

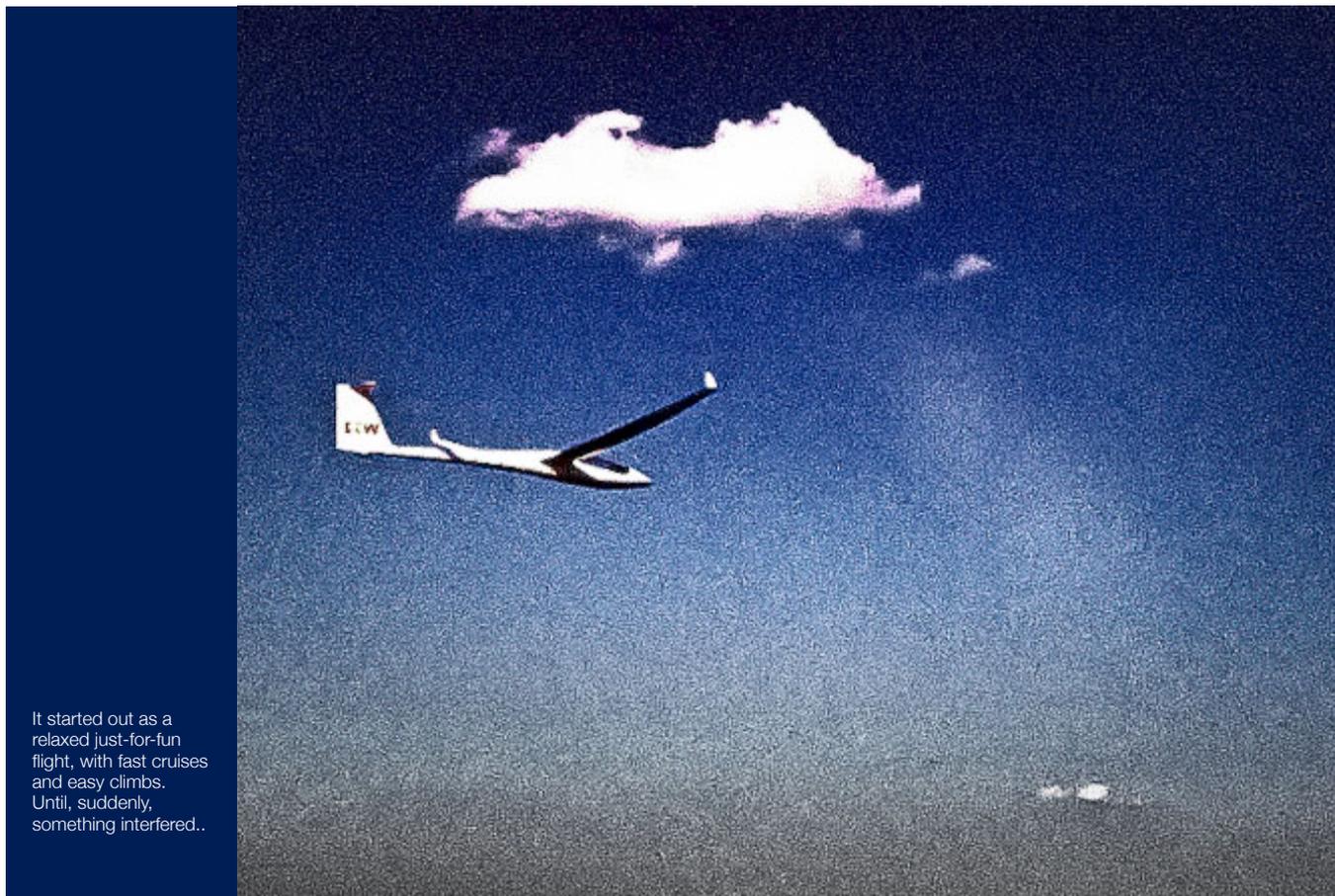


SOARING
STORIES

(3)

AMONG CLOUDS

November 9, 2011



It started out as a relaxed just-for-fun flight, with fast cruises and easy climbs. Until, suddenly, something interfered..

I fly - therefore I am... ...but who?

By Wolf D Herold

“GOPFERDORI!”

My frustration bursts out in perfect local vernacular. For more than 15 minutes I've been stuck at barely 1300ft of altitude above a clearing in the forests of central Switzerland, precisely 29 GPS-measured miles from home. I'm milling around, circle after circle, in stale, tired air which appears to be rising at exactly the same velocity my plane and I, half a ton of man and machine, would normally sink. This makes for a net altitude gain of zero, or, as an optimist would say, zero altitude loss.

Nowhere even the slightest hint of a stronger updraft. No soaring bird to be seen, no rising smoke either, nothing, nada, zilch.

For the umpteenth time I move my circle, open it up just a tad. There's got to be a tiny rest of thermal energy somewhere to lift me out of this trap! Perhaps a little closer to the village, near the cow patch?

Cows and sailplanes?

Despite my precarious situation I can't suppress a brief grin: I remember an evening at the airport in Moriarty, New Mexico, where Bob, a fellow glider pilot, raved about the magic flying skills of his 82 year old instructor: "...he can stay up on the fart of a cow!".

Well, here I couldn't expect any Southwestern Longhorns to help me with their powerful farts, but why not try the pasture anyway...

Every year it is the same....

What was it that made me jump out of bed early on a fresh Saturday morning in mid-March, that had me gulp down a few swigs of tea and a mouthful of muesli before slipping into a heavy sweater, throwing sunglasses and maps into a bag and heading out to the airport?

Why this hectic when putting the glider together which once again resulted in a scraped finger?

All this just to spend a couple of hours trying to keep a flying machine without engine aloft, against the will of gravity?

Or was there something else? An unquenchable thirst, perhaps, for “out” and “up” after weeks of grey skies?

Every year it is the same....

A weak cold front had moved through and had pushed - to everybody’s surprise already on Friday evening - its showers of rain and sleet across the hills of the Jura and away to the Southeast. And since the mercury followed physics and forecast and indicated a ridge of high pressure there was nothing to keep me from starting the flying season. The wings were polished, the batteries charged and, most importantly, I felt this tingling, this unmistakable sign that I had to search for the horizon which had gone missing during the long foggy days of winter in the Kanton Aargau.

Out here at the airport I was one of the few to prepare for launch.



The rapid clearing of the sky after a wet and windy night had obviously caught most pilots by surprise. Instead of pushing their glider in the waiting line behind the tow plane they were most likely pushing a cart through the aisles at the Coop and filling it with the items on the list of a routine Saturday shopping trip.

Meanwhile the assembly of my plane had left me without additional scrapes and I moved the big bird onto the runway. I climbed into the cockpit and had hardly shuffled into a comfortable stretch when Stephan came with the towrope and signaled to get ready for launch. It was my first tow of the year and I told myself to invest a couple of extra Francs, extra altitude that is, to make sure I had plenty of time to find that crucial first updraft.

Today, however, I pulled the knob to release the tow rope at only 1200 feet, too strong and persistent came the push from below.

The first couple of circles felt rather edgy, as always after a long winter pause, and it took me a while to coordinate the teamwork of hand and feet on the controls. When I had managed to center the roundabout more or less in the core of the column of rising air the needle of the variometer gently swung about the 2m/s up mark. Slowly my left hand began to loosen its tense grip around the flap lever and I eased into normal breathing.

The “Chestenberg”, a hill just west of the airfield which serves as the local thermal generator, dropped out of my field of view and made room for the ridges of the Jura Mountains.

Like so often, the first day of the season offered delightful soaring with bubbling thermals and excellent visibility. It wasn’t a record breaking super-day, but the first probing circles in the fresh and ebullient polar air proved that the few crisp cumulus clouds marked the strongest updrafts and in between plenty of blue thermals promised reliable climbs.



Only a few circles were necessary to spiral up to comfortable altitude in the tight columns of rising air before I could push the nose down to pick up speed again and aim for the next updraft. During the phases of smooth and fast cruising between climbs I enjoyed the view of ridges and gullies, where the leftover snow enhanced the contrast between light and dark along tree lines and topographic contours.

It was this consistent, dependable sequence of up and down which gave me motivation and confidence to move the turn point further and further out west: Chasseral, Vue des Alpes, perhaps La Brevine?

As I passed over the small lake in Switzerland's coldest valley I swung the big bird around in a wide arc back towards an easterly heading, back toward home.



Looking towards the South, I saw frizzled, short-lived clouds drifting across the wide Central Valley of Switzerland like foamy wave crests on the surface of a pool of humid haze, which the sun hadn't burned off yet.



And, with the sun almost in my back, the clouds on course were gleaming like white cotton puffs in the late afternoon light, lined up like buoys which one only had to hit, one after another, to get safely from updraft to updraft.

The return leg was going to be fast!

And easy.

Perhaps too easy?

Perhaps, after the first 50, 60 miles, a tiny bit monotonous, a bit boring even?

Was it an anticipated lack of excitement during the last hour of the flight or maybe an unconscious desire for adventure, which nudged me to postpone my estimated – well, basically given - time of arrival?

Was there something in me that couldn't resist the temptation to accept a little extra challenge and embark on a short detour?

Was it a hidden streak deep inside, which lured me into that trap, which made me leave the fast track the sky had offered and follow the seductive “come here” of a white fluff in the sky far off course?

No idea!

I only know that this happens every year!

Not because I don't learn from my mistakes – I guess (and hope).

It is more subtle, I suspect: it is, because I fly the way I am – if I want to or not!

And I'm not the only one! Once up in the air, cut loose from towrope and the rules and habits of daily life, foibles, desires, and peculiarities pop up which would never break the structure of our routine at altitude zero.

Up here, however, plane and sky require our constant attention, tickle our curiosity, trigger a desire for adventure. Often they leave no capacity, no time to check our behavior against self-prescribed norms, against the do's and don't's defined by system or society.

It is, I venture, in these moments of total absorption when suddenly an unknown urge breaks out and makes us act in a more inspired, intuitive, a more authentic way.

Flying as a mirror of the unconscious – wow, what a hobby!

When I arrived -low!- where I had estimated the little cloud to be, it was gone. Instead of heaving me softly up to altitude for an easy glide towards home base, the last bubbles of warm air had barely kept me from making the first off-field landing of the year.

Every year it is the same....

With my altitude of 1300 feet I would just about make it over the small hill, then along the edge of the forest and finally a couple of miles down the valley before I would have to pick one of the meadows for touch down.

No, somewhere there had to be a little bit of extra thermal energy...

Meanwhile I had moved the center of my circles almost half a mile without losing a single foot of altitude. Suddenly a tiny push from below – or just wishful ‘feeling’ of my butt? With a soft touch I tighten up the circle just a tad.

A couple of minutes later I still feel the slight pressure under my back and the altimeter reads 300 ft higher. Is that it?

Every year it is the same....

I terminate the first fun flight of the year with a crackpot idea. After effortless cruising over long stretches between clouds I force myself to endless circling over the same spot. I finish a relaxed afternoon among clouds with low level aerobatics. Instead of telling friends about my successful start into the new season I have to talk myself into perseverance.

And all that brought about by my unconscious...

Five minutes later I'm at 2700 feet, still climbing slowly. Out of the hole, back in the sky. Tension and frustration stay below. After another couple of circles we've made it, my big bird and I: we're high enough for a final glide home.

I sense relief, which slowly turns into satisfaction, then into self-confidence: I've passed the first test of the season, didn't give up down low, found a weak updraft, used it in an optimal way and avoided an off-field landing.

I still know how to fly!

The last 15 miles.

The air is perfectly still, not a single gust, not the slightest trembling moves through the wings. Only the ventilation is hissing softly.

The radio is quiet, too – everybody else has already landed. Out there, over there, above the Black Forest, the last little cloud just dissolved in the evening sun. In here, in the cockpit, in my head, I do a little recap: in the end this little detour was kind of neat. It forced me to practice in very weak conditions, to keep up patience and concentration, it made me earn my post flight beer with lots of sweat.

And it showed me what my real fascination with flying – and living? – is all about: challenge and adventure.

For that I ought to be grateful to my unconscious.

