. I mean the first 200 plus and, and then that 306

[00:05:19] **Gavin McClurg:** or something like that from

[00:05:21] **John Heiney:** Hobbs. That one was crazy. Cause he, he, I remember when I talked to him about that. He, he... He had it picked out where he was going to land, but he'd never been there. It was this crazy story. I think it was next to

[00:05:35] **Gavin McClurg:** McDonald's in Kansas and from Hobbs and, you know, he imagined he was going to land there, but he

[00:05:42] **John Heiney:** didn't know, but he'd never been there. It was pretty cool stuff. John, it's fantastic to be able to do this with you in person here at your shop. I already feel like I've gotten a little

[00:05:54] **Gavin McClurg:** taste for some of the magic. And you, I didn't know that you were a machinist. I knew about your photography background and some of your hang gliding background, which we're going to get into here, but I have a million questions for you. So why don't we start with this one? How do you describe yourself? Cause you seem like a Jack of many trades. If you're at a party and someone walks up and hi, John, what do you do? How do you answer that? Oh, these days I just say I teach hang gliding, which, you know, my dad thought that if you ever got good enough at something that you could teach it, that was the best you could do in your life. And, uh, sadly he didn't live long enough to, to see my success. Um, but, uh, uh, yeah, I, uh, at one point when, uh, the hang glider manufacturing ended and I thought about what am I going to do now, uh, occurred to me that I've been preparing my entire adult life or being able to teach hang gliding and, you know, a

[00:06:56] **John Heiney:** young man, uh, approached me, uh, right about that time, wanted to learn to fly and, and, uh, I'd taught a couple of friends a long time ago, but, uh, I got into teaching him and, uh, and decided, yeah, maybe this is what I should do now. Huh? And for the last 22 years or so, it's been working well for me. Not that much activity right now, but I still get enough people to stay at it. And give us a rundown and not in resume short form, but feel free. Feel free to lengthen it out however you want, but, uh, you, before we got recording here, you started in 78 and let's go from 78 to here. What, what has that, what does that journey looked like from a kind of a bird's eye view?

[00:07:42] Oh boy. Um, I started out on the little sand dune at Dockweiler, um, friend of mine who had moved to California before me, who I'd worked with at Outboard Marine Research in Milwaukee, uh, took me out and his friend. Had a hang glider and, uh, we tried it, you know, that's what you did

[00:08:00] **Gavin McClurg:** back in those days. Your friend had a hang glider. You'd run down the sand dune with it and see what happened. And, uh, and, you know, three stalled crashes and, uh, it was the biggest thrill of my life. It was, it reminded me of when I first got up on two wheels on a bicycle as a little kid, it was, you know, that feeling of your world just being greatly expanded

[00:08:24] **John Heiney:** all at

[00:08:25] **Gavin McClurg:** once by this, by this

[00:08:26] **John Heiney:** one simple device. And, uh, I was hooked on it at that moment. Had you seen it and stuff because you were here, you were in this area then? I had seen hang gliding, um, here and there from, uh, actually, let's see, when I first moved to California in 72, the first thing my friends did was took me to a hang gliding event at Escape Country. And I saw these people, I mean, we pulled into this park and there were people launching these colored wings. Off hills, all over the place, high and low hills. And I just thought, this is fantastic. And, uh, you know, I, I think at that moment I knew that I wanted to spend my time doing this, but it, you know, I was in kind of a hole in the, that time, that point in my life.

[00:09:14] And I, I, it was another five years before I got around to actually get started

[00:09:19] **Gavin McClurg:** at it myself, which is probably good because on those early gliders,

[00:09:23] **John Heiney:** I probably would have gotten killed. Well, I mean, in 78, uh, they were thermaling. I mean, you're, the people are going places, yeah? Not, well, in 78, yeah, that, that was starting to happen then, I guess, yeah. The carnage was, had certainly started by that point. Uh, it was kind of dying off by that point, actually. The worst was around 74, I think, as far as the highest death number. Right. So. So there was, what, what did it look like to learn hang gliding in 78? Um, from what I saw, you took one lesson and you were on your own. You were ready to go. You were a pilot then. Um, but, um, I started out with a school in, uh, Santa Monica and, um, we went out to Doc Weiler and I took one lesson.

[00:10:13] I bought a glider from Iper, which was a poor glider and too small for me. And I had a hell of a time learning how to fly that thing. And cause I, you

[00:10:22] **Gavin McClurg:** know, I took two lessons and then was off on my own. And then I needed a lot more than that.

[00:10:28] **John Heiney:** I was not a natural at it at all. Maybe I, maybe, you know, the, be

[00:10:33] **Gavin McClurg:** having the wrong glider was a big part of it, but. I see all your, you

[00:10:38] **John Heiney:** know, you're a machinist here, certainly. And you've got all these, this fancy equipment and welding stuff and you will get into the photography, but was

[00:10:46] **Gavin McClurg:** the, was

[00:10:47] **John Heiney:** that, were you an

[00:10:48] **Gavin McClurg:** engineer coming into this? Were you bringing that kind of background to flying or did that grow out of

[00:10:54] **John Heiney:** flying? I went to engineering. I went to engineering college, but I graduated on a, just a two-year degree, associate in applied science. And, uh, I worked at a research center for a couple of years and then just, uh, got bored and thought I wasn't doing anything meaningful and just quit like a fool. And, uh, and then I didn't know what I was going to do. I was kind of interested in motorcycles and, uh, and, uh, so I have a, an engineering background, but I'm not considered an engineer cause I didn't get a four-year degree. And, you know, my engineering training has served me well. I mean, I really enjoyed what I learned there and, uh, and I've always been a student of science, but, um, I've had many

[00:11:40] **Gavin McClurg:** jobs, you know, I found that I could walk into any place that I wanted to get a job at and tell them what I could do. And I always got a job, but then, you know, once I got into hang gliding, I never had a real job again after that. Really? I always tried to. Earn some money somehow hang gliding. And,

[00:11:59] **John Heiney:** you know, I got into doing, uh, promotional photography and, and test flying for people making hang gliders and, and, uh, you know, eventually got a steady job for a guy who wanted to become a hang glider

manufacturer. And I helped him out with that. And we had a pretty good success with that company called Altair, uh, made the predator in Saturn. What years were that? Was that? That was around, uh, 90. Five to 99 or 2000 or so. Yeah. Uh, when I first came to California to get heavily into hang gliding around 1980, I was staying with a friend and not too far from his house was this little flying site called Salt Creek in Southern Orange County, California.

[00:12:47] And when I arrived there the first time I saw this guy named David Beardsley flying there and he was just the smoothest. Pilot. I could have, I mean, I haven't seen that many pilots. The guy was so smooth and he landed so gracefully. I thought to myself, I want to fly like that guy. And I ended up flying there and observing him. And, you know, he was very generous and, and he'd been flying seven years, which I thought was sky God. And, uh, but he, he was very talented and very knowledgeable and he shared his, his wisdom, always mentored the new guys. Coming in and, uh, and he continued doing that his whole life and still does it.

[00:13:32] He still shows up at the flying site at the end of

[00:13:34] **Gavin McClurg:** the day or when the

[00:13:36] **John Heiney:** flying starts wherever he happens to be. And he's done a lot of traveling and whatever flying site he happens to be at. I figure he's the de facto safety officer because he'll walk up and approach some new guy about to do something stupid and he'll straight it out. Yeah. That's a nice. Skill to be able to know how to do that tactfully and, you know, make it optimistic and bring people up rather than scare them to death. Yeah. And he has a personality that lends itself to that. And so he, um, I figure he's probably saved lives and certainly saved many mishaps just by giving of his knowledge to, to other people. And for 2024, USHPA has awarded their commendation award today.

[00:14:25] So what I figure is probably is a lifetime achievement kind of award for him, but he did something around 9,000 tandem flights in his career. Many of them for free just to, to show other people how great hang gliding and taught several people to fly. And, uh, yeah. That you're amazing photos adorn your shop here is just, it's, it's history on the walls. It's fantastic. How did you get into photography? You know, I was into, I always liked photography, cameras, pictures, you know, from an early age, I had a little instamatic and, uh, never really thought much about it. Probably did more documentary photos than anything.

[00:15:10] But when I got into hang gliding, I was so enthused about

[00:15:14] **Gavin McClurg:** it. So thrilled

[00:15:15] **John Heiney:** about the, the

[00:15:16] **Gavin McClurg:** idea of flying high in the air, you know, fundamentals wing, um, that I just, I wanted to tell other people about it. And, you know, I have to

[00:15:26] **John Heiney:** say, I saw the pictures of Leroy Grannis and, and, uh, Eric Raymond in the hang gliding magazine. And I just, I thought that is one of the best things I've ever seen anybody do is creating these special pictures they took mostly by mounting cameras on gliders. And I thought, I think I can do

[00:15:47] **Gavin McClurg:** that. And with

[00:15:48] **John Heiney:** my, um, ability to build things, I think I can make better mounts than those guys have made. And so that was really the beginning was my, my thoughts about building better mounts and taking those great, uh, mounted

[00:16:03] **Gavin McClurg:** shots. When

[00:16:04] **John Heiney:** I was first thinking about doing, uh, this mounted photography,

[00:16:08] **Gavin McClurg:** um, Eric Raymond was my hero. I just wanted to be like Eric Raymond and be able to take those great shots and get them published in the magazine. So, uh, he was, uh, he was my role

[00:16:19] **John Heiney:** model. And I got to still, you're still, you were just talking about him before with the 360. And that's good. I mean, he's still doing it. Yeah. Yeah. Eric Raymond is, uh, he's, uh, every, uh, free flight pilots hero

because he just had a storied career of, you know, learning to hang glide and then becoming a, uh, competition pilot and a hang gliding photographer. And then when he got bored of, uh, um, building his own hang gliders and, and, uh, he decided he wanted to build an electric sailplane and fly it across the country. And he did. He did what he wanted to do. Yeah. And he's still, uh, still working on his, uh, two place, uh, uh, sun seeker duo over in Europe and, uh, living over there now and, and, uh, putting out really nice little films, uh, of this, uh, electric sailplane.

[00:17:12] So, yeah. Yeah. He's a hero. Yeah. Cool. Uh, Gil Dodgen was, uh, an early hang gliding enthusiast and then he, uh, became the editor of hang gliding magazine. And he was editor for many years, 20, at least 20 years, I think probably more. And so he was the editor pretty much through the whole eighties and nineties when I got the majority of my photographs in hang gliding magazine. And, uh, I give him credit for, for my having become noticed as a hang gliding photographer, because without that forum to show off my photographs, um, who would have ever known about the pictures

[00:17:54] **Gavin McClurg:** I took, uh, but he, um, liked my, my photos and he, uh, he printed them

[00:18:00] **John Heiney:** regularly. And, uh, I, I think I had not just hang gliding, but, um, a few other magazines. I think I had, um, in the neighborhood of 65 cover photos and as far as center spreads, I think it was something more like 30 or so, but, uh, that's a lot of covers and any photographer would be proud of that. Just, just from my, um, you know, watching hang gliding magazine over those years, I think

[00:18:30] **Gavin McClurg:** it's probably

[00:18:30] **John Heiney:** a record. Oh yeah. That'll never be beat. That's, that's Kelly Slater stuff right there. That's amazing. Here's kind of a funny one. Um, I had this idea to take a picture, stepping on the nose of another glider as I flew over, you know, Torrey Pines is the obvious place to do

[00:18:50] **Gavin McClurg:** that. So, uh,

[00:18:52] **John Heiney:** a friend of mine, David, a good friend, uh, known as RC Dave, uh, agreed to help me with that picture. So he was flying one of my TRXs and I was flying the other one. I had the camera mounted on my wing and, uh, and I mounted it in vertical format just to have plenty of room to get the other glider below. And plus I thought might make a nice cover shot. And so, uh, we went out and did the shot and, uh, and we got it, you know, it worked. It was pretty easy to do and, uh, and gildodge and put it on the cover of the magazine and the next month somebody wrote in letter to the editor. That's a dangerous picture you put on the cover. You shouldn't be showing dangerous things like that on the cover of our magazine. And so the following month, RC Dave wrote in a letter to the editor and said, uh, he said, I had one hand on my parachute, the other hand over my eyes, tell your readers to quit whining.

[00:19:48] It was all under control. That's terrific. There's something about people who are drawn to this sport that I, I haven't really landed on the why too much. I

[00:20:03] **Gavin McClurg:** live in a town where backcountry skiing is a big deal and, you know, pretty

[00:20:09] **John Heiney:** extreme mountain biking is a big Denali run around with, with guys who are, you know,

[00:20:16] **Gavin McClurg:** take some pretty heavy risks and they have no desire to fly whatsoever. Isn't that interesting? What is it about?

[00:20:23] **John Heiney:** Like guys like you who, who just were drawn to it and this is what you had to do. I just had this conversation with Tom Pagini, you know, when he used to fly with you back and still is passionate about it today as he's ever been. He just loves flight. I don't know the answer. Um, it's, uh, it's just probably a human psychology thing where people think that as long as they're close to the ground, they're safer really in flying. Everybody in flying knows that the only time you're in danger. So when you're close to the ground, so, uh, it's, it's probably just a difficult mistake and idea that people have about, about, uh, flying that, um, and about dangerous things that, you know, if you're, if you're, uh, kind of sort of connected to the ground, you're not in danger.

[00:21:13] I don't know. It's interesting, isn't it? I was in New York doing some towing with Paul Voigt and his group. They were truck towing. And I think an airport. It's called Blue Swan. And, uh, there was a young instructor there and he

had some students there who were doing their first towing. This young man was going to do his first tow. And, uh, I said, uh, where's your parachute? And he said, oh, I don't have

[00:21:39] **Gavin McClurg:** one yet. I've ordered it. But, uh, my instructor told me I could fly without it until it gets in. And I said, can't tow without a parachute. And he said, oh, well, uh, let me ask my instructor. And he called the instructor. The instructor said, oh yeah, it came in. And I said, let's put it in your harness right now. So I put it in his harness, got it all ready. And he towed first tow flight, uh, behind a trike and we're watching him tow. And they're about maybe 500 feet up. And all of a sudden the hang glider and the trike are both going down like this. Toe line still attached. Whoa. And, uh, the, uh, student threw his parachute and the line broke weak link broke or something. The trike. Ended up pulling out and flying away.

[00:22:26] Everybody was all right. And the student came down under that brand new parachute. Holy. He was lucky. He came across you. Holy cow. What happened? Somebody stalled.

[00:22:38] **John Heiney:** Uh, I suspect the, the student maybe got too slow and slowed the trike. Oh. And then they were both recovering from the stall. Gotcha. Wow. Holy cow. That was lucky. Yeah. Incredibly lucky. He called me a year later on. Thank you. I bet. I bet he did. He owes that birthday to you. You, I have another generalization. This isn't always true, but it seems that people, when they get into the sport are drawn towards one aspect of the sport or another. It could be acrobatics in your case, aerobatics or cross country or, or neither really, uh, you'd be red soaring at Tory.

[00:23:23] And for your career is, I understand it. You were kind of the modern inventor of aerobatics. Uh, talk about that. What was, what was spinning your mind that you wanted to make these things do things that they weren't quote unquote supposed to do? Well, big correction. I was in no way an inventor or originator of aerobatics. Most people give that to, uh, Dan Racanelli. Okay. Uh, he was, uh, he was doing really, uh, beautiful maneuvers back in the single surface days. And, uh, and of course, um, Mitch McAleer was doing aerobatics before I, um, I had that backwards and I thought that Mitch came after yours.

[00:24:09] No, I learned a lot about aerobatics by watching Mitch and, and, you know, analyzing his videos. And, uh, I really tried to emulate, uh, what he did. And, uh, one of the biggest compliments of my life was when, uh, when he saw me do loops for the first time and he was kind of, you know, he was surprised and he said, you look like me. That was a big, that was a big thrill. So, uh, but I watched, uh, Eric Raymond, uh, Eric Raymond was probably one of the guys. I didn't see him do loops very much, but one day I was standing at Edwards and he was up not all that high. And all of a sudden you

[00:24:49] **Gavin McClurg:** just pulled in and dove. And did this loop and it looks so easy. I thought, well, you know, I know it's not

[00:24:56] **John Heiney:** easy, but once you learn what you need to know, that looked easy. It's gotta be something that's quite doable. And, uh, and then Wayne

[00:25:06] **Gavin McClurg:** Denny, crazy Wayne, um, also gave me good pointers that really helped me out. He was looping, uh,

[00:25:13] **John Heiney:** fledges, which is a little different, but still, um, had some, uh, some

[00:25:17] **Gavin McClurg:** good advice for me. And, uh, of course, Ron Young. Ron Young was, uh, he was a monster at aerobatics. Um, the guy had longer than normal arms, which is a perfect situation for, uh, doing aerobatics on hang gliders. Cause you can pull in, get your body weight further forward, you know, and, uh, he was strong guy too. He was just like the muscle man of aerobatics. He forced the glider to do what he wanted to. And, uh, so all those guys, you know, were before me. Um, so, you know, probably. Uh, the only reason I got famous at aerobatics was, uh, cause I, uh, started mountain cameras and getting those upside down pictures and then video, you know, 16 millimeter cameras of Tom Sanders.

[00:26:04] And, and, uh, yeah, one year I got to

[00:26:07] **John Heiney:** fly in a air show on the Chicago lakefront, my friends, Greg and Audrey Fisher were very much into hang gliding organization back then. And they got us a group of hang gliders. And so, um, the day before the show, we were, um, practicing at MIGS field. There was an executive airport right on the

[00:26:33] **Gavin McClurg:** lakefront in those days. And, uh, Greg and Audrey thought it'd be a fun thing to

[00:26:38] **John Heiney:** bring, to rent a limousine and come out and do our towing, uh, that day with a limousine. And so, uh, we were towing up just to do some practice stuff, a towered field, MIGS field. And, uh, we were there by permission, of course. And, uh, so we did some flights and late in the day, I noticed that there was a nice, I think I took a flight and was up and saw that this nice sunset was starting to happen behind the Chicago skyline. And I thought that would make a fantastic picture. I need to, and I was totally into aerobatics shots at that time. So I thought I need to do a loop and get a picture of that Chicago skyline with the sun setting in the background. And so, uh, I got the camera all set up on the glider and I towed up and, um, you know, we were limited as to how far we were told we were doing a static line tow and the runway wasn't that long.

[00:27:36] So I was up, I don't know how far, but it was enough to do a loop. So I dove and I did my loop. And as usual, I just pushed the button and held it, you know, thinking that I would get three or four shots as I went over and one of them would be the shot, uh, which is my, my habit at that time. So as I went over and got quiet, as I did went over the top on the loop, I noticed I didn't hear the camera clicking and I knew I hadn't gotten the shot. Then I remembered I had put the camera on single shot when I gave it to somebody else to take pictures of me. So I thought, oh man, I leveled out. I'm looking at the ground. I knew I needed to do another loop and get that shot, but I thought I'm too low. And I looked at that gorgeous scene behind me. I wanted it so badly.

[00:28:21] I thought I got to get it. I dove. And I, what could go wrong? Yeah. And probably getting close to the ground. I pulled up a little early and I was concentrating on timing the pushing of the button at just the right time. And I pushed the button and I started falling into the sail. And, you know, people talk about an out-of-body experience. I learned about out-of-body experiences that day. I, when that happened, I knew that I was in a bad situation. Cause I, I thought I wasn't high enough to recover from a stall. So I, uh, it felt like I was sitting alongside, almost riding tandem with the guy flying the glider. And I said, you really screwed up this time. You don't have room to get out of this.

[00:29:07] But the guy flying the glider did all he could do. Just hauled the bar in and dove for the ground. And, uh, by the time I got to the, towards the ground, I was back in my body again and I pulled up going. Probably 60 miles an hour, five feet off the tarmac. And I had just enough energy to pull up, turn 90 degrees to the left and mush over a Cessna and land into the wind. Did you get the shot? I got the shot and it was in the calendar the next year. So the guy who was, uh, the operator of the airport was in the tower at the time. And he comes down and walks up to me as I was getting my harness off and had a big smile on his face and said, did you mean to do that? And I said, no, that was the closest I've ever come to smacking myself on the tarmac.

[00:29:57] Well, that would have been unsurvivable. Holy cow. Wow. That's amazing. I've never heard. That's, that's a remarkably low save. We talk about low saves, but it's a different kind of low save. From in your, in your, in your sail to landing it. Couldn't have been more than what? 50 feet off the deck. Oh, when I was upside down. Oh no, I was much higher than that. Okay. Uh, it takes more, more than that to get the, but the thing is, see, that's the, uh, hint that, um, what Wayne Denny told me, uh, before I did my first loop, he said, it's okay. As long as you get upside down, if you get flat upside down, the way the glider is designed, you keep your weight forward. You've got less surface area in front and more weight, more surface area in the back.

[00:30:46] So the nose is going to come down. So you'll be stalled and you'll be. Dropping like a rock and you'll be in a, you know, the fastest dive you've ever been in, but you'll come through and you'll still be flying. You won't tumble as long as you get flat upside down. And so that gave me the confidence to go ahead and experiment with the first time. Amazing. Yeah. What was your loop record? The Guinness one? Oh yeah. 52 loops after dropping out of a hot air balloon around 12,000 feet up at

[00:31:18] **Gavin McClurg:** El Mirage

[00:31:19] **John Heiney:** dry lake. Tom. Sanders made that whole project happen. He organized the, uh, uh, the Guinness people to film it and he filmed the, did the aerial filming for it. And that was a great project. Great fun. What year was that? That would have been 87. Oh no. Uh, 88. I think that was on the red mystic. What does it stand at now? Well, uh, I had the record for nine years and then I did another attempt in Florida. Which I extended it only to 58, uh, because, um, the turbo tug that was taking me up, hadn't tried towing that high before and, uh, got out on oil temperature, high oil temperature and so I had to pin off low.

[00:32:05] And, uh, but then, uh, the next year McAleer did, uh, 71 or 77, I believe 77, uh, down in Rio de Janeiro. And then, uh, I think only a year or so after that. Chad Elchins did 95. He towed up, uh, uh, 15,000 feet, I think, and did 95. So that's the record now, you know, Mitch is the, the only living pilot who has, you know, the high, the highest, uh, number. Is, forgive my lack of knowledge with hang gliding in history. Is, is aerobatics as, I'm going to put this in parades here, as safe in hang gliding as it is in paragliding.

[00:32:51] It's, it's kind of an interesting thing in, in paragliding,

[00:32:55] **Gavin McClurg:** the, the acro crew has, they don't have a lot of accidents and they, they, they're, they're, they're, they get, it's really, really, really good training for any kind of cross country paragliding in cross country pilots need to do as much as they possibly can, because it teaches you wing control and,

[00:33:15] **John Heiney:** and, uh, ground relation and just awareness. Uh, it was, is it, was that the case in hang gliding as well, or were you taking on some huge risk? I've taught a number of aerobatics seminars and, um, most of the people who attend them aren't really thinking about getting to the point where they do loops, but they know that it's a good, uh, safety idea to know how to get out of a bad situation if you find yourself because, you know, anybody can get flipped upside down in a radical thermal. Um, so, uh, it's good to have some, some practice and experience at doing wing overs and getting into some unusual attitudes and how to get out if it goes wrong. You've done a lot of traveling all over the world, uh,

[00:34:02] **Gavin McClurg:** to fly. Was

[00:34:03] **John Heiney:** that for aerobatics competitions? Was that for cross country competitions? Was that just for fun? I didn't have the

[00:34:10] **Gavin McClurg:** stamina I needed for cross country competitions. It became Ironman contests in

[00:34:15] **John Heiney:** the, you know, mid eighties. And, uh, so yeah, I, I got into aerobatics just, uh, again, watching the guys who I, uh, saw around Elsinore. Elsinore seemed to be a hotbed for guys interested in aerobatics. And interestingly, none of those, uh, early guys, Dangerous Dave Gibson, Ron Young, Mitch McAleer,

[00:34:38] **Gavin McClurg:** Eric Raymond, none of them

[00:34:39] **John Heiney:** wanted to tell me anything about aerobatics because I think they were afraid that, you know, they'd be responsible if I got hurt. And, uh,

[00:34:48] **Gavin McClurg:** and so they just, they were pretty much,

[00:34:50] **John Heiney:** you know, quiet about it. I had to figure things out by watching them break in. Yeah. But as I said, Wayne Denny gave me, uh, probably the best advice I ever got about it. Uh, it's interesting that, you know, you and Roy and, uh, Mitch and you've all kind of made this your place. What is it that's so special about, uh, flying here for the audience who hasn't, who haven't flown here in this area? You know, I mean, this is kind of the birth, as I understand it, of flying in the U.S. Well, I mean, Kitty Hawk, of course, the other side, but, uh, you know, what, what has been the, what's kept you here? What's been the magic of this, this, these mountains, these, these ranges? It started in Southern California, certainly, but I've lived in Utah and I really think Utah is the best place I've ever lived for flying hang gliders, paragliders, but Southern California, you know, it, you can fly year round, any, any day of the year, winter or summer can be sorable, you know, less sorable days in the winter, of course, but also, uh, I don't like the cold, you know, I get cold easily

[00:35:56] **Gavin McClurg:** and, uh, and it's better to be here. I really should go spend winters in Costa Rica, probably. There's nice flying down there. Yeah. It's pretty. But yeah, that's, uh, as far as world traveling, uh, most of the times I've gone has been to do demonstrations. At some event, you know, uh, I think it was 96. What was his name? Guy in, uh, an organizer guy in, uh, Portugal brought me over to do aerobatics at, at, and, uh, two events he was running. He was running the, uh, Portuguese nationals and the Spanish nationals on some mountains up in Northern Portugal, right close to the border of Spain. And, uh, after the event was over, he and I.

[00:36:43] We were

[00:36:43] **John Heiney:** flying just, we were the only two guys in the air. The previous days, the air was filled with gliders. Well, he and I are flying just, uh, thermaling for the fun of it. And I was down range a ways by this windmill, uh, thinking there'd be a thermal there. And, and, uh, I was, I was up at a good altitude and I'm just kind of flying out away from the ridge a little bit in some pretty good wind. So it was kind of just hanging there. And I look over to my left and I see a Hawk down below. Just right next to me doing the same thing. And, uh, got this crazy idea. And I just pulled in and dove and did a loop right next to him. And I pulled up, leveled out.

[00:37:23] **Gavin McClurg:** And I looked over, he was above me a little bit at this time. And he dove and did a loop. Get out of here. And that's awesome. I was, you

[00:37:33] **John Heiney:** know, I didn't expect that to happen, but I saw it with my own eyes and I have no proof of it. But I have to believe that, you know, I've never seen. A hawk do a loop. Um, and, uh, I don't know if I've ever seen any bird do it, but. That is cool. You went, Oh, that's a good idea. You know, I did a, an interview a while back with a gal who now she is a pilot, but at the time she was just studying, uh, migratory birds. And she was making the argument that birds don't play. It doesn't make sense for them to, because, because. Flying takes energy and energy is only replenished through eating that they don't, that they, and I said, no, you have to learn how to fly because every pilot in the world knows that birds play.

[00:38:27] We see it all the time. They definitely

[00:38:29] **Gavin McClurg:** play. And she was saying, no, that doesn't make any scientific sense. Well, I promise you that they're, they're playing. Cause that we see it all the time. Well, it's a logical hypothesis from her point of view. Absolutely. I should check in with her now because. Because I know now she has become a pilot. So if you're listening to this, I'll, I'll, I'll ring you back up. But yeah, I mean, we see birds play all the time, just purely for the fun of it. We do. In fact, at Torrey Pines, you know, you see the ravens will dive and they'll roll

[00:38:58] **John Heiney:** upside down and then roll back the same. Yeah. I finally saw one roll and continue and go all the way over. All the way through. Which is very rare. They usually go upside down and then back. Right. I, I went to Norway. In 2004 to teach a class on aerobatics. There was, there were eight guys there who had been practicing and were ready to get on with looping. And, and it was pretty rewarding. I watched a few of them do their first loops. Oh, cool. Yeah. But been to Japan three times and that was always for aerobatic demos,

[00:39:34] **Gavin McClurg:** contests, hang gliding contests back then.

[00:39:38] **John Heiney:** When I went to the Black Forest region of Germany, probably, I don't know, it was 10, 12 years ago, I realized at that point when there were just a few of us hang glider pilots flying this site and about 60 paragliders, they were having a contest, of course, but made me realize that that's what hang gliding is about now, doing demonstrations at paragliding events. So. Where do you think hang gliding's going? If you could predict in 10 years, you think there could be a resurgence? You think it could, you know, there, like you said, there's. I'm showing up at sites in certain parts of the world where it's still pretty popular. You know, it's not, it's like you said, you've got students coming. Yeah. What do you think? You can rub your crystal ball.

[00:40:24] The way I see it happening is kind of maybe like a dystopian novel. We'll go long enough without enough people interested in hang gliding that all the manufacturers will have to close because they just don't have enough business. Can't afford to do R&D anymore. And, uh, and then at that time, sometime after that, I think that, uh, there'll be a resurgence of interest in hang gliding and people will be, uh, looking around in grandpa's garage for a hang glider

that might be hanging up in there. And that's where the, they'll get their hang gliders from old gliders. Like, like my collection where. You got about 40 back there, you said. Where they'll, uh, people will be looking for, for old hang gliders and, you know.

[00:41:12] Somebody will be lucky enough to find one that was

[00:41:14] **Gavin McClurg:** flown once and put away

[00:41:16] **John Heiney:** and it's brand new. And then there'll be old ratty ones that they'll have to do repairs on, maybe even make new sails. And, uh, and it'll be a, an, a really interesting community of, uh, of creative and, and talented people who will, uh, resurrect, resurrect these old

[00:41:33] **Gavin McClurg:** gliders and, uh, and learn to fly them. And it might even be illegal by that time. Well, all the flying that'll be done will be bandito, you know, and you'll be running from the authorities. Right. And like base jumping off buildings is now, you know, all done in the middle of the night. So it could make for an interesting story. Hmm. Hmm. Are you, uh, you know, many of your brethren have made the jump over, you know, Mitch goes both ways still and stuff. But, uh, do you, if you toyed with paragliding as well, have you spent any time flying, flying the rags? Yeah. Um, friend. Scott Gresset was, uh, working for people importing paragliders in the early days and he, uh, got me started in it and, uh, and it was great fun.

[00:42:23] I loved soaring little coastal cliffs

[00:42:25] **John Heiney:** with paraglider and light thermals. I

[00:42:28] **Gavin McClurg:** thought were fine too, but, uh, little freaked out. They were pretty collapsey back in those days. And, um, we're talking about the late eighties, early nineties. And, and I, you know, the first time I ever

[00:42:39] **John Heiney:** flew at Torrey Pines, I, uh, had a, a half wing collapse and didn't know what to do. And, you know, it was about 15 feet up is all. And so rotated 180 and hit on the ground on a, on a hard plywood seat and, uh, did a compression fracture and

[00:42:56] **Gavin McClurg:** of my

[00:42:57] **John Heiney:** T12 vertebra. And so I was out for four months. And when I got back into flying, I flew paragliders a couple of times, but I didn't really get back into it mainly because, uh, UP, the company I was working for at the time was ending. Their, uh, operations in the U S and

[00:43:15] **Gavin McClurg:** stopped importing

[00:43:16] **John Heiney:** paragliders. So I didn't have free paragliders to fly anymore. Uh, tell me about your design history, you know, UP and, uh, uh,

[00:43:27] **Gavin McClurg:** just how,

[00:43:28] **John Heiney:** what, what were you doing? You mentioned you were a test pilot. Were you mostly test piloting? Were you mostly designing? You know, the first guy I helped work on hang gliders, he was designing and building his own gliders in his garage in Gardena, California. Not Gardena. Gardena Garden Grove. And, uh, he, his name was George Dyer and he was, uh, a Texan who, uh, had been, uh, four times world champion at flat tight flying where they tow these big flat kites behind boats

[00:43:56] **Gavin McClurg:** before regalos were developed. He got into hang gliding, of course, he was an engineer and I ran into him at Crestline one day and ended up getting to know him. And, uh, he was building these gliders. He called the Hawks, the double surface gliders in the early. Days of double surface and, and, uh, so I wasn't much of a help to him as far as designing at that time, but I did, uh, test fly his gliders

[00:44:22] **John Heiney:** for him. And, uh, later I, uh, when I made my first looping glider, uh, I was, uh, involved with Bill Bennett up at, uh, Delta wing gliders up in Van Nuys. And, uh, I wanted a glider like, uh, Eric Raymond had that he was looping and he had taken a comet and put an extra rib. In between each normal rib station and a few other

modifications. And, uh, he had a nice looping glider. So I just, uh, asked Bill Bennett if I could do the same thing to a mystic sail. He had the mystic at the time. And, uh, so I did that and, uh, I didn't know Eric well at all at that time, but I, I looked at his glider and, and made a few other changes on the glider, bigger leading edge tubes,

[00:45:07] **Gavin McClurg:** uh, bigger

[00:45:07] **John Heiney:** crossbars and, uh, a high hang point King post hang point, which was. In the early days of that. And, uh, the thing just happened to work out great for, for looping. It was easy glider to loop, dive it for about three seconds and start letting out. And, and you had your loop later. I got the chance to, um, develop gliders with Cheney up in Utah, uh, who'd been building hang gliders since the early days and, uh, had gotten involved with, uh, the Japanese who owned UP at the time. And they set up.

[00:45:41] **Gavin McClurg:** I set

[00:45:41] **John Heiney:** up a company to build gliders and I got on with them, uh, doing, uh, demo tours and, and doing promotional

[00:45:50] **Gavin McClurg:** photography for them, which I had done for Delta wing. And, and so, uh, when,

[00:45:55] **John Heiney:** uh, that all fell through and, uh, it was just Dick Cheney

[00:45:59] **Gavin McClurg:** and I, um, there, uh, I asked Dick, if you would, uh, let me take the TRX and do some things to it to make a better glider. I think he was sick of, of hanging. And gliding by that time, but

[00:46:13] **John Heiney:** to his credit, he went ahead and really went all out to, to help me with that project. And he was the sail maker, you know, and he, he was a genius at hardware and together we came up with some really nice stuff for that glider and made the predator. And then later the Saturn sizes and, uh, and so that, you know, lasted a few years and, uh, and we had great fun at it. Uh, Peter Radman was the guy who bought the. The rights to make the predator after, uh, you know, Dick and I had developed it. And so we had the company Altair for a few years and, you know, we all had a good time doing that, but as with most hang glider companies, it wasn't destined to last long.

[00:46:59] And what was, what was the death nail? As I say, it was it, what was the stat? What was the state of the industry pre the first paragliders? Was it already really declining, splitting apart? Cause I know. There was just a lot of companies coming and going. Yeah. You know, by the time paragliding came around, it was down to a few basic companies who are making hang gliders. Wills Wing in the United States, uh, ramp and all, I think was kind of at the, towards the

[00:47:27] **Gavin McClurg:** end of his run, uh, making the sensors. Cameron Blevins was, uh, pretty much just getting started making his gliders and, uh, he made great hang gliders. He did some really good, good contributions to hang. Gliding, but, um, you know, the

[00:47:43] **John Heiney:** foreign manufacturers, Icaro and, and Moyes and the ones in Germany and, and UK, they were all still doing well, I believe. But I think what really led hang gliding in the wrong direction was this idea that you always have to keep making them higher performance, this concentration on competition. And then whatever the competition pilots were flying, all the rest of the regulations. weekend warriors had to fly in order to feel worthy. And so when the gliders got into the topless realm, I just saw that I never wanted to build a topless predator. I just thought it was a step too far in complexity, cost, cost of repair, complexity of repair, weight of the glider, and they didn't handle very well initially.

[00:48:38] It just seemed like the wrong direction to go. And I think that's what really was what set hang gliding on the decline was same thing that put sailplanes on the decline. You know, once sailplanes got to be 60 to one glide ratio and cost, you know, hundreds of thousands of dollars, you know, not everybody could afford those. And so there goes your customer base. So I think that's what happened to hang gliding really. This is the big conversation right now in the world cup is you have to, you know, if you don't have the sub harness and you don't have the, this year's hottest glide, I mean, the Enzo three has been, has been kind of dominant now for, for many years, but it's, that's the same thing. Now we're going to go the same route. If everybody's going to have this, that stuff, cause it's expensive and it's fragile and it breaks

and then you get another one and, and it's pretty hard to be competitive without it.

[00:49:28] Yeah. It's interesting. And we've got the history books to look at to make better, better, better decisions. Well, I think paragliding is going to stick around for a long time. It seems to me that, that most paraglider pilots realize they have to stick with a glider that's reasonable to fly from a safety standpoint. And you know, even in hang gliding, the topless gliders were quite safe. They, you know, they did their same testing that they did on, on all the hang gliders ever developed for strength and stability. So it wasn't really a, a safety aspect, unless you consider having to land one of those things, you know, they, they were harder to land cause they just glide forever. Yeah. So paragliding has a better chance of surviving it.

[00:50:15] I think. Well, it was interesting what I think the, the Red Bull X-Alps and then, and then most recently COVID, I think really drove people to hiking. You know, it, it shut all the lifts down in Europe. And so everybody to stay sane, they had to go outside and go do something. And so there's, there's been this wave of, of lighter gear technology and, and improvements. And, and so people can walk up hills and that seems to be, that's a nice, it's, it's, it's helped things, I think, stay growing, not probably growing very fast, but it's, it's, it's brought, it's brought in more interest from people who normally wouldn't do it. That's a great obvious advantage of paragliding is the hike ability. Yeah. Carry stuff.

[00:51:00] Yeah. I have friends who carried, one friend I'm thinking of, Steve Aiden used to carry his glider up to the top of the Butte and where he lived in Oregon. And, uh, he would be up there soaring when his friends down at the normal launch down below couldn't, couldn't fly cause it wasn't so horrible down there yet, but he would throw his 38 pound glider on his shoulder and hike up there. And, uh, and so, yeah, but you know, gliders got to be to

[00:51:26] **Gavin McClurg:** where they're most of the gliders that are strong enough to be safe are, you know, 55, 60, 65 pounds these days. And I have been for a long time and that's, uh, you know, we really should do something to make gliders hang gliders lighter.

[00:51:42] **John Heiney:** Now it's a little late. There's, there's no customer base to make it worth doing development. So, but, uh, yeah, the weight of the glider is another fact. So I just watched Oppenheimer. I don't know if you've seen, seen the film, but there's this, there's this, uh, you know, when they're, they're creating this bomb, there's a lot of science, but there's a lot of unknown still. And there's this moment where, you know, they're going, Hey, when we light this thing up, we don't know if it's just going to keep going and incinerate the atmosphere. And there's, you know, I'm sure some of that's Hollywood, but I think there's, there's some historical basis to that. They really didn't know as an atomic bomb, when you guys were getting, this isn't a perfect comparison, but when you guys were, you know, the, the first person who looped was there, is this thing going to hold together?

[00:52:29] Is it going to, there's quite a bit of force there, isn't there? Yeah. Well, thankfully for me, Racanelli and, you know, other guys, found that out ahead of time. So I didn't have to worry about it. So it wasn't a complete crapshoot when you were building a glider to loop that you, you, you, you knew the basics of what it had to do. Yeah, no, I was, uh, I, I kept the basic parts of the glider, you know, stock, or at least I knew that I was making them stronger than stock. So yeah, that wasn't anything I was concerned about. The, the guys who set the infinite records on a paraglider, I mean, looping on a, on a paraglider, it's, uh, you know, they, they talk about the physicalness required of it, you know, the G force and the whiplash in your neck, and it looks quite a bit smoother on a hang glider, but how, how fit did you have to be to loop 70 something times?

[00:53:26] Was there a lot of physical training involved before you did it? And as I recall, too close to the project, I decided, you know, maybe I should do some pull-ups and get my muscles built up. And so

[00:53:38] **Gavin McClurg:** I actually, uh, hurt myself by doing, trying to train too soon before the event, too close to the event. And, uh, and I, uh, why my arms were sore for days after that, uh, after that run. But, uh, you know, I guess I was just in good enough shape. I was, you know, I've never been much of an athlete, but, uh, I, I had enough being 30 years old or whatever I was. What gets you excited about flying these days? Um, mostly, uh, shooting video, you know, again, the idea of showing other people

[00:54:10] **John Heiney:** how cool it is and, and, uh, what a thrill it is to be up there and how beautiful it can be. You know, you're always trying to get the sunset shots or the beautiful clouds, stormy cloud shots and, and, uh, shots close to other gliders and, and, you know, doing touch and goes and whatever trickery and clowning you can come up with. So yeah, I'm just mainly trying to make the hang gliding Moyes that I always dreamed about even way back in the eighties. So I never really got the chance to do. And now I've got all the equipment to do it, that I need myself to, to film and edit the things. I just have

[00:54:47] **Gavin McClurg:** to get friends

[00:54:48] **John Heiney:** to help me and, uh, fly with me and, and, uh, and I'll come up with some nice Moyes.

[00:54:55] **Gavin McClurg:** The, uh, Telluride, tell me about Telluride. There's, there's a mysticism behind that place for, uh, I think most hang gliders that have flown the States. You guys used to have comps there. You had aerobatics comps out there too, right? Yeah. The green machine and all this stuff that there's, uh, there's mysticism there. Is there something that many people have not flown Telluride? I mean, even these days it's, it's not, not flown a ton. It's, you know, it's way up high. Uh, what is it about that place? I think most of us who went there had never been to such a beautiful little mountain village as, as was there. And then to, to get up on launch and 250

[00:55:36] **John Heiney:** feet and, and look at those great peaks

[00:55:40] **Gavin McClurg:** above the timberline all around you, you

[00:55:42] **John Heiney:** know, it was, uh, just spectacular. And, and then to have, you know, um, a couple of hundred other hang glider pilots show up in town and all going up on trucks to fly every day. It was, I mean, you just, you got to socialize with other people who are passionate about what you were and, and, uh, and then they always had that aerobatics contest. You know, from the early days they were, uh, they, uh, the Telluride air force people, uh, called their contest, the world aerobatics championships. Nobody else in the world was doing any kind of anything like it. So I figured they had the right to call it that even though there was no official sanctioning from anyone. And, uh, and they did it for so long, you know, every year in a row that, uh, that give them credibility.

[00:56:30] And it was, uh, it was everybody there was just like floating, on air literally, you know, because they were

[00:56:37] **Gavin McClurg:** just having this great experience of getting together with like-minded people. You mentioned the one accident on a paraglider. Have there been others along the way? There've been, you've been, you've been pretty lucky. Have you been, uh, I've been very lucky. Yeah. I have had hang gliding accidents. Uh, seem like every couple of years when I, from the time I started, I had some mishap, but I was always lucky enough to get out of it with a minor injury or coverable injury. And, you know, I, I guess I can't deny that I'm a, a bold pilot, but, um, and there are old bold pilots, but the, uh, they exist only by luck and you can't

[00:57:20] **John Heiney:** count on luck. I tell my students, uh, it's good to be lucky, but the only luck you can count on is that which you've had in the past. Better lucky than good.

[00:57:30] **Gavin McClurg:** That's Nate and my buddy Nate skills likes to say all the time. Uh, yeah, you instruct. You've had

[00:57:36] **John Heiney:** 45 years or 46 years of flying. I think if I did the math right there, what do you try to pass on to those who are getting started and have no understanding of the,

[00:57:50] **Gavin McClurg:** what they're getting into really? I mean, it's, it's, we're all ignorant for quite a long time. Yeah. I feel that I'm, uh, my main job is to keep them from getting hurt while they're learning to fly. And, uh, it's, it's hard to know how to do that. Had a pretty good safety record. Haven't killed anybody yet. Had a few broken bones. Yeah. It's just, uh, I start out on a very shallow training slope. That's so shallow that a person can't possibly get

[00:58:20] **John Heiney:** into a turn and turn downwind before they hit the ground. So that takes out the, uh, the prospect of a downwind crash. And we, uh, do a hundred to a hundred and a half miles per hour. And, uh, do a hundred and fifty takeoffs and landings on that small, that shallow slope before progressing to a higher launch. And, uh, I've had people do over two hundred takeoffs and landings on the shallow slope. And then, you know, it's always, uh, it's always

a little, uh, nerve wracking to send them off a higher launch for the first time. But, uh, in most cases, you know, it's, it's intuitive enough that the control of the glider is intuitive enough that most people

[00:58:59] **Gavin McClurg:** just pretty much get onto it right away. Try to

[00:59:02] **John Heiney:** do tandems, at least one tandem with a, with a student before, you know, an hour long tandem at Torrey Pines or Crestline, if possible to, uh, get them, you know, satisfy myself that they're doing the right thing, controlling the glider. And then, you know, the next flight, they're off the mountain on their own and that's worked mostly. Tell me about when you're sitting here looking at all these amazing photos, you said you recently did a presentation. It's so easy to tell stories when you see them. I see, you know, all the images you've taken over all these years and video these years, uh, pulling out that is still very memorable for you. And just in terms of, uh, there I was, what an amazing, you know, wouldn't it be nice to, that's the coolest thing to me about flight is we never do the same thing twice.

[00:59:51] It's always different. And there's always something different about the air and the, and, uh, the, the

[00:59:57] **Gavin McClurg:** sky and the light and the time and where you are and the headspace. But is there a particular flight that just really stands out? Probably the one that stands out the most is the one that hurt me the most. I had this idea that I wanted to take a picture with the camera mounted on the wing of the glider while flying over a body of water with my finger stuck in the water as I glided over. I just thought it'd be a cool shot. And, uh, and I think, uh, it was

[01:00:28] **John Heiney:** Dan Racanelli's, uh, actually it was a guy named, uh, was it John Minnick, I think, who, uh, took that picture of Dan Racanelli gliding over low over a lake. Man, that reflection is beautiful. Yeah. And, uh, so the, the idea of having the glider reflected on the water. And then I thought the extra little thing for it would be to put your finger in the water. And, uh, so I planned to do that at, at Lake Elsinore. And my plan was to take off in sled ride conditions, uh, with the camera on the glider, mount it, uh, fly out over the water and, uh, turn around and glide back towards shore and dive, get up some diving speed so I could plane out over the water to have a few seconds, several seconds to, you know, get my finger in the water before I landed on shore.

[01:01:20] So, you know, I, I chose to put the camera all the way at the tip, which was a mistake from a safety standpoint. They made a nice, nicer picture, but, um, and then before I launched, I thought, you know, I've got it counterbalanced with a weight, but the drag of that camera out on the tip just could make the glider kind of hard to control. So I think I taped a tin can on the opposite tip of the glider just to create some drag out there. And, uh, and I told myself I was going to practice dives on the way out.

[01:01:53] **Gavin McClurg:** And if it didn't, the glider didn't feel really controllable, I wasn't going to do it. I would just cancel. Well, of course I got out there and I, did the test

[01:02:02] **John Heiney:** run and it wasn't right. It, it still yawed to the right pretty badly. And where the camera was. Yeah. Yeah. So you didn't have enough drag in the can. It wasn't exactly. Okay. So I, uh, uh, ended up going for it anyway, like a fool. And, uh, and I don't know that that, uh, hurt me, but I, um, uh, everything worked out great. I dove, I got, uh, got my speed up, my

[01:02:29] **Gavin McClurg:** energy built. I,

[01:02:30] **John Heiney:** I pulled up just over the water. I, uh, I had already arranged to have the button for the camera right in the middle of the base tube. So I could

[01:02:39] **Gavin McClurg:** put one hand on the middle of the base tube and not have the glider turn on me. And then I put my finger down and went in the water up to the first knuckle. And then it came out again right away. And I thought, oh, maybe I didn't get the picture. So I thought my, my first foolish thought was, well, I'm going to pull in a you know, go for another try. And I, uh, learned a lesson there about aerodynamics. Uh, and that is when you're gliding long at a certain glide angle and for the speed you're going, if

[01:03:11] **John Heiney:** you lower the angle of attack, the glider drops some altitude instantly before it settles into the new glide angle. And, you know, when you're up high, you don't notice that little bit of loss of altitude, but when you're in within arm's reach of the ground, yeah, when you're within, arm's reach of the surface, it's becomes quite obvious that you lose some altitude in the base tube, hit the water. And I slammed through, I was probably going 50 miles an hour. And, uh, fortunately I w the water was only a couple of feet deep. My, my head went through the bottom surface of the sail and did some damage to my larynx. I couldn't talk for a month and a half, spent the night in the hospital. And, uh, but, uh, you know, if the water had been deeper, I would have drowned.

[01:03:57] If I'd gotten knocked out, I would have drowned. So it was an expensive photograph. And, you know, I get a lot of, uh, compliments on the picture, but it certainly wasn't worth doing. Oh, um, was that similar doing very different things? You know, Mitch was doing the show over in, was it Austria when he did that? Yeah. And it was his third loop. And man, the footage of that is just, you know, 50 miles an hour to zero is, uh, some, that's a heavy hit. Yeah. He might've been going faster than that too. He was moving. He might've been going faster. And you're right, but Holy smokes. That's a, that's a hard stop. That would have killed a normal man.

[01:04:41] He does have some superhuman-ness in him. That's for sure. That is some incredible footage. Those of you listening, I'll put that up in the

[01:04:51] **Gavin McClurg:** show notes again. That was amazing. That's hard to watch. Oh God. It's terrifying. Uh, you've got some history in motorcycles. Yeah. Oh, just, uh, you know, I, I watched the movie easy rider and, uh, and I just liked that idea of the chopper and going on long motorcycle trips. So, uh, so I got an old Harley and, uh, built a chopper and actually went to work for a guy in, uh, Florence, California, another one of those places where I, I walked in and decided I want to work here. And I told the guy what I could do. He, it was a custom motorcycle shop, Walker's engine and frame, a guy named Ed Walker. And, uh, and I, you know, I was enthusiastic about this stuff and I knew how to weld and

[01:05:39] **John Heiney:** build things. And so he hired me as his frame builder and welder. And, uh, and I worked there for a fair amount of time and had a lot of fun and built, uh, built my old Harley. You like building things. Uh, you're also fascinated with what did Mitch call it? Diesel rabbit. Yeah. This is the Volkswagen rabbit, right? Yeah. That's, uh, I, I bought a brand new diesel rabbit in 1980. My friend Gary Bakley and I went to Oshkosh the air show one year, uh, around 1980. And, uh, and we drove his little 78 diesel rabbit up there and he let me drive it on the

[01:06:17] **Gavin McClurg:** way home and, and it drove nicely and it

[01:06:20] **John Heiney:** got 55 miles per gallon. And I thought this is, I'm going to get one of these cause I'm going to, I'm getting into hang gliding and I want to be able to drive wherever I want to go without the guilt of wasting fuel. Fuel was cheap back then. So, uh, so I, I bought a brand new one and drove it 379,000 miles and got 55 miles per gallon. And, and I've, uh, I bought a van after that. But then, um, when I got back down here to Southern California, I started finding these used rabbit diesel rabbits and, uh, and I'm on the fifth one now. And, uh, and you know, when I find something that works for me, I stick with it. Uh, yeah, that's 44 years of rabbits. Yeah. Right. That's a two years less than you've been flying.

[01:07:07] That's, that's, that's very impressive. It's a great little efficient automobile and, and I know how to work on it myself. So I, I just keep going and don't think about buying, I think about buying a new car once in a while, but then I, I procrastinated on it and forget about it. Uh, looking back, you know, when you're editing your films, and thinking about all your years in the sport, anything that you wish could have gone differently, uh, let me phrase that a different way. When you, if you could have talked to your 78 self, you know, when in 78, however old you were at that time and said, Hey, John, uh, here's what you need to know. What would you have told yourself? Yeah, I've had my mishaps and

[01:07:54] **Gavin McClurg:** injuries. The way my life is gone. I don't think I'd change.

[01:07:57] **John Heiney:** I don't think I'd change anything because I just feel good about my life right now. I never made much money, but I made some accomplishments, some satisfying accomplishments. I, uh, I just, I enjoy my life as it is. If I, if I did anything differently, um, you know, any, any little change could have changed a lot of stuff. Jeff Shapiro said that when I had him on, he said almost the same thing. He said, I wouldn't change anything for fear of

changing everything. Yeah. Right. That's a nice way to put it. Good way to put it. Yeah. Jeff is a cool guy. You know, in the earliest of days, I would obviously, uh, say a bunch of things about how hang gliding works and maybe I've avoided a few of my mishaps and injuries just from being illiterate about it.

[01:08:47] Again, you know, that's, that's a meaningless question because you, you can't, you can't go back and tell yourself, but I guess, you know, the point is you can tell other people, uh, who are starting out. And to that point, just, uh, be very conscious about safety, you know, and, and, uh, decide whether it's a day to fly or not, uh, based on conditions and how you feel, because it's much better to miss a flying day and be able to fly again the next day to fly in the wrong conditions, get hurt or killed. Yeah. I don't think I've heard too many people that have been hurt go. Yeah. I wish I, you know, I wish I'd done, I wish I'd flown. You just fly the next day.

[01:09:34] Yeah. An interesting, uh, aspect to my learning to fly. And I think the one person who's maybe more responsible for my accomplishing what I have in hang gliding is an old gal named Elsie Garut who lived down the street from me when I first lived in San Clemente, California. And I got to know her because I was doing electrical jobs to earn my rent and food money at the time. And, uh, I ended up doing some little electrical

[01:10:05] **Gavin McClurg:** repairs for her and her husband. They lived several houses down the street. And, uh, so I got to know them. And after her husband died, she, uh, told me that I could use her spare

[01:10:17] **John Heiney:** bedroom in

[01:10:17] **Gavin McClurg:** her house. She was living alone. And so, uh, I moved into her spare bedroom, didn't have to pay rent for the next few years. That meant I didn't have to

[01:10:26] **John Heiney:** work very much. And I could go flying almost every day.

[01:10:30] **Gavin McClurg:** And I think that is why I, you know, gained the skills

[01:10:35] **John Heiney:** I could to win some

[01:10:36] **Gavin McClurg:** contests. Yeah. And, you know, I cooked meals for her and took her places. She was, um, legally blind. And, and so, you know, it was a symbiosis, but, uh, it was, it was great. And she, uh, she loved me like a grandson. And, you know, I think it was Spanish Joe who told me one was just

[01:10:58] **John Heiney:** a normal hang glider pilot, just another pilot in England until he got a sponsorship and didn't have to work. And he had a girlfriend who drove for him. And so he could fly every day and he could try going cross country on any day, even if it wasn't a great looking day, he just left and went cross country because his girlfriend would always pick him up. So it was convenient. And Spanish Joe said that was when John Pendry went from an average pilot to being world class. Hmm. Time. Yeah. And so that's a similar situation. I had, of course, didn't have a girlfriend to drive for me. So, well, my wife drove for me at the time, my girlfriend, she drove for me once and, uh, near the end of the day when we were on our way back, she said, Gavin, I want you to know that I'll never do that again.

[01:11:47] She never has. I have a friend who, uh, whose girlfriend was really

[01:11:53] **Gavin McClurg:** enthusiastic about his hang gliding. She wrote poems about it. She made drawings and made picture books and stuff to give him. And the day they got married, she never drove for

[01:12:04] **John Heiney:** him again. Yes, there is pre-marriage and after my, my wife now, uh, who is amazing. She also, until we got married, she listened to every one of these podcasts. Hasn't listened to one since she's very supportive of the flying, but she's not going to pick me up and she's not going to listen to the podcast. John, thank you for your time and sharing all these fantastic stories with, with myself and the audience and sharing your little nook of the world here. This is a cool shop. I appreciate it. I appreciate all your photos and all your contributions to the sport and, uh, quite understated. I think we, but we got to have a nice journey there with you.

[01:12:50] Thank you very much. Nice to talk with you. If you find the cloud-based mayhem valuable, you can support it in a lot of different ways. You can give us a rating on iTunes or Stitcher, however you get your podcast that goes a long ways and help spread the word. You can blog about it on your own website or share it on social media. You can

talk about it on the way out to launch with your pilot friends. I know a lot of interesting conversations have happened that way. And of course you can support us financially. This

[01:13:14] **Gavin McClurg:** show does take a lot of time, a lot of editing, a lot of storage and music and all kinds of behind

[01:13:19] **John Heiney:** the scenes costs. So if you can support us financially, all we've ever asked for is a PayPal, or you can set up a subscription service that charges you for each show that comes out. We put a new show out every two weeks. So for

[01:13:35] **Gavin McClurg:** example, if you did a buck a show and every two weeks, it'd be about \$25 a year. So way cheaper than a magazine subscription. And it makes all of this possible. I do not want to fund this show with advertising or sponsors. We get asked about that pretty frequently, but I, for a whole bunch of different reasons, which I've said many times on the show, I don't want to do that. I don't like having that stuff at the front of the show. And I also want you to know that. These are authentic conversations with real people. And these are just our opinions, but our opinions are not being skewed by sponsors or advertising dollars. I think that's a pretty

[01:14:05] **John Heiney:** toxic business model. So I hope you dig that. You can support us. If you go to cloudbasedmayhem.com, you can find the places to support. You can do it through patreon.com forward slash [cloudbasedmayhem](https://cloudbasedmayhem.com). If you want a recurring subscription, you can also do that directly through the website. We've tried to make it really easy and that will give you access to all the bonus material, a little videocast. We do an extra little nuggets that we find in conversations that don't make it into the main show, but we feel like you should hear. We don't put any of that behind a paywall. If you can't afford to support us, then just let me know. And I'll set you up with an account. Of course, that'll be lifetime. And

[01:14:43] **Gavin McClurg:** hopefully you're being in a position someday to be able to support us, but you'll find all that on the website. All of you who have supported us or even joined our newsletter

[01:14:53] **John Heiney:** or bought cloud-based mayhem merchandise, t-shirts or hats or anything, you should be all set up. You should have an account and you should be able to access all that bonus material now. Thank you so much for listening. I really appreciate your support and we'll see you on the next show. Thank

[01:15:07] **Gavin McClurg:** you.