

A Wild Ride On The Wind

By Stu Simpson

It wasn't my fault. Really, it wasn't. As flight lead I did all the checking and prepping I was supposed to do before we took off. But we still wound up in this mess. Now I had to get us out of it. But really, it wasn't my fault. Read on, you'll see.

We were on the ground at Bishell's strip near Carstairs, about 35 miles north of Calgary. All our planes were lined up nose to tail facing north on the side of Bish's expansive runway. There was Pete Wegerich's Cubby II, my Green Giant, followed by Al Botting's Challenger, Bishell's Bushmaster, and finally Glen Clarke's J-3 Cub. A rather nice looking line of aircraft if I dare say.

We wanted to go further north to the Olds-Didsbury airport but the weather just wasn't going to permit it. A large thunderstorm was tracking straight for O-D and that's why we all landed at Bishell's.

When I checked with Flight Service before leaving the home 'drome of Chestermere-Kirkby Field just east of Calgary, the briefer told me there were some thunderstorms associated with a cold front near Red Deer. I remembered the front from the weather maps I checked earlier. She said the front would be moving southward much later in the evening. Perhaps I should have been more suspicious of her information when I learned she didn't even know where Carstairs was. Just another byproduct of closing Calgary's flight service station, I guess.

Anyway, our flight to Carstairs was pleasant as we ambled along with a warm 10 - 15 mph. tail wind. We spied a fairly significant thunder cell off to the west of Carstairs (the one that had a bead on O-D) and I wondered why the briefer hadn't mentioned it. After all, she'd noted the ones near Red Deer.

After our diversion to Bishell's, the five of us were talking airplanes in the lounge above his hangar when we heard a hell of a roaring from outside. Al and I poked our noses out the door and saw the wind had indeed come up quite a bit. In fact it was blowing better than 25 knots, and gusting quite a bit higher. It had also changed direction by 180 degrees. What was going on?

We decided it might be a good idea to check on our planes since they weren't tied down. We hustled down the stairs into the now chilly evening outside.

"My airplane's rolling backward!" Al exclaimed as we looked toward the flight line. We both started running for the planes.

Al's Challenger has a large wing and the plane sits nose-high when it's empty on the ground. So, if a headwind catches it it'll roll quite easily backward, as it was doing now straight toward Bishell's Bushmaster.

"Don't worry!", I yelled back over my shoulder (I run faster than Al). "At least it'll stop when it hits Bishell's plane." Botting chuckled behind me.

I reached the Challenger first and grabbed a wing strut when there was only a few feet between the Challenger and the Bushmaster. Al arrived a few seconds later and we spun the Challenger's tail into the wind. Then I noticed the Giant also rolling slowly backward as it rocked heavily in the wind.

Wegerich, Bishell and Clarke each have parking brakes, so they enjoyed the luxury of simply walking quickly, rather than running for their planes.

But, where did this wind come from?

Peter and I calculated the wind was likely a by-product of the thunderstorm now northwest of the strip. Kind of strange, I thought, since it was quite a distance away. Still, I've seen thunderstorms do some pretty amazing things. We all figured the wind would subside as the storm wandered off. We were also glad we wouldn't have to taxi in this wind. When it came time, we could just launch from our current positions.



Stu's Bushmaster and Glen's J-3 cub.

We waited and watched for 20 minutes as the storm did what we predicted and trundled off north-eastward. But instead of dropping off the wind was actually getting worse. Other things had changed, too; the air had gotten very hazy with moisture and dust, and there was a remarkable drop in the temperature. There were no clouds associated with these changes, though. Just a bright summer evening and a cruel tempest trying to rip the wings off the Dragonflies.

We decided this was something much more sinister than the meteorological effluent of a thunderstorm. It was a rogue cold front.

See? I told you it wasn't my fault.

It was time to get out of Dodge before the wind got any worse. And as bad as it was on the ground, each of us knew instinctively it was going to be a lot stronger aloft. Good thing it was going our way.

But what about when we got home? If we had this wind on the ground at Kirkby's we'd be in big trouble just trying to clear the active, let alone taxiing to our hangars. This wind would easily flip our planes over if it hit us from the side.

Naturally, being flight leader it fell to me to take off first. I thought for a moment about offering to share the glory of leadership and let someone else go first, but my pride wouldn't let me. Besides, I doubted I'd get away with it.

My takeoff roll was incredibly short, maybe 50 feet. The air was surprisingly smooth as I worked the Giant up and into the wind. Naturally, climbing out was virtually effortless, though forward progress truly sucked.

“It’s an elevator ride, boys,” I radioed, “but it’s a smooth one.”

“Roger that. Dragonfly 2 is rolling,” Peter called.

As my wingmen were getting airborne I angled northeast, not wanting to get away on them before we had a chance to form up. When we were all in good position to join, I banked the Giant to catch the wind.

It was like hitchhiking on a hurricane! I could actually feel the G-forces in the seat of my pants as the wind catapulted us southward.

We formed up into an echelon with Wegerich off my right wing and Botting and Clarke off the left. As we rocketed south Peter reported periodically on our tailwind, which varied between 40 and 50 miles per hour.

“We’re going to have a lot of trouble landing and taxiing in this wind,” Pete said.

“I think we’re going to catch up to this thing in about 15 miles and probably beat it home,” I replied. I’ve run races like this before and always won. I did the math in my head and figured we’d do the same this time, but I could tell my wingmen weren’t so sure. Looking at our ground speed, I could hardly blame them.

While we ripped along, at times with nearly 120 mph of ground speed, a large cloud of dust and haze stretched ahead from northeast to southwest ahead. It made sense that this was likely the actual cold front. When we drew east of Airdrie I flipped over to Calgary tower’s frequency. YYC was still landing planes on runway 16 with 8 to 10 knots from the south. This confirmed my suspicions about the cold front’s actual position and that we were quickly sneaking up the monster’s back side.

Now I started to worry about the turbulence we’d encounter punching through it. I warned the guys to expect significant bumps, though the ride had been remarkably smooth to now. Nevertheless, I pulled my straps tighter.

We hit the back of the front (I love how that sounds) just north of the Balzac Road, about 10 miles northeast of Calgary International. The turbulence lasted only a minute or two and wasn’t anywhere near as rough as I figured it would be. Still, there were some hum-dingers that gave us a ride somewhat more thrilling than a traveling carnival.

As we squirted out through the front of the front the air temperature rose significantly. And I was quite alarmed to note that the Giant was doing likewise. I suddenly realized what was happening. The cold front, being cold and all, was wedging itself beneath the warmer air we were now in. The warm air was shooting upward to get out of the way and it was dragging us along for the ride.

I eased the throttle back and shoved the Giant's nose down to arrest the ascent, but the altimeter continued swinging up toward 4800 feet, the floor of Calgary's controlled airspace. We were most definitely not welcome there and could face a mid-air collision being so close to the airport.

I keyed the radio mic. "Remember boys, we have to stay below 4800." I throttled back more and pushed the nose even further down, but it wasn't working. I was pointed nose-down, had better than 80 mph indicated and was still climbing at nearly 600 feet per minute! I have to admit, I was impressed.

Peter, Al and Glen were right with me. It was quite a kick looking out and seeing the rest of the flight still welded in formation and all pointed in the same nose down attitude. We'd stuck together punching through the cold front, and we were sticking together through this mess. Those guys are quality flyers!

Our altitude finally stabilized at about 4750 feet, though it still took a bit of forward stick to stay there. A few minutes later we were able to drop back down to a height above ground level where ultralight jocks are much happier.

"Our ground speed has reduced to about 60 miles an hour," Pete reported.

Hmm, 60, eh? Well, the headwind is a little stronger than I'd have liked, but we seemed to be winning the race. Then I looked to the west.

The cold front was catching up to us! Or was it? The cloud of dust and haze that characterized it was now upon Calgary International, directly abeam our right wings. But a look out the left side revealed the east end of the front was still far enough behind. I had an image of a meteorological game of crack-the-whip with the west end of the front coming up from behind to smack us yet again.

"Dragonfly 1 to the flight," I called, "let's descend and maintain 4000 feet to minimize the headwind." We'd be only 700 feet AGL.

"Number 2 descending."

"3 descending to 4000."

"4 copies."

We nosed over again and gratefully gained a few more knots going across the ground.

"Dragonfly 4 to Dragonfly 1," called Glen. "I'm going to go on ahead to my strip to try and beat this thing home." Glen's strip is about 5 miles southwest of Kirkby Field, at the south end of Chestermere Lake.

"Roger that, Glen. I'm sure you'll have no trouble. Thanks for coming along tonight." Al and Peter each bid Glen goodnight and we watched his pretty Cub motor out ahead in the evening sun.

I turned my attention back to the west end of the front, which was now further south than we were. This was going to be close.

Kirkby Field was in sight so we all switched to 123.4. I decided these were special circumstances so I radioed the Dragonflies' intentions to make a straight-in approach and landing on runway 16. I hoped I wouldn't get in trouble for it.

I did my best to keep the speed up on final, landing long to clear the active as soon as possible for my wingmen right behind me. I shut down in front of my hangar and bolted out of the Giant to get the big doors open. The front was clearly visible off to the north and bearing right down on us.

It was a great sense of relief to finally get the Giant tucked away safely inside the hangar with the doors closed and latched. Then I helped Al and Pete get theirs secured.

I timed it. Nine minutes after I shut down, the cold front hit Kirkby Field. I know things can get tighter than that, but not by much.

I'm nobody's thrill seeker or adrenaline junkie, but I have to admit I really enjoyed our ride on the wind that night. Naturally, we try and avoid situations like that one, but there's a satisfying feeling of confidence in knowing that we Dragonflies can face the elements and with our skill and team work, handle such unexpected adventures. And I hope you see that it really wasn't my fault.