The LSF Story

By Scott Christensen, LSF 001

(Written in 1988, and submitted by Bob Steele, President of the LSF.)

A special thanks go to Barry Kurath who, having recently achieved Level V, started the dialog and did much of the footwork that brought the "LSF Story" to light. Special thanks also go to Bob Steele, John Vennerholm, and Cal Posthuma for all their hard work and dedication to the L.S.F.
Judy & Jerry Slates, *R/C Soaring Digest*

Genesis

Soaring, as an activity within the R/C community, in the mid to late 60's, was very interesting. Believe it or not, R/C soaring had been around a long time up to that point, but had never really "caught on". There was probably soaring activity going on in a lot of areas of the U.S., as well as Europe, but this activity tended to be fairly low key and was reported in the magazines only sporadically.

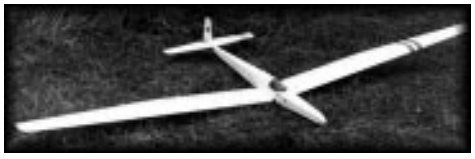
However, designs were being developed, contests were being held, and this momentum of activity was beginning to be reported on in the magazines. Fortunately, for the as yet to be formed LSF, some well-placed individuals were taking an active interest in R/C soaring, and were in a position to report on this activity in the modeling press. Two of these individuals were Jerry Nelson and Ken Willard. As fate would have it, these two gentlemen would later play an important role in getting the LSF into national prominence, and keeping it there for a reasonable amount of incubation time.

I had lived in and around the San Francisco Bay Area since my discharge from the Air Force in 1965. At that time, I moved to San Jose and started my new job with Fairchild Semiconductor in Mountain View. Geographically, all of the lower San Francisco Bay communities were close to each other and it was possible to meet people from all of these areas at a single flying site. Flying sites for R/C thermal duration sailplanes per se, did not exist. What you had to do was find a site that was far enough away from other, powered R/C activity, so as not to create a conflict of any kind. Fortunately, there was just such a site in San Jose: Del Mar High School. It was at this site, in 1967, that I met and flew with Duane Hyer, Keith Brewster, and Le Gray. The four of us had a lot in common in terms of model aircraft backgrounds, but most importantly, we got along very well and quickly became good friends. There were several other "Del Mar regulars" who, along with the four of us, gathered every weekend to fly.

Most designs being flown in those days were scratch-built, due to the fact that there just was not much available commercially. It came down to the Kurwi (a great airplane) and some imported kits, primarily Wik, that flew OK, but were

Earl with "Snipe I".

"Pell's Belle", 10' span, 800 sq. in., 54 oz.



"Lowisa", 8' span, 670 sq. in., 33 oz.

Photography on this page submitted by Earl Pell, Connecticut, depicts early East Coast sailplane interest and aircraft design, around the winter/spring of 1968.

Earl Pell with Myndair Products Slingsby "Dart" 15 (The Rock).

Bob Belger and "Foka".

Bud Pell with modified "Kestrel", January 1969.

Electric winch, level wind and all.

not all that easy to build. In short, it was a time of heavy design activity, essentially no classes of models, and very embryonic-type contests.

During this time, at the Del Mar High School site, we were busy "making-up" and flying our own contests. We even had our own winch. In those days, the winch was located directly upwind of the pilot, 300 to 400 yards away, and was operated by a fellow who "stood winch duty" through one complete rotation of the pilots present. He was then replaced by the next guy in rotation, and so forth. The winch was a simple 6-volt affair, using a car starter motor and a homemade take-in drum with heavy phenolic sides. Most significantly, there was no turn-around; the winch and its operator were very remote from the pilot, and all start/stop signals to the operator were relayed by flags, waved by yet a third individual, who stood near the pilot! If the turn-around system had been invented, this bit of technology had not yet made it to the Bay Area. Compounding all of these launch procedures and requirements was the fact that we were all completely convinced that the safest way to get a sailplane into the air was with an R.O.G. launch!

The contests themselves consisted of literally staying up the longest and landing the airplane back on the same field. Your time started when your hand let go of the model, and stopped when the model touched the ground. (Yes, your time on the winch, during launch, counted in your flight time.) I can recall even doing a few rudimentary "cross-country" type contests, where you launched your model, were given some period of time to find lift, and then declared your proposed flight distance from the field. So, say you launched your model, a few minutes later found some lift (always a total surprise), started climbing and, at the end of, say, five minutes asked to declare your distance. You looked at your model's altitude, figured you could safely get a half mile away and still get back, so declared "1/2 mile". You were led over to the back of someone's grungy pick-up truck, deposited in the back, and the driver took off, using the odometer to determine the intended 1/2 mile. This was more than often done without any regard to wind direction or pilot-related input. Once the driver was 1/2 mile away, he stopped the vehicle, stepped out, and became the witness to the outward bound aircraft actually passing overhead. Another variation was to see who could fly the most "laps" between the winch location and the pilot himself.

In all of this, we placed little, if any, emphasis on landings, other than stipulating that the pilot had to land on the same field he took off from. The flying part of these contests had a kind of "sameness" to them, and it was not very long before we all were searching for another aspect to the flight that would be: a) prototypical, and b) easily judged or measured. This quickly ruled out aerobatics (too subjective and not necessarily prototypical), limbo (Believe it or not, this was tried but, only once, with disastrous results.), and speed (This seemed like a good idea, until it was explained to people, at which time we figured there would be maybe two people who might try it.). Somebody, I honestly don't remember who, came up with a "scale runway landing", which would be the conclusion to each contestant's flight. This thing was laid out with two parallel lines, 12' apart, which were the "edges" of the runway. The length of these lines was about 20'. At first, all that was required of the pilot was to land his airplane,

Photography taken in Marin county, Northern California at a North Bay Soaring Society contest held in 1969.

Ken Willard, the 'ol professor, is making a few last minute adjustments to one fine performing Delgavilan mod. with Eppler airfoil.

Scott Christenson launches the beautiful Plyonius.

Sam Crawford, Steve Martin, and Les Anderson taking advantage of a big lift on the hill. On a clear day with wind, you can physically fly out of sight; the ocean is just 4 miles away.

Hart Jewel shows a little of that ol form, as he launches his Francis Cirrus, a fine performer for both slope and flatland.

(L) Joe Corr and his beautiful Schweizer 232 weighing 3 lb.

"LSF is all about goals. Setting them and doing what you must to meet them. It makes you a better flier. Every goal seems very hard, until you do it, and then it becomes easy. You may fall short a few times before you make it. This builds soaring character."

Cal Posthuma, LSF 2997, Level V

right side up, inside of this 12' X 20' rectangle. If he did this, he'd be awarded another 30 seconds to his flight score. This whole idea proved both popular and a challenge, because all of these airplanes had a wheel on the bottom for the required R.O.G. take-offs! Well, it didn't take long for virtually everyone to learn how to land in this box, and we were just about back to square one.

Then, one day, a great and simple truth struck us when one of us took off our flying hat, threw it onto the grass, and announced, "For a quarter, I'll hit that hat!" Someone yelled, "You're on," and literally put a quarter into the hat. The pilot didn't hit the hat, but the nose of his model came to rest within 6" of it! A great landing by anyone's standards. I remember every flyer at the field standing there looking at the hat, the quarter, and the nose of that airplane. I don't think anyone said a thing for a full minute. What we had just seen was the birth (to the best of our knowledge) of the "spot landing". Funny how things evolve though, because what really occurred to all of us, when we viewed this scene, was a way to GAMBLE with our models! You guessed it! That hat (or, "spot") was quickly filled with the pilot's ante, and the money was awarded at the end of each round to the guy who came the closest with the nose of the model. Word spread quickly, and now, instead of the usual 9 to 12 contestants we expected for our contests, we were looking at 20 to 25 people every Saturday! This aspect of our contests had really put fresh spark in the pilots because, besides being fun (and it was), spot landings could be lucrative. Competition became intense; money, regardless of the amount, does that, and the amount of money in the hat quickly escalated. I recall completely cleaning the entire nose off of one of my sailplanes when I struck a hat filled with $22.75 in quarters! Clearly, things had gotten out of hand.

I think that eventually it was Le Gray who suggested that the "quarter thing", as he called it, had taken a bad turn, and that perhaps, we should do away with it, but keep the spot as a landing goal. This, coming from Le, was quite a concession, because he still much preferred the more prototypical runway type landings which, he felt were more in keeping with full-scale soaring techniques. To understand this point of view, you had to understand Le. Le took all of this very seriously, and to that end, designed gorgeous scale-like R/C sailplanes that were complete with well-done pilot busts, and always equipped with wheels. Many of these designs were published, and you may remember names such as Wind Dancer from the dim past. At any rate, he never cared that much for the spot landing concept, but never denied its usefulness as a learning tool and its popularity in contest situations.

There is one other aspect to R/C soaring back then that should be addressed, because it had a direct bearing on the eventual formation of the LSF. It was commonly believed and accepted, that any R/C sailplane design could and would work with equal success on both the slope and off the winch. On the surface, this belief should not surprise too many people because, as most of us know, you can toss almost any thermal duration type model off of a reasonable slope, and fly it quite successfully - no big deal. But, R/C aircraft designed specifically for slope soaring had not yet come down the road as an accepted type of model. Therefore, at least in those days, and in that area, airplanes that were slope-oriented only tended to be viewed as quite limited. Unless you don't know, all of that changed, and changed fairly quickly.

All of the fore-going (and much, much more) takes us happily into the fall of 1968, and soon-to-be-founded League of Silent Flight.

Formation of the League of Silent Flight

The summer and fall of 1968 proved to be a very busy time for R/C sailplane enthusiasts. At the Del Mar site, alone, contests could be enjoyed every week-

Fernando Ramos holding Phoebus. Photo taken in 1969 at the (then) Harbor Slope Soaring site, Southern California. Mr. Ramos is known for his scale, free flight activities and, at the time of this writing, was the scale, free flight columnist for *Model Builder*.

Les Taylor's beautiful Schweizer, competitive in both thermal and slope events, caught in a R.O.G. winch launch sequence. Model kitted by Les' company, Fliteglass Models. Taken in 1969 at North Bay Soaring Society contest.

Duane Hyer, one of the founders of the L.S.F. and artist who designed the L.S.F. logo. Taken in 1968 at Milpitas foothills in Northern California, plane is Original Design with heavy free flight influence.

"This LSF Accomplishment Program has been incredibly helpful for me. It motivated me to set goals, improve my skills and equipment, and take the chances necessary to win contests under tough conditions. I encourage EVERY soaring pilot to get started on Level 1 the very next time you go out flying, and keep pushing yourself until you finish 5. The rewards are huge!"

Barry Kurath, LSF 5790, Level V

end. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Bay, in Livermore, Jerry Nelson was working with sailplane pilots in his area, and they too were holding a series of experimental contests. The interest in this type of flying was running high and Jerry, rightfully, foresaw the need for the AMA to become involved in terms of formulating National rules and, simply, recognition of the activity by the AMA. Since he was a member of the District X AMA Contest Board Committee, he was in a good position to press the issue. To this end, he set-up a Special Interest Group, called the National Radio Control Soaring Society, or NRCSS.

Jerry held a contest at his father's ranch location in Livermore, California, on the weekend of August 17 - 18, and it was at this time that the formation of the NRCSS was announced and memberships were solicited. Membership was $5.00 and the promise was that NRCSS would represent R/C soaring to the AMA, and get the activity recognized. Jerry, along with Dale Willoughby and Hans Weiss, would act as temporary officers. Dale Willoughby, who was editor of *Zephyr*, a publication devoted to only R/C soaring, volunteered this magazine to be the "voice of the NRCSS". All of this went over quite well, and I recall virtually everyone joining on the spot. Soon, general publication of the formation of the NRCSS took place in not only the *Zephyr*, but in more recognizable magazines, like *Model Airplane News*. It was not very long before the fledgling NRCSS was "monied" and had a reasonable membership.

During this same summer and fall period of time, Le Gray, Duane Myer, Keith Brewster, and myself began some serious talks about an R/C soaring program, of sorts, that would approximate full-scale soaring's Flight Achievement Program. This very successful program worked within and throughout the full-scale soaring community and, in essence, memorialized an individual's achievements in soaring, against a given set of criteria. This program could be actively pursued by anyone, regardless of club affiliation, etc. It awarded diamonds for each phase or level of achievement, and was generally referred to as the "Diamond Program". The most important aspect of such a program, we all felt, was the recognition of the individual. This meant, to us, that anyone, anywhere, regardless of club affiliation, country of origin, etc., could reap benefits from participating in such a program. What were these benefits? In order of importance, I think we saw these as: 1) becoming a better pilot through participation, 2) being recognized for achieving a given level of accomplishments, and 3) being a member of an organization which sought only better piloting, instead of endless funding. There was a kind of simple truth in all of this that really appealed to us. We, as a group, set out to come up with such a program.

Most of our meetings took place at Le Gray's apartment in Sunnyvale. He was the only one who was not married and so the timing of those meetings was much easier. We met a lot of times during the fall of '68, and finally, in December, we'd hammered out the original five levels of what we called the SOARING ACCOMPLISHMENT PROGRAM. A great deal of thought went into these levels, because we wanted both a "doable" program, as well as a challenging program. We wanted one level of achievement to give the participant a true level of accomplishment and to also pave the way for participation in the next, even more challenging, level. An interesting sidelight to all of this was the fact that from a purely technical standpoint, we did not think that equipment existed, at that time, to complete the two higher levels! But, we felt that if the program really had merit and was to be truly challenging, individuals would force their abilities and talents into these technical areas to achieve these levels. Further, we felt that the fall-out of some of these technical achievements would have a direct benefit to R/C soaring in general. Lastly, we wanted these levels of accomplishment to create a true pyramid of membership. In other words, those people with the will to do so would be able to make it to the top, but there would be darned few of them. The goal was to set a standard of excellence that was so high that when you ran into a Level V pilot, you had automatic respect

A very young Scott Christensen at an early NRCSS contest, Livermore, California, Nelson Hummingbird Haven ranch, around early 1968. The airplane is a Keith Brewster design called the "T-Halfback".

Ralph Dodsworth, Saskatoon, Saskatchawan, Canada, 1968, L.S.F.'s first foreign member, holding "Bong Boomer".

"It seems that once someone completes a difficult task, others become encouraged to try and that is the real spirit of modeling. So for those of you who still look forward to your eight-hour flight, or any other task, perhaps some of the things I have shared with you may help you prepare for that day when you climb a mountain somewhere and throw your favorite bird off into another world."

John Vennerholm, LSF 1291, Level V

"I have been in the LSF for about 1.5 years and am currently a level 2. I like the LSF because it gives me a way of measuring my growth as a pilot."

Jon Stone

for both him and his abilities, not only as a pilot, but as a person. Looking back over the years, I'd have to say that the program did precisely what it initially set out to do.

All four of us were at a place in our lives where we each had something to give to the program. It turns out that each of these things were critical to getting the program off the ground and keeping it there.

Le Gray worked for United Technology Corp., in Sunnyvale. Le's job was all about technical writing, contractual, I believe. This, plus Le's abiding love of full-scale, as well as R/C soaring, gave him the tools needed to finalize verbiage needed for the L.S.F.'s Soaring Accomplishment Program. At our various meetings, Le would take copious notes on everything said, and would then have these formalized for our next session, and so forth. Le was also a gentle "guider" of those meetings, always keeping us working towards the goal of creating both the organization, as well as the program.

Keith Brewster was a rugged individualist, with definite ideas on how things should be done, and who should do them. He was not wealthy, but had some money, could be counted to "kick-in" now and then when we needed something. He loved R/C sailplanes, and even opened a hobby shop in Sunnyvale devoted to nothing but R/C sailplanes. He came up with his own designs and even kitted a couple of them. He, like the rest of us, liked to compete.

Duane Hyer was the artist. He was employed at Sylvania in Mountain View as a graphic artist. It is Duane who came up with the now famous L.S.F. logo. Duane was also an artist when it came to modeling and I recall that every single model that he came up with was so outstanding in workmanship that they put everything else to shame! Duane was the quiet type, and never interested that much in competition. But, he did participate and enter every contest that we ever held. Duane was the perfect team-player and, without him, I'm sure that the L.S.F. would not have become the organization that it eventually would.

I worked for Fairchild Semiconductor and was, at the time, in charge of all of their Marketing Services distribution programs: mailing, printing, collation, etc. I was, in short, good at organizing and distributing paperwork. I also could type 75 wpm, and this eventually proved an asset. Working with other people at Fairchild, I was able to come up with our letterhead, envelopes, and membership cards which, I always felt, made us look professional and "for real".

Once all of the various elements came together, and we had the ability to at least look like a real organization, we made a PR mailing to virtually every magazine, magazine columnist, soaring oriented individuals, and anyone else who we thought might be interested. The League of Silent Flight became a reality with that mailing.

The mailing announcing the formation of the L.S.F. took place in January of 1969. Locally, of course, we passed out information to anyone who wanted it. In the meantime, a whole bunch of us, myself included, set out to achieve Level I of the program. Since the League's first mailing address was my house, I was going to be able to see if the mailing produced any results. Boy, did it ever! We received a slew of what we called "letters of intent", and each of these was personally answered by me, neatly typewritten on L.S.F. letterhead, with a Level I form included. We were really paranoid in those days about doing everything "just so" in order to look as professional as possible. I really think that it paid off in terms of people's belief in us as a viable organization.

In the meantime, I was fortunate in completing my Level I form rather quickly, and becoming the first legitimate L.S.F. "member", complete with the issuance

"One aspect of soaring that people in the less soarhead populated areas miss out on is the person to person relations. However, LSF doesn't allow this. You have to get a credible witness out there to sign off on your accomplishments. Typically, this will be another flier, and invariably, they are going to give advice, tell their own stories, and simply exchange with you. If they aren't fliers, they are likely to be interested in the hobby, since it would be tough to get someone who's not interested to trudge out to the middle of a field, or onto a precarious cliff, to watch you fly a 5 minute flight. Or worse, watch as you inch closer to that 10 foot landing, as each time the smallest of wind gusts blows that trainer just outside the circle!"
"Personally, it's hard to coordinate mutual times to get out to the glider field. The accomplishments program encouraged me to do so, and I'm happy it did. The same goes for the competition flying. Sometimes its hard to realize how many glider fanatics are within a 3 hour drive of you. And once you meet them, you want to talk about everything you've learned or are trying to learn, but simultaneously beat them by 1000 points in the contest standings."

Adam Weston, LSF 7179

"LSF is one of the best programs we have in soaring. I'm surprised more clubs don't get people involved through LSF task days, especially to get aspirants through the first 2 levels."

"Out at ISS (before it was ISS), we used to hold a contest for anyone who had sent in their documents for Level I. That way they could have their first contest right at home. It only took 5 people to qualify for a Level II contest and we'd make up little trophies from wood scraps and stencils and give them a name. The TRCGC was our first (Tony Read Commemorative Glider Contest). Followed by the Tall Paul (for Paul Trist), the GNATS (Gary's New At This) and others. Each one had a small trophy for the new Level I pilot, so no matter how it came out there was a little something for them. Seemed to help break the ice and overcome the trepidation that sometimes comes with starting out in contest flying."

Dave Register

of the first-ever membership card (which I still have)! I bought a yellow poplin jacket just for this occasion, and this was taken to a bowling trophy store, where a custom L.S.F. back patch and shoulder patch were made and sewn in place. I still have this jacket, and look at it from time to time, still amazed that we could have pulled this thing off, without even having patches to mail out or anything like that! All of that came later.

Le Gray acted as the first "president" of the L.S.F., the other guys did what they could, and I acted as the first "secretary". 1969 was the first real year for the L.S.F., and there were no elected officers, only volunteers. What a year it was for mail! I handled, as I recall, the first 200 aspirants, in terms of letter writing, phone calls, etc. I remember when we got our first "foreign" aspirant, a fella from Saskatoon, Canada. Man, we'd gone international! R/C soaring enthusiasts literally came out of the woodwork; it seems that the program hit a real nerve and was producing results. Things were cooking right along, except it was becoming quickly clear that money was going to be an issue. Believe me, no one was getting paid, as that was totally out of the question! No, we needed funds for more letterhead, cards, etc., plus funds for patches and other allied goodies for the membership.

Right about this time, mid '69, we got a real break. At yet another contest, held by the NRCSS group in Livermore, Jerry Nelson made a post contest announcement. He said, in essence, that the membership of the NRCSS could be served much better by the L.S.F., and that he was recommending that all NRCSS support and funds be turned over to the League! He backed this up with the same statements in his March 1970 "Soaring" column in *RCM*. While the funding received was modest, it did put us in the black, again, and we were running to the point where the organization grew sufficiently to allow elections and some real management.

The rest of the L.S.F. story is history, successful history. I think that the League did a lot for a lot of individuals, without asking for money. It gave, continues to give, real goals and achievements to soaring pilots around the world and proved, to me at least, that the only way to get something accomplished is to do it yourself, be it flying or creating a viable organization, Did it really work? To get that answer, I'd suggest talking with the latest pilot to achieve Level V, or the latest pilot to achieve Level I; the sense of satisfaction and belief in the program should be similar in both cases.

Reference material

Model Airplane News, Dec. 1968, "Silent R/C Flight Whispers", by Bill Northrop
RCM, September, 1969, "Sunday Flier", by Ken Willard
RCM, January 1970, "Soaring", by Jerry Nelson
RCM, March 1970, "Soaring", by Jerry Nelson

"As to LSF stories, planned attempts to do thermal tasks always failed. Success came when least expected. One summer evening, circling a few feet above telephone poles over a paved intersection, I unexpectedly remained aloft over a half hour for Level 3. After trying all one year for the Level 4 hour task, and after a few flights of 3 minutes or so one cold morning the end of October, I figured flying for the year was finished and went home. Shortly after lunch the fellow I'd been flying with banged on my door announcing there was now lift all over where we'd been and to go for the elusive hour flight. The air was dead, it was gray overcast, frost still on the ground on the shady side of buildings. I launched, headed out over an adjacent cemetery and stayed up an hour, probably never getting more than about 300 feet high. I can understand the continuous lift rising over the hot intersection, but can't figure that one at all. I've never been able to repeat either experience in the same spots."

Harley Michaelis, LSF 023