

First Flight

Born and raised in Detroit, Jeff Campbell's parents were skiers who frequented Aspen. "As soon as I could walk, they put me on skis in the Michigan woods." In 1956, when he was eight years old, they took him to Aspen. It was an experience that would ignite his passion for skiing.

Jeff Campbell was living in Steamboat Springs when friend Michael Bing came back from a trip to Telluride, sharing news that they were putting in chairlifts and starting to hire at the new ski area. Jim Guest, Greg Henzie, Jim Drew, Mickey Thompson, Keny Rainen, Scotty McIntyre and many others invaded Telluride from Steamboat. Gus (Guest), Herky (Henzie) and Stamp (Campbell) arrived in the fall of 1972, camping in Ilium Valley before landing in one of the old Ophir cabins. As soon as they found housing, they moved into town.

Unlike Steamboat, the surrounding mountains dumped right into Telluride. "When I got hired by Johnnie Stevens for the Telluride Ski Patrol, my gravity addiction was quenched," says Campbell. "The ski area had potential and I had a chance to be a part of it."

The first winter of lift-access skiing (1972-73) was also the first season of powerless flight in Telluride. Jeff Campbell, who had taken to the air elsewhere before taking a job at the ski area, launched from the top of Smuggler run. He did not foot launch: "Skis made leaving earth and coming back down a lot less frightening." He did not gain altitude: "We didn't go up in those days. If I stayed above the trees, I was happy." He did not fly long: "Flights lasted minutes." In no time, other patrollers and flyboys were launching off the ski area. The only rule set by ski patrol director Johnnie Stevens was that you were not to wear your patrol parka while flying.

Telluride saw its first coming together of pilots in February 1974 as part of the Coonskin Carnival, an event sponsored by the chamber of commerce and organized by a non-flyer, John Micetic. Telluride Air Force members—Jeff Campbell, David Stanfield, Mitch Stanfield, Bob St. Onge, Gary Gross, Joe Kray, Clint Wolf, Jack Carey, Dennis Stenslien and Peter Slack— and other competitors launched from the sunny side of the canyon off Mill Creek Road and landed on the valley floor. A prize was given for the longest flight time of 1 minute, 38.2 seconds. The Telluride Airmen's Rendezvous became a fixture of the summer festival lineup, aving spectators



Jeff Campbell's first flight from the ski area in March of 1973

as hang gliders circled above snow-covered peaks. Over the years, hang gliding became more sophisticated, and getting towed up by a powered ultralight meant you no longer had to get to the high and difficult places in order to launch. The last hang gliding festival in Telluride was held in 1999.

The first winter of the ski area, 1972-73, Telluride's Lift 6 was the only way to the top of the mountain. A band of us had organized a launch from the TV towers above Mammoth (now the site of Lift 9). I was in charge of getting the last of the gliders to the top. Senior [Billy] Mahoney and Johnnie Stevens allowed me to take hang gliders [on the chairlifts] up the mountain. I was the responsible one—partially because I worked for them as a ski patroller and partially because, between the two of them, I was an amusement.

As I loaded with my glider, I reminded the lifter to inform the top that there was one more hang glider coming up. It was a powder day; anything could happen. Maybe three or so chairs from the top, I noticed that no one was in the lift shack. In fact, I could see no one at the top.

The glider's control bar didn't collapse in those days. Attached to nineteen feet of aluminum tubing threaded