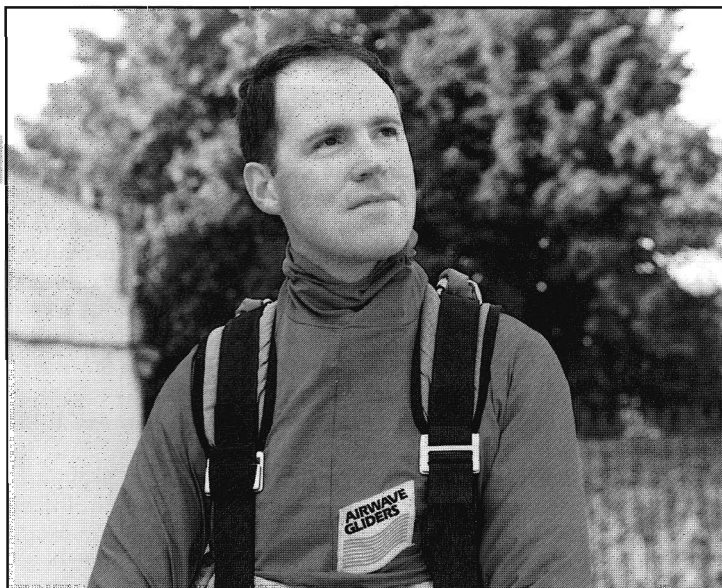


profile

S T E V E  
H A M



Steve Ham (ph: Tammy)

BY SPANISH JOE, July 1993

**S**teve Ham, 30, traded the grey skies of Brighton, England for the high cloud-bases of Piedrahita, Spain with no regret about 3 years ago. He has flown in both the British HG and PG Leagues. As Airwave and more recently Firebird dealer for Spain, he uses his successive paragliding distance records (including a 62.4 km European Distance made last July) to boost sales.

***Is Piedrahita the best site in Spain?***

Spain is one of the best places in Europe to fly and this chain of mountains, the "Sistema Central," is probably the best place to fly in Spain in the summer. However in the winter it's not too interesting. If you lived in Cadiz, Andalusia, you could fly all year round, although in the summer months it's too hot and too stable. If I had the opportunity, I would probably live in Cadiz in the winter and Piedrahita in the summer.

***Why did you come to live here in Piedrahita?***

I came to Spain to work with Airwave and specifically to Piedrahita because it engenders all the qualities needed for a flying centre which no one had really recognised at the time. Flying makes people do drastic things. A lot of people I knew have tried to give up their jobs, lost their wives/girlfriends all in the pursuit of free flying. Coming here was particularly drastic. It has given me the opportunity to do what I want.

***Did you come as a pilot or for business?***

I could say business, but then I should be in Madrid; there's superb flying there! But living in Madrid is too expensive to make ends meet on the amount of income you can get in hang gliding. Barcelona, where there's a larger concentration of pilots, would be the place to live. As far as how well business is going, I'm not sure, I

need to talk to my accountant! If you came here with a business selling ice cream, you'd do far better than selling hang gliders.

***Does breaking records help business?***

I don't know. I think a lot of people would say, "Oh, well he did it in Spain," like they say, "Oh, well he did it in Namibia; it's easy there." Making records on the Voodoo last year helped in a big way as far as opening Airwave is concerned. Last year I did 3 records: each time gaining just a few km, which was quite good commercially, as I was in the magazine every month.

In this type of place, to have a successful business you need not just sales but you need to work on the whole range of services catering for the pilot: accommodation, retrieves, other activities. We've been working in conjunction with the local government to build up the flying facilities for the area. It's a very slow process. A huge injection of capital is just not possible in this sport.

I'd like to have a hostel with the flying school to be able to run cross-country courses and to have sufficient facilities to attract competitions, run in conjunction with the Town Hall and the local government. I'd just like to see this place more successful.

***What do you think about Blay Olmos', European HG distance record (321 km) from Piedrahita?***

The last night of the League when the results came through, I was estatic. Blay flew to the geographic limit of flights from here in an easterly direction. So it's going to be pretty hard to crack. I've been told the winds race through the Rio Ebro, making quite an important meteorological and geographical barrier, that I believe even sailplanes don't attempt to cross. To get more miles you need to start tracking south when you get past Soria. Further west we have another site, Lastra del

Cano, which will only give you an extra 20 km, and the Valle de Jerte in the Sistema Central or Extremadura, which is probably about the most underestimated site in Spain, about an hour's drive from here, from where I think the next big flights will be done.

***What about your own record?***

There's not much to say. I didn't take off until 3:40 and at first the flight was a bit iffy until 5 pm, when a convergence got me turning less and less and flying under a cloud street 4000 m high, which took me all the way to Campestele, Valladolid. I arrived there at 9:05 pm with a total distance of 162.4 km in 5h25 min (averaging 30 km/h). It was not just pot luck., I'd been trying to set a record for several few days in low wind conditions from Pena Negra.

***Now that Airwave and Firebird have a trade agreement, does it matter which canopy you fly for records?***

I actually thought it was quite important this year to try to launch Firebird. When I came to Spain, Airwave wasn't really known. Now, Airwave is established and people know me, but Firebird hasn't really been selling in Spain. From past experience, the best way to launch something is to get publicity through records or competitions. The Spanish aren't too interested in competitions. They identify with free flying and XC pilots rather than racing pilots. So it was better for me to do the record on the Navajo. But Airwave have already put in a request for a new record on a Rave.

***What is the major impediment to flying distance on paragliders?***

The wind is an important factor. When you have no wind, it's all or nothing; if you're turning all the time you'll never pass 150 km. With wind and the ability to take off at 12:30 and to land at 9 pm, there's a huge scope for distance flying.

On my record flight there wasn't a great deal of wind. The whole week before I was racing into the ground, as there were too light winds, landing at 5 pm after 70 km. On the day of the record, I took off at 3:40 pm, although it was working from a lot earlier on, and landed at 9 pm.

### ***Have you had most success in hang gliding or paragliding?***

I was getting pretty good as a hang glider pilot but then I flew into the side of a mountain. That made me a bit of a scaredy-cat. I've only ever flown paragliders in Spain, really. I was 2nd in a PG Nationals, 5th in the nationals last year, 2nd in a British League.

### ***Who are your main competitors?***

On the hang gliding side it's very diverse, depending on the fashionable model of the year. It was *Wills Wing* and *Airwave* last year. This year it's probably *Airwave*, *Moyes* and *Icaro*. In paragliding the main competitors are *Trekking* and *APCO* and there's a high percentage sold by all the major manufacturers. *Edel* haven't really got a grip yet on Spain: they're trying in a big way this year.

### ***Cloth porosity is a hot issue; how do you feel about the subject?***

You have to firstly look to the manufacturer of the cloth, who should have done

their laboratory tests to give an indication of the longevity of the cloth and its qualities. I think now it's important that paragliding manufacturers should also do rigorous testing of their own and not just believe what they are told. Some of the glide angles and sink rates which manufacturers broadcast show quite obviously that some people are lying. So there could be lies all the way down the chain.

### ***Do you think you have an equal chance to be in the British Team while you are living in Spain?***

No. It's very difficult for me to go back to Britain. I have to fly in the paragliding Leagues there to be eligible. It's a long way and a huge investment to go back to sit in the rain for 5 days which is the normal routine. Plus, I don't have the superstar status of *Robbie*, *John* or *Bruce*, who can afford not to go to the Leagues.

### ***Could you make the Spanish Team?***

According to FAI rules, yes. However, the FENDA (Spanish Air Sports Federation) won't allow anyone but a Spanish national to enter the team. The largest sector of the FENDA is actually PG and HG, although it receives an unproportional amount of funds, which seems rather unfair.

In Spain they choose the team on the ranking over a series of predetermined

competitions. In Britain they take in other considerations. I think that's probably a better system.

### ***Are you isolated from the PG scene?***

I see the same old faces in the Spanish competitions just as they do it at the PWC competitions. It's very rare that a PWC comes to Spain. Last year we had one of the most successful competitions in *Castejon de Sos*. But this year there seems to be no interest. It's a shame that all PWCs have to be flown in the Alps, which tend to have mediocre weather. In *Castejon* they had a very large number of valid days and nice tasks. In the long term, and not just for commercial reasons, I would like to encourage competitions to come here and to Spain in general.

### ***Do you have the infrastructure needed for the PWC here?***

We're working on it. At this precise moment - no. We've worked quite hard to actually develop an infrastructure here to be able to organise competitions. The village offers a very comfortable, pleasant atmosphere for pilots. Everyone is together. There are good facilities; the villagers are all behind us. They like the pilots. It's very easy to get to takeoff. And of course, the conditions are fantastic. So it really has just about everything you need for a good international competition.