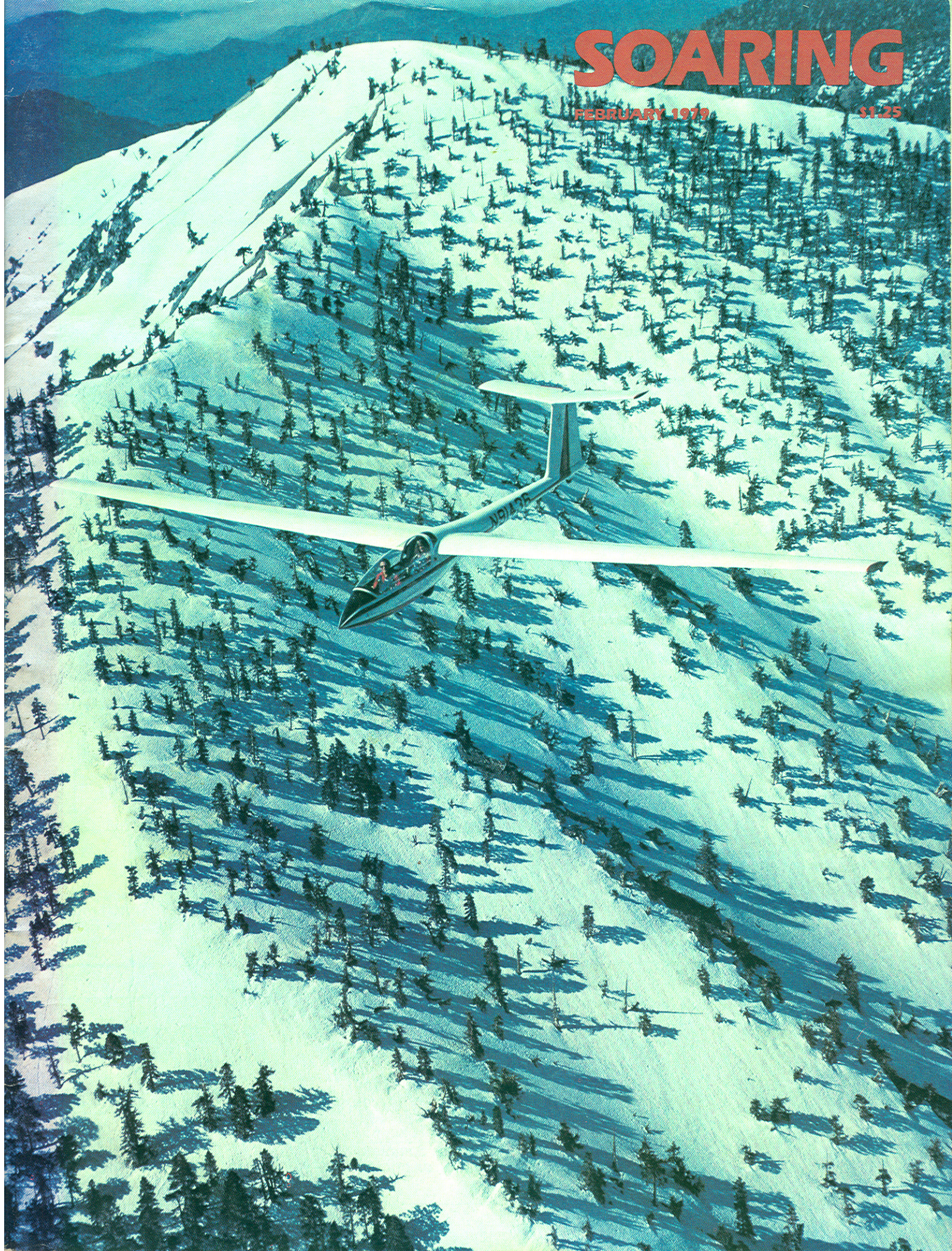


SOARING

FEBRUARY 1979

\$1.25



by JIM GEORGE

Illustration by Rudy Obrero

TWO LONG



When the late Jim George wrote "My Secret Andes Flight," he was writing fiction. Quite a few readers mistook his fiction for fact. But when he wrote his Lincoln Award-winning "Two Final Glides" — this time let there be no mistake — he was dipping into the past to recount two very real incidents in his life. Then, early last summer, a tragic third final glide ended Jim's life when his AS-W 12 spun into a grain field. To be sure, "Two Long Final Glides" is an adventure yarn. But when the tales are told and the reader ponders what he has read, there comes the awareness that here is a man who achieved that special relationship with sky and aircraft we all seek. The story is reprinted as a testament to the spirit of Jim George, airman.

FINAL GLIDES



THE KLAXON HORN ROARED its signal to scramble; a fast start of the jet engines and a rolling takeoff down the metal-planking runway at K-13, Suwon, Korea. The date — July 1952. My mission — to lead a flight of four F-86E *Sabres* to intercept MIG 15's attacking our F-84 fighter bombers on the Yalu River dividing North Korea and Red China.

"Vector 330 angles 33 Bandit tracks from Antung."

From our ground control stations I was being given climb instructions while making ess turns to allow my flight to join up. We were to climb to 33,000 feet on a heading of 330 degrees and could expect interception by MIG's climbing south out of their Chinese sanctuary, Antung airfield, just across the Yalu River.

RODRIGO

Test-firing our 6-50 cal machine guns as we crossed the front lines, we climbed higher and higher.

"Buzzard lead, you're conning," my wingman called.

"Roger," I answered.

That is what I wanted to hear. I used a trick told me by Jim Jabara; I signaled my wingman to drop down with me to 2500 feet below and 5000 feet wide of my element. There I could be covered from above and behind and, in turn, protect my element (Sabres numbers 3 & 4). The secret was to put your high element just below the condensation level where jet exhaust turns to trailing white clouds — con trails. Thus, any attackers from above would have to penetrate the condensation layer and we could pick them up easily. It took the Chinese a long time to figure that one out.

. . . SLOWLY THE TOW SHIP PULLED my Diamant up to the 2000-ft. release altitude. Wagging his wing was the signal to release. I then glided over to the only thermal near the start gate. There, 49 other sailplanes circled in weak lift trying to get high enough to make their starts. It was the third day of the 39th U.S. Soaring Championships at Minden, Nevada, 1972. The task was a 189-mile triangle from Minden to Air Sailing gliderport to Schurz to Minden.

Very slowly, each ship would climb up to start-gate altitude, make a slow start, and return to the same thermal. Looking off to the north on course, I saw a small cumulus building up east of Mt. Rose right over Reno. This was unusual for the time of day and I knew it was time to start! Most others were holding back for better conditions, but the strategy of a few would pay off.

By the time I had reached the area north of Virginia City, the build-up had become a high thunderstorm and covered the entire northern first leg. Those behind would never make it through. I was flying just below the thunderstorm, making good time, when suddenly the lift stopped. . . .

CRUISING AT 350 KNOTS and using the basic flight tactics that Baron von Richthofen used some 35 years earlier, we search the sky seeking our prey: the finest Russian fighter, the MIG 15. Suddenly, "Buzzard leader . . . Bogies 4 o'clock high. . . ." "Buzzard flight — Cadillac!" is my immediate response.

In a flash, four sets of 120-gallon external fuel tanks are jettisoned, falling away like eight huge bombs. (Since each F-86 carries two external wing tanks and they cost the taxpayer about the same price as a Cadillac, there could be no better code word for dropping them.) These tanks will end up as roofs, walls, bathtubs — you name it — all for the residents of North Korea.

Now I pick them up: a flight of six MIG's diving down on my top element. Breaking hard to their right as the MIG leader starts to fire, my element escapes their firing pass. As usual, the MIG's won't

stay around to fight. They just scream past, knowing they can out-dive us.

Now the MIG's pick up me and my wingman. This is what I want. Waiting until they are nearly in firing range, my wingman calls,

"Buzzard leader, break hard right."

Instinctively, I haul hard over and put 5 g's on my ship, pulling up at the same time. Large basketball-size fire balls come floating by me — the MIG leader is pumping his 20mm cannon fire into my proximity. As I pull up into a tight climbing turn, it causes the two MIG's to overshoot and pull out in front and below me. He has made a fatal mistake. My tactics have worked. A hard, high-g barrel roll over the top puts me right on their tails. . . .

. . . THE THUNDERSTORM BLOWOFF IS KILLING ALL LIFT for miles. No choice but to glide toward the turnpoint. I sink lower and lower. Suddenly, a sunny spot appears about ten miles ahead. That should provide a thermal. Arriving with 700 feet, I have not seen one of the other 52 contestants. As I start to turn in a weak thermal, I am suddenly joined by four other sailplanes, all diving for my flashing wings. I have the only thermal around.

Climbing away and into the turnpoint, things improve. Now I am far downwind of the storm and into clear air. Others behind me are in trouble. Repeated radio calls come for crews to get to assorted fields and pick up their pilot. They have made their mistakes.

Halfway down the next leg, I see a sailplane circling right on course. Using this marker, I speed up and before long join Dick Schreder who is flying his AS-W 17. Looking beyond the next turnpoint and back toward Minden, I can see a line of thunderstorms built up between me and the finish line. . . .

NOW I HAVE A GOOD LOOK at the guy who is trying to kill me. The MIG 15 is painted a brilliant purple on the upper surfaces of the little fighter. Red stars mark the wings and fuselage.

Diving straight for the Yalu River and his hoped-for sanctuary, the MIG leader and his wingman try evasive maneuvers to shake us off.

"Buzzard leader, you're clear," calls my wingman.

Now I can concentrate on closing and tracking. Every turn the MIG's make gives me an advantage, as I cut him off in the turn and close the gap.

My radar gun sight is showing a lock-on at 2800-ft. range, but then it breaks lock and ranges out. Again a series of twisting turns by the MIG's. The #2 MIG pilot must be a newcomer. He is way out of position and not doing his leader any good. I get another lock-on. I am able to track for a few seconds and fire. I can see the tracers going behind the wingman. The sound of the machine guns must panic him. He snap rolls under and starts an uncontrolled spin out of the flight.

Another turn of the MIG leader. I close to 1500 feet. Another break lock by the radar gunsight. The damn thing is unreliable! I turn off the radar function and go to a fixed sight. Now I am on equal terms with Richthofen. Just old duck-hunting

windage. Pull lead and fire . . . only at 450 knots. Tracers go over his wing — too much lead. Ease off. Now flecks of silver flashes peck at the purple wings. Pieces start ripping off the MIG. Doesn't take much to spoil the configuration of a wing at .9 Mach. Suddenly, the MIG canopy flashes by my left wingtip . . . there is a hard inside snap roll. The purple machine disintegrates.

"Buzzard leader — I got bingo minus 4."

Bad news. My wingman is letting me know he is 400 pounds of fuel below our safe get-home fuel reserve.

. . . THE DIAMANT CLIMBS BY SCHREDER and on into the second turnpoint. Suddenly, a speedy Libelle comes into my thermal with a high-speed chandelle. I glimpse the 7V embellished on its tail — Ray Gimme (the future champion) has joined me. I make the final turn and head home. Ray flies a little ahead of me, driving hard in hopes of losing me. The thunderstorm is now blocking our direct course to the finish gate. 7V thinks he can lose me by pulling up into the bottom edge of the clouds. Might as well use old Ray, so I tuck the Diamant 15 feet directly behind and below the Libelle, using Ray as an artificial horizon. I fly instruments on him, knowing he will not turn and will just stay on course. It's dark inside the cloud, but there is enough light to keep glued to 7V's empennage.

We break out of the cloud and Ray still does not know I am just behind him. But now it tells — we are on a 50-mile final glide with a solid line of rain showers and the Pine Nut Mountains between us and the finish line. . . .

CLIMBING BACK UP TO 30,000 FEET and heading south toward home base, my wingman and I begin to sweat the fuel. We have 200 miles to go. I have 600 pounds of fuel showing. That's the amount we are supposed to have when we enter the landing pattern at K-13. Even with the prevailing tailwinds, we won't make it. Leveling out, we throttle back until rpm is near idle. This gives us minimum flow, but is below safe tail pipe temperature.

Now the long final glide home has started. . . . Perhaps I can shut down and dead-stick it to a lower altitude and then restart the engine. It's been done before. But that's gambling that the engine won't seize. If that happens — that's all she wrote. No, it's better to chance a dead stick at a lower altitude when the fuel runs out.

Groundspeed is looking good. We head down the coast, starting a gradual descent from 125 miles out. In case we have to bail out, our Navy could pick us up. But as we cross the large fleet of U.S. vessels, black puffs of smoke appear below us. Anti-aircraft fire! Those damn Navy gunners are firing at us. All swept-wing fighters look the same to them. They can't tell an F-86 from an MIG!

. . . NOW RAY GIMMEY DROPS HIS NOSE and speeds up to 85 knots to keep on his glide slope. Here is where my Diamant falls away. Gimme's well-watered Libelle has too much L/D for me and I fall lower and behind his flight path. Looking up ahead, I see I will just barely clear the Pine Nut Mountain Range. Ray has 1000 feet on me when we run into a rain shower. Beads of rain form on my wings and my sink rate is doubled. Down, down I go. The mountains have risen to intercept my glide slope when a sudden break in the showers allows me to spot a saddleback notch to right of course.

No choice. I dive for it and just scrape across the top of a small meadow, scattering a herd of wild mustang. Overhead I catch sight of 7V. He has cleared the ridge with a high margin and is steaming toward the finish line 14 miles away.

I find myself in drier air — and zero sink. New hope. Slowing down, I start a white-knuckle glide toward the finish line at Douglas County Airport. Lower and lower I sink . . . a little zoom, a little essing here and there . . . the ground gets closer and closer . . . Now I'm down to 800 feet and two miles out. Thank God there are no obstacles enroute, because, I couldn't clear them . . . A bubble of zero sink helps me cross the final approach threshold with 25 feet. . . .

My speed is slow and the finish line is 3000 feet away. Can I make it? I ride ground effect for all it's worth. Finally, not being able to hold off any longer, I touch down. The Diamant rolls on and on.

Fifty feet to go. There is Joyce waiting to catch my wing. And she does as I just cross the line under my own energy.

Turns out we have beaten Gimme by .5 mph and clocked 66.0 mph to take third place. . . .

THIRTY MILES OFF I CAN SEE K-13, Suwon airfield. Down to 90 pounds of fuel. I sweat. How can I explain the loss of two ships in exchange for two MIG's? I press on, angling to set up a straight-in approach. Ease back on the power — got to leave the wingman something to play with. . . . Hold the gear, no flaps, get the most out of the glide. . . . Fuel, 40 lbs. Field clear. Two miles out, 1500 feet. . . . I can just barely make it if she keeps running. I call my wingman.

"Buzzard Two, we will make a formation landing. Tighten up."

I call the tower.

"K-13 Tower. Two for a straight-in. Low on fuel. Gear down and locked."

We made it. A perfect touchdown and rollout. The planking under our wheels sounded good as we rolled toward the taxi turnoff, just clearing the runway. Flame out!

Some pilots fly by faith; others by fear!



("Two Long Final Glides" first appeared in ARIZONA AIR CURRENTS. — Ed.)