

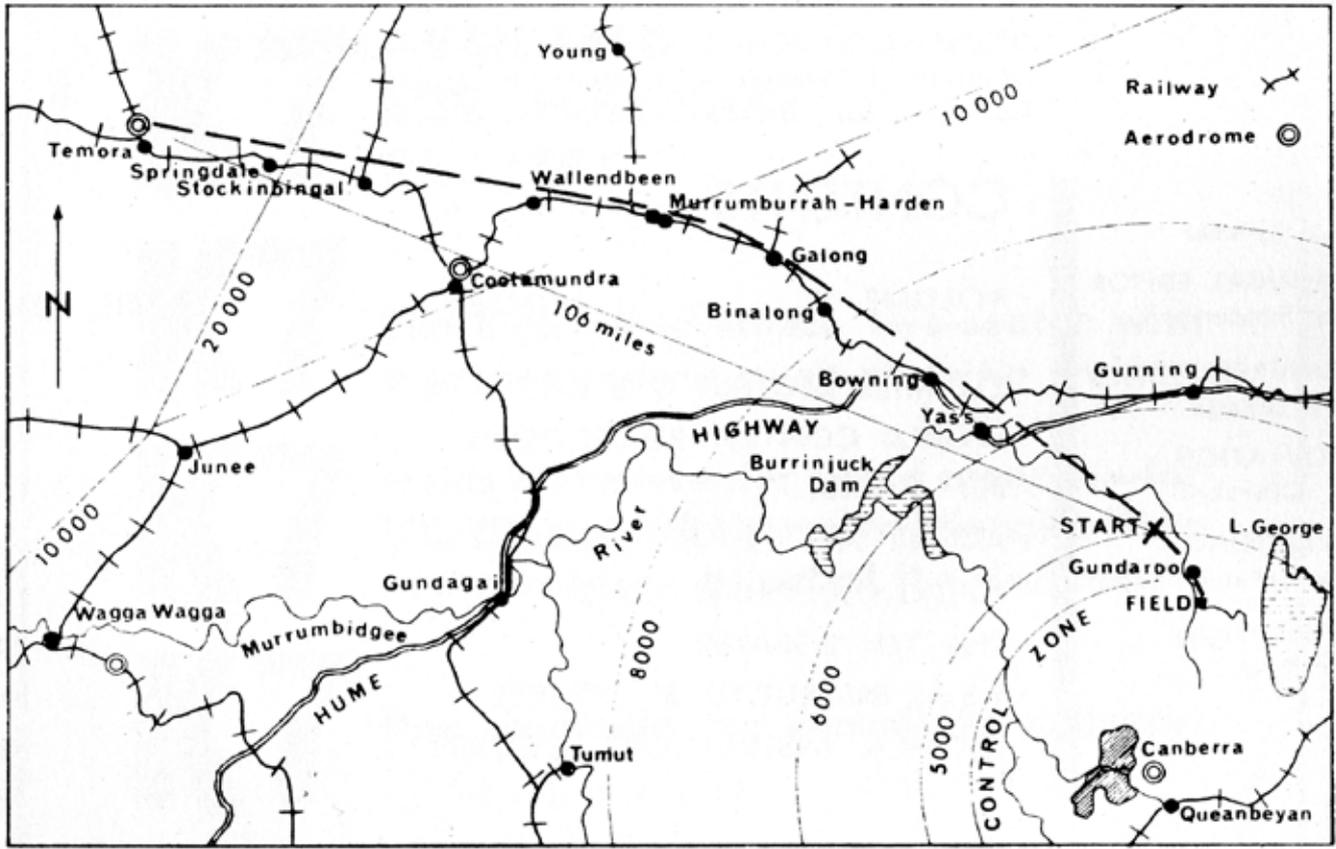
Soaring Australian Thermals

The Collected Papers of
Garry Speight
from 1966 to 2015



212 Mile Record O & R

By John White



This first article was written by my friend and co-pilot, John White. I contributed the map and barograph trace.

Originally published in Australian Gliding, April 1966

When Garry Speight rang to ask if I would be interested in a cross-country flight as co-pilot in the Canberra Long-wing Kookaburra it didn't take me long to say yes. That evening, Friday January 15th, saw us poring over maps, looking at the list of Australian gliding records, and making sure that we would have all the necessary materials and launching crew.

We had to take into account the special difficulties in getting away from the club's field at Gundaroo. We are four miles inside the Canberra Control Zone and would have to begin by flying northwards to get clear of it, and once out we would not be allowed back in. Immediately outside the zone, landing fields are scarce, the only really satisfactory escape route being down the river to Yass.

Even on this route we would be restricted by the stepped base of the Control area which is 6000 ft. above sea level as far as Yass, giving us 4000 ft. of clearance above the valley floor. However, we are pretty well accustomed to flying under a specified low ceiling, and thought we might manage to get away, especially as Rupert Brown and Heinz Tietz had managed a 159-mile flight two weeks before. A light northerly was forecast, so we planned to head for Benalla for the 2-seater distance and goal record.

Saturday morning proved to be hot, with temperatures in the eighties at breakfast time. The forecast was now moderate north to northwest winds, which would make the trip to Yass more difficult. Furthermore, a front was coming up from Melbourne and was bound to beat us to Benalla. An out-and-return seemed to be indicated.

The record book said 86 miles; Temora aerodrome was about 100 miles and in line with the escape route, so we declared it, making sure

212 Mile Record O & R

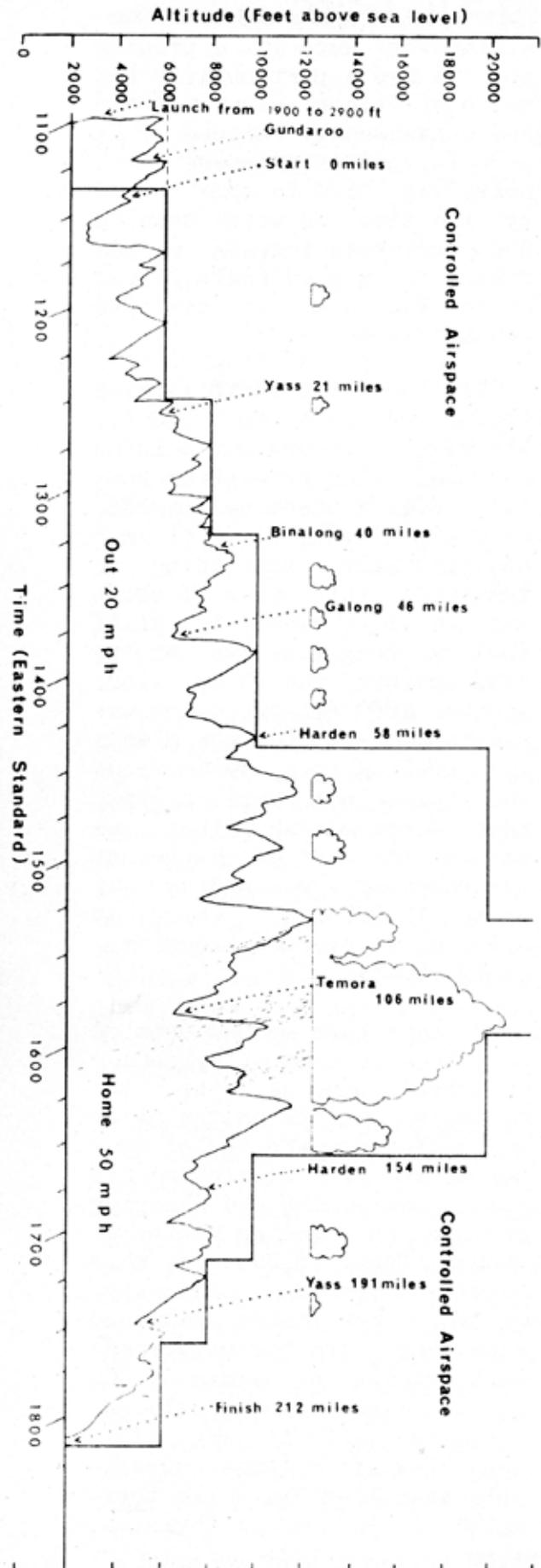
that we also declared a point at the edge of the control zone as start and finish.

By 10.30 we had the glider on the strip complete with tie down kit, lunches, jerseys and maps. The barograph was installed and we had both checked that it was running. Air Traffic Control gave us a special clearance to 6000 ft. within the control zone and after a few frustrating delays, we were launched straight into a thermal at 11:05 a.m.

A climb rate of 500 ft./min reassured us and we quickly found ourselves up to our 6000 ft. limit. It was certainly disappointing to have to break off the climb with cloud base still several thousand feet above us. Anyway, we had soon made up the distance we had drifted back while thermalling, and were making ground towards Temora. Two more thermals took us out of the control zone and then we hit a flat spot. Fields suitable for a landing were at a premium and we had a particularly bad patch of 'tiger' country ahead and consequently needed that 6000 ft. before crossing it. Lift was hard to come by and by the time we were down to 2000 ft. above terrain we had picked out a good field, hoping of course not to make its acquaintance.

Still no lift worth talking about and down to 700 ft. above the ground but holding our own. Then by working some lift over a burnt out paddock we changed this to 50 ft./min up, gradually increasing to ten times this rate of climb and we were clear. It still took a long time to get to Yass against the 15 mph wind. Another 2000 ft. of height was available here but the clouds were still a long way above us and it was not until 2.30pm, near Murrumburrah, that we passed the last of the height restrictions and wound our way up to 12,000 ft. Later, at 3.30 pm, we reached cloud-base at 12,400 ft.

By this time we had settled down to a routine of half-hour 'watches', handing over the controls exactly on the hour and half-hour, the 'idle' member of the crew stretching his legs, navigating and keeping an eye on landing fields although from



212 Mile Record O & R

12,000 ft. this hardly seemed necessary. Weather conditions remained excellent with thermals regularly giving us a steady 800 ft./min and one memorable one a steady 1200 ft. min. (This was bliss after those unspeakable so-called "Waikerie thermals" I endured at Christmas time...G.S.).

Once, at over 12,000 ft., we met an eagle, but we soon lost sight of him and didn't see whether he flew into the cloud or not. We were quite warm in our shirts and shorts, so I don't think the temperature could have been much below 60. The clouds were building up though and we were rudely shaken out of our routine by the sound of a machine gun going off just in front – actually it was a light shower of hail but it certainly came as a surprise.

About this time we decided to spend a bit of time below 10,000 ft. in case we were getting too little oxygen and with this end in view flew straight through a couple of thermals. Rate of sink was fairly high but this was no surprise considering the booming thermals we were getting. One bonus was that at 12,000 ft. our I.A.S. of 70mph became a T.A.S. of around 90mph.

And so to Temora; down to 7000ft. to get good photographs (the name fortunately being written on the hangar roof). Then up again to cloud base and set course for home. It seemed we were now in a frontal zone, for the wind was southerly and Cu-Nims were developing above us with rain pouring out of them in patches so we diverted round them to miss the worst of it. Our hopes of actually getting back the 106 miles to Gundaroo were fairly dim as it had taken five hours to get to Temora and it was 4 o'clock by this time. Anyway we pressed on, finding long spells of zero sink alongside the Cu-Nims and all the thermals we wanted.

We were soon back in the westerly wind and the first fifty miles home were covered in fifty minutes. By 5:30 Yass was underneath us, but there were no more cumulus clouds ahead to mark the thermals, and the towering frontal clouds behind were casting a great shadow that seemed certain to kill the lift we needed for the last twenty miles. In addition we were back inside the circles around Canberra control zone and had to leave our lofty position and descend to more mundane altitudes. Ten miles to go and a thermal as smooth as silk from a hillside facing the setting sun and I knew we had it made. And so it proved.

We arrived over our finishing point just north of Gundaroo and had plenty of time to pick out the best of the available fields. In to land, swerve a little to miss a sheep, and silence.

Outside it was still over 90 and we found out later that Canberra has had its hottest day for years – just topping the century. It was 7 hours since take-off. We climbed out rather stiff-legged and while Garry pegged the Kookaburra down, I telephoned in from the nearby homestead. After the retrieve crew arrived there came the job of getting the Kookaburra to pieces and trailering it back to our field. After that the barograph had to be unsealed by an official observer, then there was time for a long cool drink and finally, at midnight, something to eat.

It was not until after the flight that we found out that we need not have gone nearly so far to beat the existing Australian record of 86 miles. We had mistakenly understood this to be the one way mileage whereas, of course, it represents the round trip mileage and we were in the happy position of more than doubling the existing record, setting the peg at 212 miles, subject to official ratification.