

Just Between Pilots

By Stu Simpson

There it was, a little white speck taxiing toward the button of Airdrie's runway. The pilot of the speck, Andy Gustafson, promised us on the radio he'd be with us in a few minutes.

I glanced out past my right wing to see Glen Clarke in his magical J-3 Cub. As Andy told the world he was leaving earth, Garrett Komm radioed that he was flying his Merlin southbound on the west end of Airdrie. We'd be flying north of the city, so there'd be no conflict.

Garrett and I traded information on our respective positions and began the silent duel to be the first to spot the other. Garrett won, singing out how he saw us eight miles east. A few minutes later, as Andy eased his Merlin into position off my left wing, I finally sighted Garrett, another white speck moving southward over the steadily withering October prairie.

We soon cleared Airdrie's ATF and switched to the Dragonflies' frequency. I peeked at the map and asked Andy which way to go, since he'd picked the route for today. We were headed for the Red Deer Forestry airstrip in the Alberta foothills southwest of Sundre. Sitting higher than 4600 feet ASL, it'd make for a challenging and indelibly memorable day of flying.

I initially thought we'd fly west of Cochrane, then track the forestry road north to get there. But Andy decided on a more direct route, one that cut across the foothills and bush, following no roads at all. Happily confident in the Giant's wonderful Continental A-75 engine, I easily agreed.

Andy gave me steering directions and our formation turned a little more northwest, hungry for another bite of sky and a chance at some airborne adventure.

The Rocky Mountains serrated the western horizon, slicing roughly into the sharp blue sky. They were already deep in snow above 6000 feet. The snow line extended forever to the north and south, ruler-straight against the gray granite. The mountains' brilliant white peaks warned us of the approaching winter and urged us to seize this day, to wring from it all the flight we could before cold and darkness cloaked the earth and heavens.

But we'd not have winter on this trip. The sky was absolutely clear and we could easily see 40 or 50 miles. At that moment I was more drawn to what lay below us.

Autumn holds an undeniable beauty in the part of the world that is southern Alberta. Its allure is irresistible to pilots, promising calm, cool air, great airplane performance, and a wonderful spectacle of colour.

But it was too late in the season for us to see any colour. We missed Mother Nature's art show by a week, or so. The foothills had completely capitulated to autumn's advances and become a smudgy, green-brown bushscape. There were plenty of evergreens, but any deciduous trees had shed nearly all their leaves so that only a few precious drops of red or gold remained for us to savour.

Once we passed Highway 22, we climbed steadily to 7500 feet, which would give us plenty of room to clear the quickly approaching hills and mountains.

The temperature dropped as we climbed, and my helmet visor fogged for an instant with each breath in the cold cockpit. Naturally, the Giant loved it. The wings had better air to bite, the prop, too. It spun powerfully on its shaft, the blades' imperfections glinting and scribing sunlit circles on whatever lay ahead.

We soon passed over a gas plant in the middle of the forest. It was an incredible contradiction to see forest and bush a few thousand decades old surrounding an ultra high-tech manufacturing facility.

And what of our own contradictions? We were flying airplanes and using equipment from many different ages of aviation's history, too. Clarke's Cub hails from 1939, while Andy's Merlin, only a few years old, is one of the latest light aircraft designs in Canada. The Giant is 20 years old now, but the engine was built just after World War II. And Gustafson and I each used devices that read navigation signals from outer space as we snapped photos of each other with cameras that don't use film.



Andy's Merlin and Glen's J-3 Cub. Photo by Stu.

Murray Cherkas, aka Budgie, was on the radio, telling us he was following the Red Deer River from Sundre to the Forestry strip. He flies a Murphy Rebel with 160 horsepower. He promised he'd be overhead the runway in a few minutes. We were still 13 miles back and I was still chilly.

True to his word, Budgie reported overhead the field, but then reported the runway as 4/8 overcast with cattle. He circled the strip and offered to make some low passes to shoo the cattle away. But the cows endured, reluctant to abandon such tasty grasses just to appease a few airplanes. Budgie and his passenger, Don Wilson, made four low-and-overs before finally admitting defeat in what came to be known as the Battle of the Bovines.

We might have been able to land in the remaining half of the runway, but I didn't care to try it. My wingmen concurred, so we decided to go elsewhere. There were a few choices. We could fly to the Clearwater forestry airstrip, about 30 miles northwest and similarly situated on the edge of the mountains. Or we could go to Sundre, or maybe Red Deer. After a brief election we settled on Red Deer and banked around to the northeast.

Andy and Glen and I formed up again in a 'V' to watch the rugged wilderness slowly recede, and civilization slowly reappear. The world below was going about its day, not paying much attention to a few little airplanes humming happily along above them. I spotted a few guys riding quads through some dirt and mud. It looked like fun, though I failed to see how they could possibly be having as much fun as us.

I mean, we even had a tailwind.

Glen and Andy sat off my wings and watched it all with me. But, Budgie had his Rebel out ahead of us now, a bright little cross zooming low across the dark bush.

The day was quickly becoming dream-like. But it was even better than that because this was real. I tried to completely saturate myself in it, to absorb every bit of the sky around me and memorize every instant of the flight. I wanted to gather each moment, to hoard them like a miser, and never, ever share them with anyone except my wingmen.

Days like this, times spent so utterly immersed in pure stick-and-rudder, are why I'm usually more at home in the sky than on the ground. Geez, how did it ever get this bad?

The Dickson Reservoir brought me back to reality as it floated past several minutes later. Holiday properties lined either shore, granting getaways for those who owned them. If only those people knew about the sky.

But then, maybe it's better they don't know. Maybe if they did, all of them would be up here, too. And that would mean more rules, fewer sticks and rudders, less magic. Nah, it's better that we keep these days just between pilots.

The air was so clear we could actually see the city of Red Deer from about 30 miles away. I called for the flight to descend to 6000 feet and I was pleased when the cockpit started warming up again. Once near the Innisfail airport, we went down even further to 5000'. Budgie was already on the ground, having gone ahead with his superior speed.

Red Deer's flight service specialist welcomed us with information about a Cessna flying circuits and another on pipeline patrol, low and just west of the airport. We promised to stay high until we crossed the pipeline guy's course, though we never did see him.

We dropped into the downwind for runway 16, being as professional as possible with our procedures. I soon coasted the Giant over the numbers and then did my best imitation of a bad landing, bouncing and floating in the runway's sun-stoked thermals. Fortunately, I heard later that I wasn't the only one.

We filled our bellies at Tipitina's and then Andy and I made a quick trip to the past as we explored the old airplanes on the airport. A bunch of A-26s, DC-3s, PBYS, Electras and CL-215s completely captivated us as they dripped oil and oozed history. They belong to Air Spray, an air attack contractor. There was even



Air Spray's F-86 with A-26s in background. Photo by Andy.

an F-86 Sabre the company uses for target towing. A number of Cessna 310s, Piper Aerostars and Rockwell Shrike Commanders sat scattered among the larger, round-engined classics. They stood patiently among their betters like well-behaved squires; tolerated, even appreciated, but not yet as deeply loved as the true knights because they just didn't have the history.

Andy and I strolled back to our flight line, and I again said a silent thanks that some of the Dragonflies are flying on pieces of history, too.

We saddled up and departed Red Deer, but not before thanking the FS specialist for his help and courtesy. We don't find treatment like that everywhere we go and we sure appreciate it when we do.

Once clear of the MF zone, we picked up the high-tension power lines that lead straight from Red Deer to Chestermere, where our planes hangar. The wires glistened brightly in the afternoon, inviting us to follow. Admittedly, we were pretty easy to convince.

The harvested prairie fields glowed in the sunshine, drenching our planes in autumn gold, but reminding us again of winter's proximity. Every so often an emerald-hued patch of winter wheat or some other recently seeded crop would appear. These dazzling gems, destined for harvest next year, reassured us spring and summer will someday return.

We were nearly home when Andy peeled off for his pasture strip just below. We watched him set the Merlin gently onto the grass and then we bid him farewell. He thanked us for a great day of flying. The Giant and the Cub touched down a few minutes later at Kirkby Field and taxied to the gas tanks. We were mortal once more.

Glen and I helped one another fuel up. Then we discovered, rather by accident, that the Giant's nose makes a convenient leaning spot. He and I stayed there a while, chatting comfortably about the flight, seeing no reason to let go of the day just because we'd landed. We were each the other's best excuse not to go home.

The sun shone down, and jets sailed over, heading for Calgary.

We sat ourselves on the grass near the Giant's nose, and talked and laughed and dreamt about pilots and airplanes and flight. We noted how Al Botting hasn't been flying his Vagabond much because he's been traveling in England. And did you know the Giant's 6-bits came from a Champ that was wrecked in a windstorm in Grand Prairie decades ago? Our conversation flowed easily, a lazy river of contentment on a warm afternoon. It wound this way and that, touching on things like props and prop hubs, brakes and radios, our landings at Red Deer - anything air-related - anything that would keep us in the company of flight just a little longer.

And then time very rudely interrupted, telling us we'd best get home so we can do this very thing again, soon.

Glen clambered into the J-3's back seat, and when he was ready, he signaled. I simultaneously stepped up to the engine and back in time once more. Just like it was 1939 all over again, I swung the old wooden prop

once, then twice, before the engine roused and whirred to life. The prop whistled languidly through the air.

Clarke taxied out and I walked to the side of the runway to watch him takeoff. He ran the engine to full power and skipped easily into the sky, as Cub pilots will do.

The Cub flew over me and my heart soared with excitement and envy. I desperately wanted to run to the Giant, call Glen on the radio, and tell him frantically to wait, that I was coming with him, we could go fly some more. I'd only be a minute firing up. Really, only a minute.

I didn't run to the Giant, but I can't quite recall how I resisted. Instead, I just watched while the Cub turned gently for home and slowly diminished in the afternoon.

Yes, I thought, days like this really are best shared just between pilots.