

“Supine Jim”, A Laid-Back Pilot

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If you go flying at Sylmar, you might notice that one guy hangs lower and looks more comfortable than the others. That would be Robert James Heaton, AKA “Supine Jim”. I think that the youngsters into rap would admire Jim because he sits as they do in their cars; recumbent, but not recalcitrant.

Jim is a mellow and friendly retired machinist who has been flying hang gliders for 36 years. In addition to his passion for the airports trilogy of hang gliding, triking, and land sailing, Jim is an avid astronomer who builds his own telescopes, and plays guitar, stand-up bass and piano. He is interested in physics, quantum mechanics, rock-climbing and hiking.

Recently, I asked Jim these questions:

JH: Why have you continued to fly so long?

SJ: Well, I really enjoy it. It’s fun. Every year or two they come out with new gliders that can do things the old ones couldn’t, so you can get higher. The progress in performance has always kept it new and fun.



Robert James "Supine Jim" Heaton at the Sylmar LZ in 2009



Jim on the Sunbird Nova at Point Fermin, Oct, 1979

JH: How old are you?

SJ: 70

JH: Where were you born?

SJ: Washington DC

JH: Where do you live?

SJ: Sylmar

JH: Where did you first fly hang gliders?

SJ: Delta Hill. It was one of Bill Bennett’s places southwest of Palmdale.

JH: Who was your instructor?

SJ: Bob Velzy. He worked for Bill Bennett.

JH: Have you had any serious injuries?

SJ: I sprained my ankle pretty good once.

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JH: Why do you fly supine?

SJ: When I first got into it there were guys flying either seated or prone. I kinda liked the idea of seated better because the prone guys would be up for two minutes and their shoulders were all red. A guy would be up for 3 minutes and his shoulders would be almost bloody.

After I had my first lesson I bought a Seagull III that had a seat sewn to the cross spars. I started flying that way and when the supine harness came out I tried it and liked it. I have been flying that way ever since. Once you learn one way and get used to it, well I just stayed with it.

JH: What gliders have you flown in your career?

SJ: Seagull III, Seagull V, Sunbird Strato, Super Strato, Sunbird Nova, Harrier, Sport, Super Sport, HP-AT, Saturn, CSX. I am flying the Sport right now. It's a 21 year-old glider, but it's a lot of fun. (laughs)

JH: Have you done any cross country flying?

SJ: When I first started flying, if you flew more than twice your glider's glide ratio it was considered cross country. I flew from what we called Cottonwood Lakes. They call it Horseshoe Meadow now. I flew to the airport which is about ten miles, so that was my first cross country.



Jim launching Ant Hill in Bakersfield CA in 1995 on the HP-AT, photo courtesy M. French

JH: When did you first fly Horseshoe Meadow?

SJ: 1974. We might have pioneered it. I tried to get people to fly there, but they were flying from Cerro Gordo on the other side. Rome Dodson flew 48 miles. Then Trip Mellinger flew fifty-some miles. Then Jerry Katz flew 104 miles. So, I couldn't get anybody over on the other side.

I said, man, you can launch at Nine o'clock and fly down-range. If you can get high enough you could go across, and finally Larry Tudor did just that. It's funny. One person flies 200 miles and everybody wants to fly that place now.

JH: Do you know how many hours you have?

SJ: No. I never kept a logbook.

JH: What is your philosophy of Life?

SJ: My Dad used to say "You live and learn, and die and forget it all". With me, It's kinda like you live and learn and I am forgetting it all before I die. (laughs)

JH: Do you have a most memorable flight?

SJ: I was flying with Joey Fresquez a few years ago at Funston where we got above the clouds in a shear. We were up about 1200 feet and the clouds were at about 600 feet. The sun was shining through the clouds down at launch. We flew an hour or two. It was just beautiful.

I can't really pick one out. Every time I go flying it's great, almost.



Jim flying the Nova at Point Fermin in San Pedro CA, Nov, 1979

JH: Do you have a favorite flying site?

SJ: There we go again. I like Avenue "S", I like Funston, I like Kagel here, Avenue "L"...no real favorite one.

JH: What launch sites did you fly in the early days that are not accessible today?

SJ: Salt Creek is one. I like that place first-day-post-frontal. I had my first five-hour flight there. Point Fermin, I've flown 400 hours at Fermin, you can't fly there anymore. There's a lot of places that have been built on, or they made it illegal or some darn thing or another. Probably half of the places I've flown in the past, you can't fly anymore.

JH: If you could change anything in your life, what would you change?

SJ: I had trouble with drugs and alcohol, that's past now. I've been clean and sober for eighteen years. That cost me a lot financially and every other way. I wish I'd had more knowledge about it, so I wouldn't have done that.

JH: When did you first fly at Sylmar?

SJ: About thirty-five years ago. I followed a guy up to the "1500", and he set up behind me. He said "you're first". I said "where is the landing?" He said "you will see it when you get out there". I asked him "if I'm too high, where do I go to get down?" He said "you see that red spot?" I said "Oh, OK".

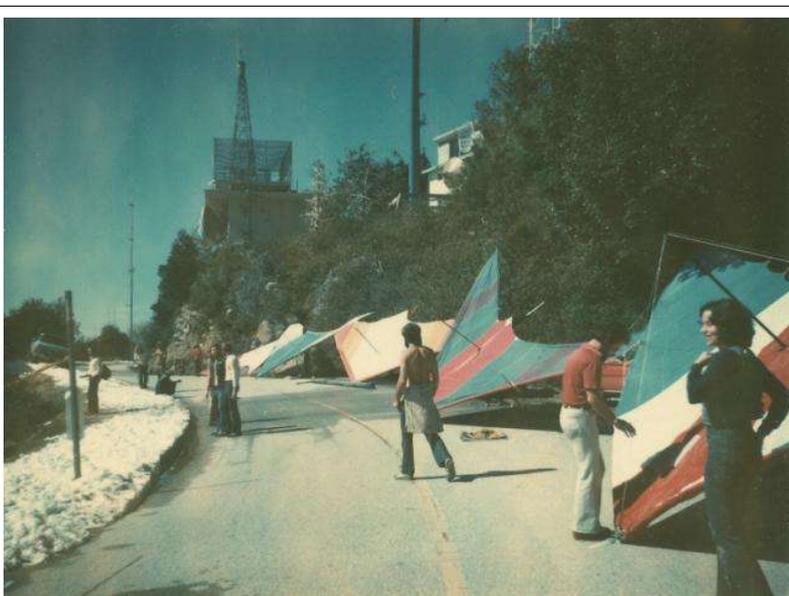
I took off and I was way high. I had never done a 360. I flew over the red spot and I started going up. I thought "this is not good". So I did my first 360 about a quarter mile in diameter and it got me low enough to make a few S-turns and I landed. We were landing at the head of Polk Street at that time. So that was my first time here, probably about 1973.

JH: Do you remember anyone who was flying here then?

SJ: Trip Mellinger, Crazy George, Jack Franklin who always had a van out there with cold water for everyone when we landed.



Jim on the Sunbird Nova at Point Fermin, Nov, 1979



Jim and friends setting up at Mount Wilson after a snow in March 1979

JH: What does hang gliding mean to you?

SJ: It is almost like a therapy. I know when I haven't been flying for a couple of weeks...I want to go flying. When you take off and get in the air, whatever is bothering you, it's gone. It's a 3-dimensional thing. It wakes up certain parts of your mind that you don't normally use much.

It carries over for several days. I go flying Saturday and Sunday, and Monday and Tuesday I am still flying Saturday and Sunday in my mind. Wednesday is the turn-around day, and then Thursday and Friday I am looking at the weather to see where I am going to fly Saturday.

I have other things that I do now, so it isn't quite so predominant as it was.



Jim soaring the low ridge to the north of Playa del Rey.

JH: What do you do for a living?

SJ: Well, right now I am trying to be retired. I have been a machinist. I write programs for CNC mills and then machine the parts. I do some design on Autocad.

JH: Have you ever won a contest?

SJ: I did fairly well once in a bomb drop/spot-landing contest. I finished fifth behind Danny Black and ahead of Joe Greblo and Rich Grigsby in sixth and seventh. (smiles)

JH: What is the best thing that has ever happened to you?

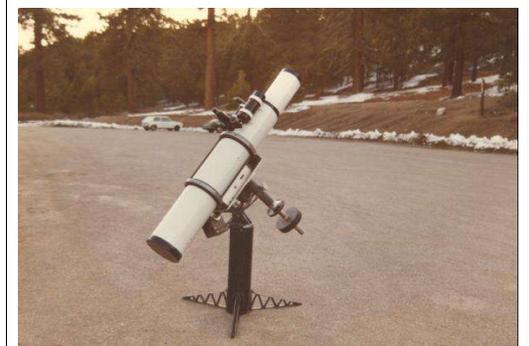
SJ: Getting away from the alcohol and drugs. That was pretty hopeless and depressing, and I didn't know how I was going to get out of it.

JH: What is the worst?

SJ: Drugs and alcohol.

JH: What is the most rewarding thing you have ever done?

SJ: Building the telescope, designing and building things at work.



Jim's home-made reflecting telescope on Mount Pinos, April 7, 1984

JH: What is the wildest thing that has happened to you while flying?

SJ: One time I was flying Pine Flats. On launch I looked to the right and it was snow. I looked to the left and it was rain. I looked straight out in front and I didn't know what it was. It was kinda half way between the two. I thought I could either wait for it to pass and fly later, or I could fly now and try to get on down before it hit. I decided to try to beat it, and I took off and it was hail!

I was just trying to stay underneath the glider. I didn't care if I landed two miles short or in a tree, I just wanted to get on the ground. I was flying a Seagull III and I was thrown every which way. In those days there were no parachutes. I was sitting on a plastic swing seat with a car seatbelt (that used to pop loose) holding me to it. When I got down to about 500 feet it smoothed out. That was scary.

JH: What is the craziest thing you have ever witnessed in hang gliding?

SJ: There was one accident at Pine Flats again. He flew out and one wing came off and flapped up on top of the other wing and he did a maple leaf spin all the way into the ground. We had to move 'cause he was coming down on top of us. It knocked him out. Andy Jackson ran over there and stuck his finger in his mouth 'cause he was choking on his tongue and he bit him. The guy was OK the next day, but that was pretty wild. He had swaged his own cables and had done it wrong.

One time I was flying Parker with "Powerline Mike". I usually landed on top, so he decided to land on top. He came in and the wind caught him and he did a 3/4 loop wingover kinda thing and crashed down behind launch. He hiked back up and did a couple of hand-springs and a one and a half twisting brandy, and he said "Well, I guess I'm OK." So he didn't get hurt, but he wiped the glider out.

Al Wadill was taking some guys to Yosemite and asked me if I wanted to go. He had some students who needed to make three flights off a 3000 ft launch before they could fly Yosemite. I took him to Mt. Lukens and they did that. Al was doing ratings and he asked me what rating I wanted, a three or a four. I said "gimme a four", so he gave me a four. I guess they figured if you were flying three years and were still alive you must be an advanced pilot. I've never taken any tests or anything. I've been a Hang IV since 75 when they started the rating system.



Jim's HP-AT