



# AMONG CLOUDS

SOARING STORIES (4)

Some objects, some works of art, even some tools to master daily life possess a unique style, are “classy”. The Breitling Navitimer comes to mind, Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, Picasso’s “Guernica”, the Swiss Army Knife. For me there is a particular harmony of form, expression, elegance and function in these “classics”.

To use them, enjoy them gives me moments of a particular pleasure.

Now imagine what happens when two (or more) of these classics descend upon me on the same day....



*The Day of the Classics*  
by wolf d herold

I'm a sucker for *classics*,

for everything that is a perfect, accepted example of a particular style, for everything that has a timeless quality and appreciation.

I am allowing myself a certain pickiness, however, when selecting 'my' classics. I'm not always swimming along in the mainstream.

" Satisfaction " by the Rolling Stones?



Everybody will agree, I'm sure.

The '69 model of the VOLVO 123 GT ?



Well, there I might get a few objections.

Sometimes, so it seems, classics have a sweet spot for me.

Once a friend literally 'forced' on me the most iconic design of modernist furniture, a Wassily Chair, designed by Marcel Breuer of Bauhaus fame.



On a different occasion a fellow member of Nutmeg Soaring in Connecticut offered to sell his 20 year old Standard Austria to me.

(Great timing on his part, by the way, as I was just looking for a used glider which could be operated within the constraints of the budget of a research assistant at Yale University.)

The Standard Austria SH-1 was a classic for me, not only because it represented the apex in the era of wooden gliders, but also because a couple of 'classics' in the circle of pilots (George Moffat for example) had won a couple of classic contests with it. Just look into the Soaring Magazines of the late sixties and early seventies.

For me with my weak spot for classics there really was nothing in this serendipitous offer to ponder about. A few phone calls and we agreed on a price, an extra long weekend and I had relocated the SH-1 from Texas to New England.



not me, but my SH-1, 25 years after I sold it - still with the same paint scheme I had put on during a two winter refinishing project !!!

Now she - and I - stood on the grass runway of Sugarbush in Vermont, ready to launch. In front of me and behind were the local pundits in their latest plastic ships waiting for the towplane. They were looking at my old-timer with a tad of pity so it seemed to me, and debated how far I would make it today. The guys had selected one of the 'classic' - here we go again - Sugarbush tasks, a 200k triangle. First up north almost to the Canadian border, then a little detour towards East and back again to Warren.

I had selected the task of not losing sight of them, up to the Canadian border, to the East and back...

But I didn't tell anybody, after all I didn't want their pity to acquire a sarcastic touch. Should my plan backfire and I'd be left behind and forced to listen to their radio transmissions coming from beyond the horizon nobody would know about it but me. And I wouldn't have to suffer from their ridicule on top of my own frustration.

Failures need to be pushed under the rug, victories shouted from the rooftops, not the other way around.

That was the Ego-aspect anyway. Apart from this semi-unconscious tactic to prevent damage to my self-image there were much healthier and more convincing reasons to follow the home team: I would profit from their knowledge of local conditions and would get a demo of the best route to be flown. And after the flight I would know how my classic measures up against their state of the art machines.



Half an hour later we met in the local hotspot above Scrag Mountain. The five of us circled in the first thermal of the day, tried, once again, to find the optimal combination of pedal-pressure and stick position to maximize climb rate and slid slowly into the most comfortable position between back rest and instrument panel.

It was John who gave the sign to start when we had made it up to the first trace of water vapor, the first hint of a cumulus:

"Okay gang, let's go! The race is on!"

In an elegant steep turn he picked up speed and three white birds dove after him. I had opened my last circle a little, moved into the wind and right at the edge of the white puff a sudden gust pushed me up another 150ft. A perfect position to begin my little chase.

"I'll try to follow you" I let the gang know.

Two short clicks from the radio indicated that they had understood.

It was John who put it in words:

"Good luck, Bravo Yankee" he said and suppressed a chuckle.

I sensed a bit of irony in his voice. Perhaps that was triggered by my call sign: Bravo Yankee? I had selected B Y as a play in words, as sort of an insider joke. Whoever called me would start his transmission with Bravo, with something like a high five over the radio waves and give me an encouraging verbal pat on the shoulder. B Y also proved that I hadn't forgotten my home entirely. Mike, the Air Force pilot who had spent two years in Germany, realized that immediately:

"Forget that "Bravo", he offered, "you are the "Bavarian Yankee"!"

By now the Vermont Yankees already were a good distance ahead. Whether it was experience, skill, whatever, they simply demonstrated that aerodynamic design could be optimized much more efficiently using fibre glass and resin instead of wood and (tons of) micro balloons. One only had to run ones hand across a modern surface to realize that air had no chance to get entangled. There is hardly any noise, any hissing at all, even when one pushes a glider of the latest generation above the 100 miles per hour mark.

In my classic, however, I didn't need an airspeed indicator above 75 mph, the whooshing and whistling gave me plenty of hints on how fast I was going and how steeply I was rushing towards Mother Earth. There was no way that even perfect mastery of plane and winds could compensate for that handicap.

The guys knew that, of course. They had quickly gained about 10 miles on me by ripping along in the ridge lift at low altitude where they could make the most of their advantage at high speeds.

Down there, though, they were running a higher risk. Should the push from below "let them down" (pun intended), they would immediately have to find some other lift, no matter where, no matter how weak. Being closer to the ground simply meant that there was less margin for error. Miss one badly needed updraft and you better have a decent field under your wings to land in.

It was exactly such a lapse of the atmosphere which helped me to log an intermediate victory.

Sun and wind had forgotten to install one of the 'always there' updrafts at the end of a short side valley. This missing elevator had put my friends in scramble mode. From their inspired discussion on the radio I gathered that they were circling around tree tops at ridge height trying to figure out how and where to get up again.

Sounded pretty exciting but didn't trouble me at all. I had decided in favor of a flight at higher levels and jumped from cloud to cloud. The higher altitude provided me, the rookie above the Green Mountains, with more options and more safety. And the chance to catch up with me friends, perhaps even to get ahead of them..

Ten minutes later I spotted them way down below me, all in the same circle. That meant that they had managed to extricate themselves from the delicate situation and found lift. Perhaps that lift could help me, too? I banked into a wide circle and soon enough I felt the familiar pressure in my bottom and was climbing nicely.

After two circles the radio came alive:

" Hey look, way up somebody is circling, too!"

And then:

" Bravo Yankee, is that you above us?"

Ah, there it was again, the unintentional praise thanks to my call sign - and that felt soo good!

I clicked my mike twice to confirm.

Stay cool, I thought.

Leave it up to them to realize that a visitor to their aerial playground in his pre-pre-generation bird had just beat them by 10 minutes on the first 40 miles.

Ah, how I loved my classic!

It had persuaded me to fly conservatively and provided me with a good measure of achievement.

I gently stroked the cover of the instrument panel just as I would caress the neck of my dog.

Well done, BY !!

I flew on, now with increased self-confidence, ahead of everybody.

Towards the North I could see some scars in the wooden hills. That must be the ski area with Jay Peak, our first turn point, I thought. There was nothing but trees on the way there, no clearing, not a single field large enough for a safe landing, so once again it was a stay-high scenario.

Just as I turned East above the chairlift to begin the second leg I saw something white flash underneath. 700 feet below LX came rushing from behind. LX, that was John. My lead had narrowed to a couple of minutes. Somehow advanced technology and local knowledge had to add up to superiority, I told myself. Nevertheless, keep on pushing, don't let yourself get left behind again, I heard ambition pitch in.

But towards the East it looked anything but full speed ahead. The clouds, the markers of lift, had all but disappeared and haze crept in. That smelt like weak thermals and slow progress. John had obviously come to the same conclusion. Right after zipping in underneath - hey, here I am again!! - he had pulled up to convert speed into altitude. His colleagues had closed in, too, and now they spread out to fly four abreast, the best formation to search for lift.

Their flying mode had changed from competitive to collaborative.

Lower and lower we got without hitting anything which felt like an updraft. After ten long minutes of gliding in still air Tony, on the left, pulled cautiously to the North, climbed ever so slowly and then banked into a shallow turn. Like pearls on a string we lined up behind him. During our first circle we hardly lost any altitude, during the second we gained about 50ft. Would that puff of rising air save us from landing out? It looked like it might. Slowly we spiraled upwards, about 180 feet per minute. Not exactly an express elevator, it would take us more than a quarter of an hour to get back to previous altitudes, but definitely preferable to landing in a field, far away from home.

When our climbing turns ended up being turns only, no climbing anymore, no sinking yet, Tony suggested to skip the task and head home right now.

"Yeah, let's go home - if we can make it, there's some headwind now!" Bruce chimed in.

Yes, I had realized that, too, as we had drifted quite a bit North during our endless circles. I didn't like that change in wind direction at all. Firstly it meant that we had to cover more effective distance, secondly it would hand my buddies another joker: faster gliders have even more advantage in a headwind.

This became immediately clear after we had turned South. Slowly but surely the four white birds pulled away. At the next thermal - thank God they found one - I arrived a couple of minutes later and 300 feet lower.

Eight miles further the difference was already 1000ft. I had hardly centered the thermal when John et al. already left it.

Mildly frustrating.

More concentration I told myself, climb faster I asked BY and kicked the side of the cockpit. I could see no other alternatives; neither could my friends. They offered advise, from a safe altitude: where to search for lift down low, which route to follow. All that was ok, and would help, maybe, if I was only a couple of minutes behind. For me it was useless, as I was - so to speak - 20 years behind.

Did people fly differently then?

This thought popped up suddenly. Was I perhaps imitating a way of flying which didn't fit my classic of the Sixties?

Had I been so fixated on what my buddies up there, out front demonstrated and proposed that I totally overlooked what was best for me down here? When I heard Tony announcing his landing on the airport in about five minutes I turned the radio off. The here and the now were important, even when the now for my bird was sometime in the mid-Sixties.

I felt a surge of new energy, a fresh dose of fighting spirit.

How can I profit from the wind down here, where does it push warm air, on which edge is it going to rise?

I tried to visualize what was going on out there, tried to take every gust which hit my wings as a hint from the air. At a heading of  $185^{\circ}$  I would reach the airport in 14miles - as the crow flies. The atmosphere clearly proposed a different track. A little closer to the ridge, along the edge of the forest, I meandered above the Vermont soil loosing very little altitude, slowly covering mile after mile.

If that continued I would, in theory, make it right to the threshold of the runway.

In praxis there was a line of 100 feet high poplars about a quarter mile before the asphalt.

No chance to score a classic triumph - to win as an underdog.

In my slow descent I had flattened the glide angle of the old bird to roughly seven miles of distance flown for each 1000 feet of altitude lost and gotten down to 700 feet above the terrain.

It was time to find a field to put B Y down, after all one needs a certain minimum altitude for a decent approach and a safe landing and what I had left was about that minimum. There was a meadow at my 10 o'clock, right into the wind, long enough, along a road, opposite to a large house. Only the airport would have been better. I set up a short pattern, touched down right behind a small creek and let BY roll out towards the road.

A next to perfect landing.

After the tension of the last hour this was the total anticlimax. I sat quietly in the cockpit for a couple of moments, let the rest of the adrenalin evaporate and reviewed the last 15 minutes. I didn't find anything, anything obvious that is, which I could have done differently. My bird had stretched its wings as far as it could. I was content and relaxed. Now it was time to walk up to the house and ask farmer if I could use his phone for a short call to the airport. I love these moments of direct communication after hours of isolation in the cockpit.

Slowly I opened the canopy, unbuckled the belts and got out.

As I put the parachute on the seat I heard somebody shout:

"Hey"

And then again:

"Hey, everything okay?"

It was a female voice. I turned around. Up there at the roadside parked a bright yellow Corvette, the rag top. Next to it a sportive brunette, waving both arms.

I waved back, vigorously, to indicate that I was fully alive:

" Yeah I'm fine, no problem!"

"Do you want to go to the airport? Can I take you there?"

Well, what I really wanted was that somebody from the airport would come here with the trailer. But instead of trusting that the farmer was home, his phone working and the friends willing and ready to get me a quick ride to the airport would allow me to organize the retrieval myself.

And apart from that: how often would I get an offer like that?

" Oh great, that would be wonderful" I replied.

After only a couple of moments back to firm ground I couldn't come up with anything more charming. A few minutes later I had grabbed my purse from the pouch in the cockpit, moved the plane to face the wind and dropped into the front passenger's seat.

Off we went.

Entirely without hectic, but with plenty of power. L68/427ci I read on the bottom of the center console. Holy smokes! This one was a classic, too! A '69 'Vette with the big 7 liter engine! Somehow I kept with the theme of the day - and continued the task on the ground in classical manner.



And my driver was up to that, too. She drove barefooted, expertly, in full command of the yellow monster, the perfect incorporation of a modern American amazon".

Unfortunately, my chaufferette knew the area well and I was without chance to coax her into a little detour. After about ten miles she turned into the driveway to the airport without any interference on my part and stopped right in front of the snack-bar. There my friends were just into their second round of beers.

It must have been the low growl of the V8: as if on cue they all turned around and their eyes widened.

"Where the hell are you coming from, and with whom?"

Their gaze seemed to be locked on to the person behind the wheel.

Now a bunch of sweaty soaring pilots in drinking mood after a challenging flight is probably not the longed for company of a self-confident woman who commands 400 horses with bare feet.

Before the guys had recovered from the shock, raised their lower jar and switched to come-on mode she turned to me, flashed a smile and asked:

"I see you've got enough friends to help you with the transport of your glider, so I guess I can move on?"

Should I invite her for a drink?

Sure, but somehow nothing seemed to fit together. Her Diet-Coke would not mix with their beers, her Corvette not fit between their minivans and her elegant blouse only get soiled by their dirty t-shirts. So I thanked her and climbed out of my seat. She turned around without much ado, waved good bye and left.

I went to the cooler, pulled out a beer and began to recount my story.

How I had almost managed to get back home at low level, how I had found my landing field and how the Corvette-lady had found me.

"Wow, so your glider is basically right around the corner! Congratulations, with the proper wood-handicap you would have won the day!"

John was amazed.

"And with your arrival you'd have easily gotten the special award for the most original retrieve" Tony grinned.

*"Two classics to win the day"* Would that perhaps have been an even better title for this story?

That's it - soaring story 4 !

Now please tell me how you liked it, what you missed, what you want to read about next time.

And don't forget to visit my blog every once in a while, there will be more to read from "Among Clouds"...

*wolf d herold*