

...And Lived On the Wind

by Stu Simpson

It's tough to believe but I was the only one there. On a nearly calm morning with a high, cool overcast and promise in the wind, I was the only guy on Kirkby Field. Admittedly, this was because the others have jobs. But some of my flying mates are retired, and so I was puzzled. I resolved not to concern myself over it, though, and instead set about readying the Giant to fly.

Linden would serve well as a destination. I'd have breakfast and buy a pie for my wife. One of the immutable truths for married pilots who fly for fun is that it never hurts to have a few extra air miles in the bank.

Once aloft and climbing strongly, the Giant felt sure and solid as it always does. It'd been too long since I'd had the controls in my grasp, nearly a week. That was when some of us wound up at a rancher's strip in the foothills southwest of Calgary. The rancher's name is Butler.

I love places like Butler's for a number of reasons. They're often set in beautiful places, in Butler's case a shallow but narrow valley running roughly northeast to southwest. Airstrips like these practically throw a gauntlet at a pilot's feet, so blatant is their challenge. But a pilot must be cautious answering the dare because such strips' approach regimens require care and imagination to defeat any obvious and less obvious dangers.

The biggest problem at Butler's is how the west end of the runway abuts a road. Naturally, the road has power lines beside it - lines without marker balls on them. Thus, the pilot bears the responsibility to see the road, spot the lines and take every pain to miss them on landing. If you're unwilling to shoulder such a burden you're well advised to fly to another, less demanding runway.



The BushCaddy and Bushmaster at Butler's strip. Photo by Stu

As testing as places like Butler's are, the real reason I like them so much is that I've never been there before. I must now confess to a barely contained aeronautical wanderlust. I'm constantly at odds with myself over flight. Part of me wants to load a few belongings and tools in the Giant and just fly away to places where I've never been before, and then keep going. Of course, my logical side recognizes the folly of such action and keeps me on a reasonably satisfying, though occasionally chafing tether. Places like Butler's, and other treasures that few pilots know of, turn up close to home with just enough regularity to keep me here.

Wegerich and I found Butler's strip last summer, but declined to land. I returned on my own one winter day to locate it again and mark it on my map. I considered a landing then, but I was alone and didn't want to alight when there were no other friends with whom I could share the adventure.

As I drew overhead of Butler's this time, I spotted the road and power lines and thus warned my wingmen, Huzzey and Bishell. Huzzey piloted his Challenger II carrying his lovely wife, Chris; and Bish was in his Bush Caddy. It's a shame Wegerich wasn't around.

I cleared the power lines and set down on the surprisingly smooth runway. I knew I'd very much like any man who keeps a runway so well. After my wingmen landed we met Pierce Butler and I did like him. He was very down to earth in his muddy rubber boots and flannel work jacket. He built the airstrip to harbour his Cessna 182, a suitably capable craft for such a locale. Butler mentioned how he enjoyed reading my stories in COPA's newspaper and I immediately liked him even more.

Our takeoff from Butler's was exciting as we clawed our way up between the heavily treed hills from his runway's 4200' elevation. The Giant handled it well but I'd be reluctant to try it on a hot day at gross weight.

The memories of Pierce Butler and his airstrip brought a smile to my face as I steered the Giant a bit to the right for Linden. It seemed the wind was pretty hefty aloft and a quick check confirmed it to be about 17 mph, but right on the nose. Good, I'd get to fly a little longer.

The village of Irricana peeked into sight ahead. I'd stay west of there and consequently of Beiseker, too, about 5 miles further up the road. That would leave sufficient distance to clear Beiseker's ATF because there'd be training flights landing there for sure.

A few little rain drops splashed onto the windscreen and skittered back in the propwash, leaving tiny droplet trails. But the clouds, benign in their appearance, showed no sign of spewing more. Perhaps a breeze had simply dusted these drops from a cloud the way someone sweeps crumbs from a table top.



Reid Huzzey pilots his Challenger II over the Foothills near Butler's strip. Photo by Stu Simpson

Irricana passed beneath my right wing with its toy-sized houses, streets and cars. One house was oddly arranged, clearly defiant of the village's architectural conservatism. Triangular in shape, like an alpine chalet, it was also canted at a rakish angle to the perfectly squared property boundaries. It would take some courage to build a house like that in Irricana. All the other houses nearby were much less adventurous being staid, square and parallel with the streets and each other.

I wouldn't have seen that house if I flew higher or faster. I'd have never known for sure there's at least one person in Irricana who likes things a little different than his neighbours. And I wouldn't have admired the owner's bravery like I do now. You come across interesting people when you're flying low and slow, even if you never meet them.

I avoided the power lines landing at Linden. They have balls to mark them, which is very considerate of whoever hung them there. A beautiful young Mennonite girl served me breakfast. Then she sold me a banana cream pie to take home to my wife, who loves them, and hopefully me, for bringing them.

I turned sharply right once airborne again from Linden's runway and headed for some land to the east that I wanted to see before I turned for home. Presently, the farm my uncle owned when I was a boy was clearly visible. Adventure then was riding dirt bikes with my cousin Byron through pastures and coulees, and camping among the gigantic poplars out back of the farm house. We'd fish from a row boat on a small reservoir nearby. I suppose when you're twelve most things are an adventure, but even then I couldn't wait to be up here.

Things have changed down there since I was a kid, but not everything. The farm house has been painted and the trees cut down, but the reservoir still bears trout. And I still can't wait to be up here.

My ground speed was measurably higher heading home. From east of Linden the route back to Kirkby's would certainly impinge on Beiseker's airspace. On Beiseker's frequency a young Asian-sounding man in a C-172 stated he was approaching from the southwest. He sounded a little unsure, but still brave in his efforts to conquer the Cessna at Beiseker, or perhaps Beiseker in the Cessna. Either way, he seemed admirably determined.

The student inadvertently keyed his radio mic on final so that anyone listening heard his instructor patiently talking him through the landing.

"Bring the airspeed back to 60 knots for final approach and adjust the ...". He suddenly released the mic button, maybe as he stretched his fingers trying to relax. The instructor, apparently a young woman, sounded forgiving and tolerant as she shared with him her gift of wings.

I envied the student for the challenges ahead and silently wished him well. I wanted to radio and tell him so, but thought it might distract him in his conquests.

Where will he go with his flying? Will he be one of so many who learn to fly and then get bored and quit? Can he even afford to keep flying after he achieves his licence? I hope so. I like pilots and would like to see more of them.

I sailed the Giant back to Kirkby Field completely enraptured with airplanes and flight. Occasionally, I'd giggle to myself just from pure joy. For a couple of moments I could hardly believe my luck being up there flying - and in my own airplane, too! Grinning incessantly, I hauled the Giant around Kirkby's circuit a couple of times, telling myself I needed the practice. Truth is, I just didn't want it to end.



Simpson's Bushmaster, the Green Giant, not far from Linden. Photo by Dan Mitchell

My first approach was way too fast and I touched long, but with barely a tremor from the landing gear. Very pleasing, that. Ultralight pilots, though, admire short landings more than smooth ones. It's neither vanity nor exhibitionism. At the places we land such skill might one day separate a pilot from his demise. There's never been a runway that's too long.

My next landing was a peach. I set the Giant down firmly and still made the intersection turn-off a few hundred feet from the button. I remained completely saturated in satisfaction and contentment as I taxied the Giant in.

It dawned on me for the millionth time - this must be what it was like. This has to be how the barnstormers felt as they cast themselves to the clouds and lived on the wind. They'd have reveled in the absolute wonder and freedom of just being up there flying. They'd feel giddy and thrilled, knowing they'd just lived a whole minute in the sky and were about to do so all over again. And every breath they took aloft would be the

most precious they'd ever drawn. I just know they felt that way. My God, how could they not?