

Charles W Hilburn

Charles William Hilburn, Jr. was born in Lubbock, Texas on September 28, 1931 the son of Charles William Hilburn and Ruth Crownover. He died in the crash of an experimental glider at the Eagle Mountain National Guard Base in Tarrant County, Texas on June 16, 1956.

Charlie, as he was usually called, was a seeker of adventure all of his life. Born in a prosperous family in Fort Worth, he was never at a loss for finding ways to have a thrill. He took flying lessons at age 14 and soloed at 16. He was also an avid parachute jumper.

Out of high school he found a job at Chance Vought in Fort Worth as an electronic technician. He first attended a local college and transferred to the University of Texas as a Physics major in 1954. He graduated in 1956. The 1956 University of Texas yearbook, Cactus, gives his interests as Rodeo and the Speleological Society. It does not mention his interest in dare-devilry.

He and two friends took a trip to Mexico in 1955 to explore the jungle for rumored Mayan gold. The full story is told in The Mayan Gold Caper, an article in my book, so I will just give



Charlie and Arthur Carroll hacking their way through the jungle

a quick synopsis here. At that time there was no highway through the Mexican state of Chiapas. They planned to drive as far as they could, then take a train into the jungle where they would hack their way to where the gold was alleged to be. Inasmuch as this was a relatively lawless part of Mexico, they also decided to take along some firearms which were then (and still are) strictly illegal in Mexico. To this end, they carefully stashed them in the door panels of the car. While they were doing this, someone wrote in the dust on the trunk of the car, "Gun Runner." After the group had returned successfully and uneventfully it was notice that "Gun Runner" was still in the dust on the back of the car.

Charlie, as he was called, continued his parachute jumping while at UT. On one occasion he decided to dangle on a line under the airplane. Unfortunately the line snapped



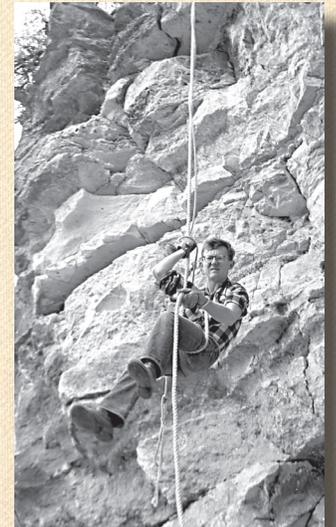
shortly after Charlie left the plane. He deployed his parachute but landed in a freshly plowed field and did some internal damage to himself. This necessitated the removal of his spleen. He claimed this was a good thing since he would



never have to have it removed again.

He also broke some ribs riding a bull during one of the Rodeo events he entered while at UT. Although I'm quite sure he suffered from it, he never complained.

He was an avid caver, and went on a number of trips during the 1954-1956 time frame. He also like to show others how to rappel down a cliff when new members of the speleology club were being trained at Zilker Park in the south part of Austin. On one occasion the pad used to protect one's rear end during rappelling slipped and Charlie got a painful burn on his bottom. None of these small "accidents" ever seemed to set him back.

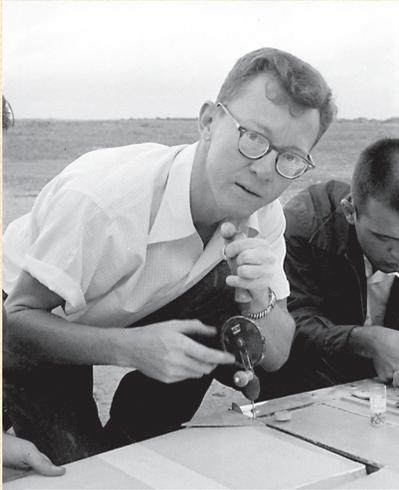


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His last major undertaking was to design and build a one man glider. He wanted to

show that it could be used by the military to allow parachutists to better control exactly when and where they would land. He and a friend, Jimmy Banks, were the principal driving engines, but

they were assisted in this enterprise by Don Goodson and several other friends. They tested the glider by towing it behind a car on a runway in Georgetown that was no longer in use. On one of the test runs, Charlie caught his fingers under the glider's skid and nearly lost them. He had to go to a hospital over that accident, too.



Don Goodson strapping Charlie to the glider



In spite of the clear and proximate dangers, Charlie decided on a full trial. He did this on Father's Day in June of 1956. He had himself towed to 5,000 feet behind an airplane before cutting loose. He made the correct maneuvers to line himself up with the runway at the National Guard Base near Fort Worth, when suddenly his glider dove to the ground and crashed. This time for Charlie it was fatal and the saga of Charlie came to an end.

Bob McClure

Asked about the design, Don (Goodson) reported, "Charlie copied that airfoil from a Navy delta wing jet that never went into production. The airfoil was not planar on the underside, it was slightly concave and had a slow takeoff speed, as it was designed for carrier use. But it also took a high takeoff angle of attack (and a lot of catapult and jet engine power) to get that lower speed take off. Charlie's design had that wing parallel to the ground just three or four inches off the deck. That is why we had to get up around 75 or 80 mph before it lifted off the ground ... with the wing loading it had with Charlie or Jimmy Banks on it. Once the nose got up a bit, bang!, it lifted off quickly since the wing loading was almost as low as that of a Piper Cub."

THE SUMMER TEXAN

AUSTIN, TEXAS, TUESDAY, JUNE 19, 1956

Glider Crash Fatal To Student Pilot

Services were held Monday afternoon in Fort Worth for Charles W. Hilburn Jr., senior engineering student, who plunged to his death Saturday, near Fort Worth testing his self-designed aircraft, known as "the world's smallest man-carrying glider."

Hilburn's father, prominent Fort Worth civic leader, watched as his son fell to the earth.



Photo by Koen Studio
CHARLES W. HILBURN

Hilburn's 50-pound motorless aircraft was towed to a height of about 5,000 feet by a tow-plane. Observers said Hilburn then cut loose and made two wide circles, seemingly lost control, and fell to the earth.

The father expressed belief that a sudden jolt may have caused the glider to function improperly in its maiden tow-flight. During the take-off, the craft rose to about six feet then jarred back to the runway but continued to be towed aloft.

The glider was designed and built by Hilburn and two friends in Austin this spring. He and Jimmy Banks of Malvern, Ark., also a University student, designed the glider after reading of a Frenchman who attempted "human flights" in a wing-like device.

They had hoped to sell the glider to the Air Force to be used in dropping troops behind enemy lines. The proposed advantage of the glider over parachutes was that it could be maneuvered to pinpoint landings.

The craft was made of plywood and aluminum fabric and had an eight-foot, ten-inch wing span. The pilot lay strapped across the top with his legs and head extended over the midjet wing. It was controlled by a lever similar to small-motored aircraft.

"He was seriously trying to develop a new craft," said Bob Gray, Houston Post reporter, who had spent much of Friday with Hilburn.

Hilburn had been flying since he was 14. He soloed when he was 16, and while at the University organized "The Flying Suiciders," a team of air daredevils who made college expense money by holding weekend air shows.

Hilburn had once climbed Mount Elbert, the nation's second tallest peak, and had ventured into Mexican jungles in quest of ancient Mayan temples. He worked during the summers at Chance Vought Aircraft in Fort Worth. He was an Air Force veteran of the Korean War.