

ARTS & LEISURE

FLYING ULTRALIGHTS / 21 AN IMPRESSIVE SOPRANO IN N.Y. DEBUT / 21

Riding on the back of a butterfly

For many, ultralights are fulfilling a longing to fly — but safety is key

By Berwyn Lewis

Vacaville, Calif.

Monday dawned foggy and freezing. Not the best day to take to the air in an ultralight and do "a little stick time," as Steve Brown, instructor at The Wright Solution here, phrased it.

"You'll know whether you're sold on it after the first flight," he said as we walked — no, lumbered — in our layers of padded ski clothes toward this recreational aircraft, which has been described as a dragonfly, a wasp, a bicycle, and the motorcycle of the air.

Extending his arm, Steve guided me over the web of wires, cables, and chrome tubing, the basic structure of the ultralight. The rainbow-colored dacron wings above me shed an eerie purple and orange light as I settled back, if one can be described as settling back on a butterfly.

"You mean this thing really flies?"

Steve handed me my helmet, fastened me into my harness, and strapped the altimeter onto my wrist. He explained that this ultralight (a Robertson B2 RD) had a capability of climbing to a maximum of 14,000 feet.

F-f-f-fourteen thous. . . my voice crackled back to me through the live intercom that Steve was sliding inside my helmet against my right ear.

Before I could ask where to hold on he was flicking the wooden propeller to life and 50 hp. roared back from the far side of the Perspex shield.

My feet, Steve had indicated, should stay on the ground, anchoring the craft so I didn't take off — by myself.

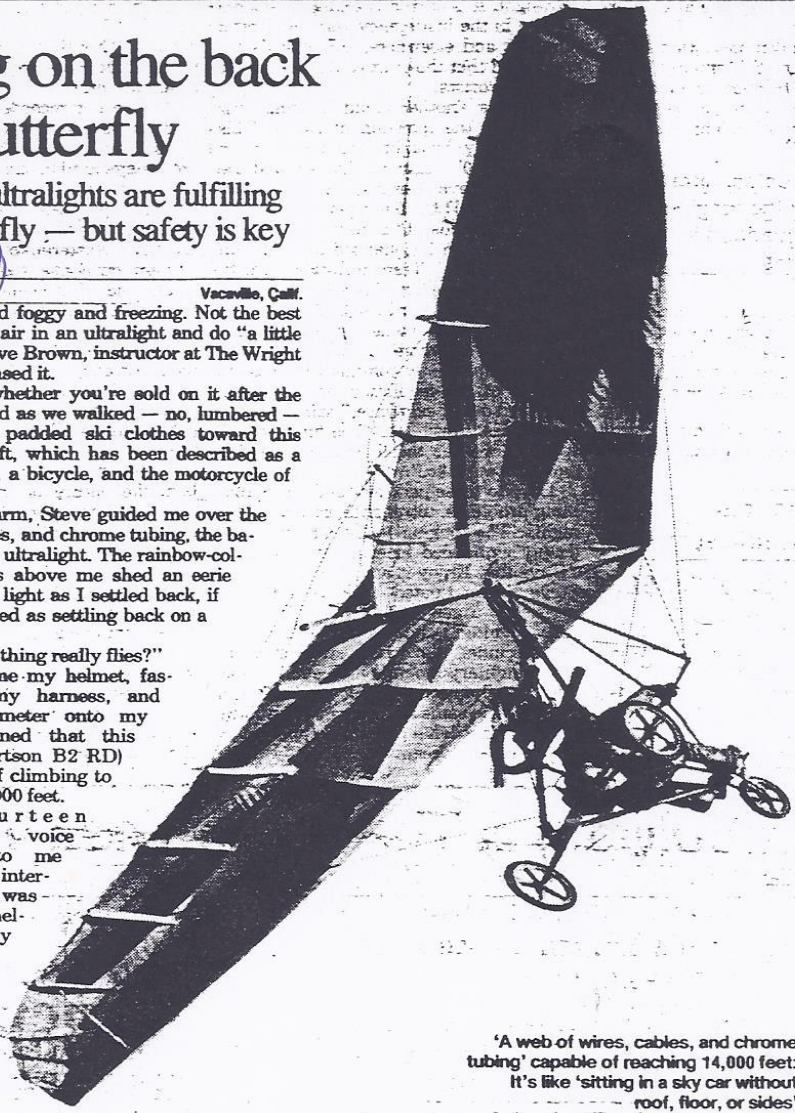
Seating himself on my left he gave the "lift off" signal. I placed my feet on the grid-style pedals in front of me and we taxied down the slightly bumpy field on soft wheels about the size of bicycle tires.

"There's the throttle, here's the control stick," said Steve. He turned and revved the engine and suddenly, five seconds later, we were airborne and climbing toward an altitude of 500 feet. . .

The air rushes past my right cheek, the ground spins slowly away, the horizon tilts, the rooftops shrink, and the white dots of sheep down below nuzzle the grass, totally indifferent to the waves of excitement rippling through my body.

There is nothing but empty space between my flapping ski pants and the treetops. It's like reliving a dream. Feelings of déjà vu and flashbacks tumble through my confused brain stirring atavistic memories of the longing to fly unaided by a machine. Here I am doing it — well, almost.

It defies the imagination and the birds, although it's not quite as agile. Ultralights are still in the infancy stage of their design and aerobatics are not encouraged because they tend to place too much stress on the structure.



'A web of wires, cables, and chrome tubing' capable of reaching 14,000 feet: It's like 'sitting in a sky car without roof, floor, or sides'

60 US companies manufacture this craft, which needs no runway for takeoff and no licenses for its pilots.

Unlike regular aircraft, ultralights are not subject to low altitude or slow-speed limitations. They are classified by the federal government as those that weigh no more than 254 pounds, travel no faster than 63 miles per hour, carry no more than five gallons of fuel, and have a stall speed that cannot be faster than 27 m.p.h.

LEISURE

"Flick the switch," calls Steve through the intercom. We stall and glide toward earth, making smooth contact with the ground. Steve taxis along on one wheel then suddenly he revs the engine and we're gaining altitude again.

Through my intercom I hear myself uttering strange yelps of excitement. Steve hears them and gives me a series of Errol Flynn eyebrow twitches and nods, indicating, "Yep, you're hooked."

Now I know what Wilbur and Orville Wright must have felt like that first day of flight above the sands near Kitty Hawk, N.C., on Dec. 17, 1903, in their 605-pound machine.

The real father of ultralights is Brazilian Alberto Santos-Dumont, who designed small dirigibles. In 1907 he built a miniature high-wing monoplane that weighed 243 pounds and traveled at 48 m.p.h on a two-cylinder, 20-hp. engine.

Flying of ultralights is banned from controlled air-

ON RECOMMENDATION