

Celebrating the flying 'birdmen'

By Alexandra Baird dailypilot@latimes.com
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NEWPORT BEACH — With aircraft made of little more than bamboo and plastic sheets, a ragtag group of aerial adventurers threw themselves off a hilltop here on May 23, 1971, launching what became known as the birth of the hang gliding renaissance.

About a dozen people gathered at San Miguel Park on Monday to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Otto Lilienthal birthday meet, named in honor of a 19th-century German aviation pioneer.

Although hang gliding had evolved since the 1800s, organizer and Newport Beach resident Frank Colver said the 1971 event sparked a worldwide explosion in the growth of the sport. It started when Jack Lambie, a Long Beach schoolteacher, worked with his class to build the Hang Loose.

When the class took the plane to a nearby hill, the story goes, some of the students took off with it. Soon, Lambie and his homemade glider drew media attention. He started mailing out plans for the Hang Loose, which cost less than \$25 to make, and he corresponded with other aviation enthusiasts.

Joe Faust, then editor of Low and Slow magazine, helped plan the Otto Lilienthal meet with Lambie and others.

"It's very exhilarating just to leave the ground," Faust said about his early gliding experiences. "You run, and all of a sudden you're not on the ground anymore. You never forget those first moments." Faust now lives in Los Angeles and edits the online magazine Hang Glider. He said the sport is an addiction and a love for some.

One of those is Bob Trampenau, who lived in upstate New York when the meet took place. When he received in the mail one of Lambie's original plans for the Hang Loose in 1971, he went for it, spending the summer building one with his friends.

"The spirit of hang gliding really got to me," Trampenau said.

Four years later, he moved to California and started Seedwings, the hang gliding company he still runs out of Santa Barbara.

"This meeting was the beginning of it and it was the most popularized," Trampenau said. "It was the seed, but the movement was springing up almost simultaneously across the country."

The Lilienthal meet became part of history when writer Russell Hawkes wrote an article about the event, which was published in National Geographic. The Los Angeles Times also featured the story on its front page on May 24, 1971, reporting that 500 spectators flocked to the hill to watch the "birdmen" fly.

Some of the small group involved went on to found the Southern California Hang Gliding Assn., which became the United States Hang Gliding and Paragliding Assn.

Although hang gliding today is a well-known and relatively safe sport, back then the culture was free-spirited, rowdy and full of trial and error, participants said.

Ken Privitt, now a San Diego engineer, flew the Swing Low, a glider he and his pilot father had made in the den of their house.

A friend flew Swing Low first, and it crashed "spectacularly," Privitt said.

They picked up the glider and glued it back together. His father gave it a try, then Privitt himself flew the craft. He was 15.

After a series of crashes and repairs, they symbolically renamed the glider the Phoenix.

"The saying was, 'Don't fly any higher than you're prepared to fall,'" Privitt said, recalling the mistakes and lessons of the day.

The area where those initial flights took place is now almost entirely covered by housing development, and many of the original hang gliders are now gone — but that didn't stop some of them from reuniting Monday to look at memorabilia and catch up.

A group of people involved in the hang gliding community also presented Colver with an engraved marker acknowledging the 1971 date as the start of the worldwide sport of hang gliding. Colver said the group hopes to present the marker to Newport Beach city officials and have it displayed permanently near where the launches took place.

<https://youtu.be/t-XC0dxeYs>