

# A Morning Of Promise

By Stu Simpson

This was clearly a Saturday morning with promise. It could hardly be anything else when everywhere I looked I saw small, fun airplanes. For instance, Al Botting had his new Piper Vagabond tied down ready to start. It's amber gleam nearly matched that of the sun. Next to him was Peter Wegerich and his yellow Cubby II, a slightly shrunken iteration of Botting's bird. One could be forgiven for doing a double take when seeing them so close together.

Botting was going to loose his tail-wheel virginity that morning. He and Kirkby had plans to take the Vagabond up so Botting could get checked out in it and join the ranks of the real men who fly tail-draggers. No more training wheels for him.

On the other side of the hangars Carl Forman tinkered with the radio and battery in his MiniMAX. The Max's battery has been vexing him for months, never quite doing what he hopes it'll do. And then there's the left fuel tank issue. Don't even get him started about that! Just up the ramp was Bernie Kespe with the top cowl off his pristine Renegade biplane. He was working on a starter problem.

And there in the corner, just in front of my hangar, sat my beloved Green Giant; loaded, fueled and eager to move the sky around.

Carl and Pete and I planned to fly to the bottom end of the Highwood Pass, about 60 miles southwest and on the very leading edge of the Rockies. There's a ranch strip there that's about 4000' long but with very challenging approaches on each end. The trip to the Highwood has never been anything less than stunning, and it promised to be so this day, too.

It turned out at the last minute, though, that Carl would have to stay home. Remember those battery and fuel tank issues? Enough said.



*Allan Botting and his Vagabond. Photo by Bob Kirkby.*

Pete and I blasted off runway 16 and climbed strongly in the morning wind. We leveled off at 4000' and turned southwest.

"I sure like seeing green fields," I radioed to Pete.

"Ya," he replied, "they're sure a lot nicer to look at." And a lot nicer for us to fly over, too, I thought. They don't throw as much heat and convective turbulence as the browner spring time fields do.

As we motored along I remarked to Pete, as I've done to my wingmen hundreds of times, that I still can't believe there are people down there who don't want to do this.

"I've wanted to do this my whole life," Pete confessed. "Now I've finally gotten to where I have the time and I can afford it. This is great."

Thinking about his comments for a moment, I decided that maybe there is something to be said for growing up, even if only a little bit. Wonder what our wives would have to say about that.

We started a slow climb crossing the Bow River and the new highway bridge there. We were near DeWinton when Pete called again.

“There’s a field down there that looks awfully familiar to me,” he said, smiling. He referred to the last time we made this trip, coincidentally just two days short of a year ago. On that jaunt Pete had an engine failure over this very spot. He put the Cubby down in the farmer’s field and effected repairs. I forget what caused the engine failure - a minor electrical fault, I think - but he was up and flying again half an hour later. The rest of the flight simply orbited over top in a wide circle while he fixed the problem.



*Approaching the Highwood pass. Photo by Stu Simpson.*

Since then, Pete decided the tired old 503 just wasn’t the right engine for his Cubby so he switched to a 65 horse Zanzottera, sold out of Surrey, B.C. The new mill runs very sweetly. Pete’s now got more power in the Cubby, more confidence in the engine and is getting a lot more fun out of flying.

The mountains were starting to rise from the haze, jagged and grey against the horizon, and growing larger with each passing mile. A glance out the right side revealed we were coming in line with the departure path of Black Diamond’s runway 14. We switched over to 123.4, the frequency that Black Diamond’s gliders use.

“Black Diamond traffic, be advised ultralights Dragonflies 1 and 2 are currently 6 miles southeast at 4600 feet, south-westbound for the Longview area. Any conflicting, please advise.”

We listened intently for several minutes but surprisingly, heard no reply. That’s strange because the glider guys are usually beating each other over the head to be the first ones in the air on such a day. We made one more call a few minutes later before clearing their area, but still heard nothing back.

We crossed highway 22 between Black Diamond and Longview. The terrain was rising faster now with the onset of the foothills. We eased our birds a few hundred feet higher and then set up to take pictures of each other with the hills and mountains in the background.

Pete’s Cubby was stunning against the brilliant green foliage below, and the magnificent Alberta blue above.

“You sure have a beautiful airplane, Pete,” I commented admiringly.

“Ya,” he said in his usual laconic manner, “I’m pretty happy with this yellow. I’d have bought the plane anyway, regardless of colour, so the yellow’s just a bonus.” I chuckled at his remarks and went back to taking pictures.

My photos done, I marveled for a few moments at the raw, blatant power of the Rockies. Though Pete and I had the power of flight at our disposal and were flying above all else, we weren't flying above them. And there they were in front of us, filling our windscreens, daring us to try. I figured it'd be wisest that morning to stick to our original plan and meet the Rockies' altitude challenge another day.

We continued enroute, intercepting highway 40 as it coursed into the mountains. The Highwood strip soon appeared as a narrow swatch of light green grass running east and west on a ranch south of the highway. It's a challenging strip, with high trees at either end, and a pond on either side about halfway along. The runway's not very wide, either. Simply put, it promised to be a lot of fun.

We arrived overhead and eyeballed the windsock.

"Dragonfly 1 to 2. The sock indicates wind from the south at about five to seven knots. It'll give us a crosswind, but not by much."

"Ya, roger. I'll follow you in."

"1 copies. I'm descending on the downwind for 25." I pulled the throttle way back and dumped the nose over to begin the drop from 6000 feet. After several seconds the Giant was still way too high, so I cranked in a side-slip to bleed off more altitude.

The Highwood requires a careful approach to minimize exposure to the trees should the unthinkable happen to the engine. Half a mile from the button I turned about 160 degrees because there wasn't enough room in the narrow valley for a proper base leg. I angled toward the strip, keeping the highway beneath me for as long as possible before committing to the runway.

My heart beat faster and adrenaline coursed through me as the trees flashed beneath. The left wing missed a tall stand by only 10 feet; there was no time to look at the right one. A snapshot vision flashed through my mind of me picking pine boughs from the Giant after landing.

Ground speed was too fast and a quick glance at the sock confirmed the wind had shifted to my tail. But it was still at only a few knots, I might be able to make it. I mentally prepared for a go 'round. Side-slipping a little more to lose some height past the trees, I wandered a little wide of the runway. So I booted the rudder, pulled the stick to the right and the Giant centered out over the strip, but it was clear we were going to land long. Should I go around?

At the last second I decided it was safe and discarded the notion of trying again. The wheels touched smoothly about a third of the way down the runway, the long grass helping to slow the plane. I was too far past the exit to make a one-eighty before Pete landed, so I had no choice but to continue taxiing ahead until I heard from him. A few moments passed, then Pete calmly radioed that he'd landed and I had lots of room to turn around.

We taxied in and shut down. Then we spent a pleasant half hour chatting with a cowboy named Bob Purkess, who works the ranch there, and his hired man Clayton. We told him all about our planes such as how they're built and the differences between Pete's Cubby and the Giant.

Before we departed Purkess invited us to call him before we land next time so he could ensure there were no horses on the runway. Very neighbourly of him, indeed.

The wind was still coming from the east as we back-tracked and it looked like it'd stay that way. We started this takeoff with a slight downhill run, which really helped overcome the drag of the long grass.

I hauled the Giant into ground effect then built up some more speed to make sure I'd clear the trees that were rapidly approaching. As soon as we ascended above the tops of the pines the wind tagged us on the nose and boosted our climb rate by a few hundred feet per minute. The Giant reminded me again why I love it more each time I fly it.

We climbed steadily from the Highwood's 4600' elevation to 5500' for the ride home. We weren't quite ready to leave the foothills, though, so instead of turning northeast we continued north to follow along the hills. This area made for a spectacular background as Pete and I snapped even more photos of each other's planes.



*The Green Giant on the ground at the Highwood pass.*

North of Turner Valley and west of Millarville we stumbled across a nicely kept ranch strip we'd never seen before. We circled overhead, using the windsock and tie downs to confirm it was, in fact, an airfield. But time was getting on and we decided against a landing. Besides, we didn't want to use up all our adventure in one day. But I promised myself we'd be back.

Calgary's ever expanding sprawl seeped through the late morning haze soon after we turned back eastbound. The view was quite a letdown considering where we'd just been.

But, at least we were flying; there were so many more down there who weren't. Pete and I agreed it was good to be cruising at only 70 mph, which let us stay in the sky a little longer. The world looks better at that speed and we simply get more from life aloft.

My landing back at Kirkby's was terrific. So was Pete's, which was only fitting in light of the wonderful day we were having.

We chatted happily on the ground with Botting, who hadn't quite lost his tail-wheel virginity that morning because the wind came up with a little more enthusiasm than he preferred. But he still enjoyed flying his Vagabond while Kirkby flew the landings and takeoffs for him.

Carl got up flying, too, but the pesky battery and fuel problems continued to haunt him. Bernie was nowhere to be seen.

It wasn't a perfect day for everyone on Kirkby Field. But for Pete and I, who got the chance to have ourselves a flying adventure, the morning had certainly fulfilled its promise.