

A Few Tarantula Facts

by Larry Fleming

The Tarantulas are a group of hang glider pilots who first met and became good friends while flying the Owens Valley during the late 1980's. Rick Devlin was unanimously chosen Tarantula leader because of his ability to organize and other qualities. Many new members have been added over the years. The group continues to fly together each year; sometimes at other places around the western US, but they usually fly at their birthplace; the Owens in July.

While talking informally about having a group name, Larry Fleming, a founding member, suggested "The Tarantulas". Since a Tarantula is a desert animal and somewhat unusual looking, the name seemed to fit. The Tarantula name was first introduced to the world at the "Hot Ditch" a natural desert hot spring south of Bishop, California, where locals and visitors gather to soak in the evenings. Larry had forgotten his under-wear at the spring and had returned down a dusty path to find the hot-pool filled with a rough and tough motorcycle gang and their naked girls... also rough, tough, and rowdy! Larry made small talk by introducing himself and his group in a quivering, shaky voice, "Hi there, we're the Tarantulas. What's the name of your gang?" One of the girls insolently flicked Larry's under-wear into his face with her big toe as a reply.

The Tarantulas greet each other with their right hands making an up and down motion in front as if they were zipping up a harness. A couple of Tarantula mottos are; "Live to fly. Fly to die" and "It's not over until we say it's over."

The town of Gabbs, Nevada is our adopted home, because the high school mascot there is a Tarantula. All Tarantulas are obligated to fly to Gabbs once during their life-time. The group gives each new Tarantula a nick-name, based on some comment or action he has said or done. No Tarantula likes their name. They just learn to live with it, because second attempts usually end up creating much worse names.

Below is a list of Tarantula nick-names.

Rick "Mumbles" Devlin is difficult to understand on the radio; he mumbles. Rick is our leader.

Larry "Lo Lo" Fleming often flies between 6,000 and 10,000 feet, which is low in the Owens.

Don "Donut" Burns has a very high wing-loading.

Steve "Skippy" Chevront once had a stretched-out landing run that looked like skipping.

Paul "Short Rib" Clayton once returned to his landing spot (2-hour trip) to find his lost batten.

Tony "Blinker" Barbarite likes to follow roads exactly.

Jim "Gizmo" Okamoto can repair any glider with tape, knife, empty soda can, or string.

Ralf "Goggles" Mueller keeps losing his glasses and is challenged in translating what he has lost.

Steve "Jackass" Rodrigues once mistakenly reported that he had landed in Jackass Flats.

Zack "Zippy-dee-do-dah" Majors already came with a name, but we altered it to Tarantula standards.

"Meat" often looks like dead meat in 100-degree heat after waiting for retrieval.

"Porno" is a shortened version of this pilot's real last name.

"Squinty" has very thick glasses and often flies deep into challenging areas as if he were blind.

"Rim Rider" likes to fly deep, along the rim of the Sierra Nevada mountains

"Flounder" tends to wander around in the air, like a flopping fish.

"Cinderella" was so happy on his first trip to the Owens, that it was like a fairytale for him. "Two-Stroke" is noisy and talks often and fast, like the sound of a two-stroke engine.

"Beaver" came with his name. It just seemed to fit him.

“Cheater” flies a Millennium, sits comfortably reclined, and unfairly cruises long distances.

Our Tarantula distance leaders are;

Donut – Horseshoe to almost Austin, Nevada, 201 miles

Squinty - Horseshoe to beyond Gabbs, Nevada, 189 miles

Rim Rider – Horseshoe to beyond Gabbs, Nevada, 176 miles

Zippy-dee- do-dah – Piute to Mina, return to Piute, no retrieve needed, 144 miles

Although the Tarantulas are motivated to gather each year to fly long distance and many of them have often flown over 100-miles, there is also a bond of friendship, adventure, humor, and good times that is very important for this group. What seems to matter most at the end of the day is not flying 20 or 120 miles, but rather how high the reading was on our “fun-o-meters”.

Live to Fly

“Lo Lo”