

Pikes Peak Soaring Society History By Milt Woodham

The early days:

When I came to Colorado Springs in 1974, there were only a few people flying R/C sailplanes, Jack Dech, Duane Thomas, Bill Tuttle, and one other person whom I do not remember. The only model airplane club in town was the Pikes Peak R/C club (PPRC), a power oriented club with no sailplane interest. By necessity, all of us were members of that club, and a couple of us are still members today.

A few years later, sometime in the late 1970s, John Read and a few other sailplane flyers came to town so our group grew a bit. There were enough of us that we could usurp a day at the PPRC flying field and hog the frequency pins and the sky. Remember, those were the days of 72 MHz radios and frequency control. Sailplane fliers hogging the field and sky with our long duration soaring flights did not sit well with many of the power flyers. It rapidly became apparent that sailplanes and the power planes could not comfortably share the same space in the sky, the same club, or even the same flying field. Something had to change if R/C soaring was to survive, and sailplanes were the minority group.

PPSS birth:

In January 1979 John Read gathered a group together in Jack Dech's basement and formed Pikes Peak Soaring Society. There were 8 people at that meeting; John Read, Jerry Murphy, Jack Dech, Duane Thomas, Frank Burnette, Chris Pollard, Mel Gray, and me. Four of those people are still PPSS members, some doing more flying than others. John Read became the first PPSS president. All of the founding members had technical backgrounds, from test engineers on space programs, to aircraft designers, to computer design engineers, to a retired Air Force Colonel.

By the end of that first year, PPSS membership had grown to 20. In the ensuing years membership continued to grow, at one point reaching about 75, and in 2020 stands at about 50.

The PPSS club motto was and still is "Relaxed R/C Soaring in the Rockies". Our goal was to fly for the fun of it. It is after all a hobby.

Soaring Competitions:

PPSS holds a monthly soaring competition contest to foster the sport and to encourage everyone to get out and enjoy the weather, the people, and the fun of soaring. Remember our motto, and if it's not fun, we shouldn't be doing it.

PPSS quickly developed a competition with Rocky Mountain Soaring Association in Denver that continues to this day. We hold a yearly contest between the two clubs called "The Challenge

Cup". RMSA had and still has some world class flyers and PPSS has been pretty consistently outflown and defeated. We have some very good flyers, but we were flying against a slightly better and competitively minded bunch of flyers. I believe that PPSS has only won the yearly contest twice.

One of our traditional contests, held each year just before Thanksgiving, is called the Turkey Shoot. It is a very simple format contest consisting of multiple rounds of 2 minute precision flights with precision landing. For most of its history, the contest CD was Jerry Murphy, a PPSS founding member. The contest was so-named because the prizes are bottles of Wild Turkey whisky, bottle size starting at very small and increasing in size depending upon the contestant's place in the scoring. And of course, no drinking and flying permitted. The Drunken Wieners that became part of the tradition were a recipe from my aunt and they became a popular snack at the contest. Various people tried to vary the recipe, but nothing was ever quite as good as the original (IMHO).

Another of our traditional contests is the so-called Night Fly. This was begun by a long time member, now deceased, named Frank Deis. He originally called the contest "the Howling Coyote" for obvious reasons. Flying sailplanes at night sounds a bit on the insane side, but with lights on board the sailplane it is a fun event. In the beginning people would strap chemical lights onto their sailplanes and fly them. In later years we began to use LEDs mounted inside the airplanes and the airplanes became electric motor gliders to make launching easier in the dark.

League of Silent Flight (LSF):

In all our years as a soaring club, several of us have managed to attain LSF Level IV. Only two PPSS members have ever attained LSF Level V ranking, a long ago member named Mike Hickman and a current member Mike Fritz. Pilot age, declining interest, and lack of suitable contests make it extremely unlikely that more of us now will ever attain Level V.

Many Flying Fields:

After PPSS was formed we moved to other flying field(s), and over the ensuing years we have flown on all sorts of fields at many locations. Our best field was the Bookers Sod Farm east of town on Judge Orr Road. We lost access to that field due to someone outside our club using the sod farm and house as a photography site. I never knew all the details or who the culprits were.

After a number of years and several good fields along the way, John Read managed to gain us permission to return to Bookers Sod Farm. We fly many kinds of electrically powered models there now, and are not restricted to sailplanes.

Among our flying fields was the Boy Scout Ranch near Elbert. John Read had negotiated a deal with the Boy Scouts allowing us access to their lake for floatplane flying. We held a yearly Delta Dart building session at the Boy Scout Jamboree until this year when the Covid-19 virus crisis hit and brought everything to a halt. At this point we no longer have access to the Boy Scout lake, so floatplane flying has died, as has the Delta Dart building program. Hopefully this is not a permanent stop to those activities. The Boy Scouts enjoyed the Delta Darts program very much, and the PPSS members enjoyed floatplane flying, it was a win-win situation.

PPSS Today:

While the club is still largely R/C sailplane oriented, the club has gotten increasingly involved in electrically powered models of all types. Electric motor gliders have become increasingly popular as some of our members (like me) age and can no longer chase a tow line or comfortably use a winch for launching a glider.

The aforementioned Challenge Cup was changed to a 2-meter RES for the 2019 contest and became a postal contest in 2020 due to the virus crisis. Although PPSS won this contest in 2019 the club managed to field only 3 fliers in 2020, and was beaten by the 5 fliers fielded by RMSA.

In the beginning all of our members had technical backgrounds as mentioned before. Today, 41 years later, we have a somewhat broader spectrum of experience in the club. We have/had commercial airline pilots, an Air Force tanker captain, an entrepreneur who produced one of the first commercial multichannel radio systems, a high altitude physicist, a retired Air Force GPS system engineer, a hobby shop owner, and a retired college educator.

Other club activities:

It has been suggested, only partly in jest that we change the name of the club to in some way acknowledge the fact that we like to eat. A group of members always gets together at a local eatery prior to our monthly meetings, and then the same group also visits that local eatery after the meeting. Quite often after a day's flying session a group will find some place to go eat. So maybe the name PPSS should also include the letter "E" for "Eating". Given some of the conversations, perhaps we should also include the letters "BS" in the club title.

Finally:

In the last couple years the Federal Aviation Administration has introduced the idea of controlling model RC aviation, perhaps at the behest of corporations interested in adding drone traffic to low altitude airspace. The Academy of Model Aeronautics has been acting as the advocate for our hobby and to date no unworkable restrictions have been imposed.

In early 2020 the virus crisis put a halt to the eating activities as well as our club meetings. The club continues its flying activity on an informal basis whenever the weather permits and has taken to monthly Zoom meetings to keep its members in touch. Club members, being ever optimistic, view this as a temporary situation and have taken some of the extra time to build new sailplanes for the future.