

Farewell to the Renegade

by Stu Simpson

Bob Kirkby had finally gotten lucky. After many months of advertising he sold his Murphy Renegade to a fellow in Cold Lake, Alberta. Kirkby and the new owner cut the deal in March and the buyer wanted to get it home as soon as possible. Realizing that he didn't have the experience or warm enough weather to fly it there himself, he told Bob he'd come and take it home in pieces on a truck.

It took Kirkby about half a second to change the fellow's mind. "I didn't want to see it go like that," Bob said. Rather than rip it apart, Bob would deliver the Renegade by flying it to Cold Lake.

That was a pretty courageous decision; many things could go wrong on such a trip, and the Renegade could get bent. Bob wasn't getting paid until he delivered it in one piece. Also, since he'd be making the trip in spring time Alberta, the weather conditions would be anybody's guess.

I offered to accompany Bob and fly him home in the Giant. It'd be safer to have someone else along, and a ride in the Giant would sure beat a 20 hour bus ride home. Glen Bishell offered to come along, too, just for the hell of it. He's like that, which is one of his more endearing qualities.

We waited through an abnormally frigid March and most of abnormally frigid April. Looking at the forecast, we set a tentative departure date for a Sunday in mid-April. The weather maps looked good on Saturday night, indicating the chance of tailwinds in both directions for the flight. But the weather turned into a freak blizzard for anywhere in Alberta north of Innisfail. As it was, Calgary had a wind storm with gusts up to 50 knots. The wind actually blew Kirkby's wind sock off it's post.

Bishell and Kirkby and I waited impatiently, checking the weather every few hours during the next days. If we found a weather window, we knew it'd be a small one and that it'd likely close on us quickly. Toward the following Friday the weather started to look a lot better, though still a bit cold for flying open cockpit. The go/no go decision fell largely to Bob, who'd have to endure the cold from the Renegade's cockpit. He decided we were on.



Bishell stands guard on the ramp at Three Hills. Photo by Stu Simpson.

The air still had a chilly snap to it as we taxied out at 10 a.m. We reasoned the day would warm up as it progressed, which is also what the weather guys said would happen. Boy, was that wrong.

Bishell, timing his takeoff from Carstairs, planned to meet us in the air near Three Hills. Together at last, we'd continue the hop to Stettler and our first gas stop. But Bob had a minor radio problem shortly after takeoff. Glen's radio was acting up, too, so we decided to land at Three Hills.

Several people appeared on the ramp to peer curiously at our birds. We impressed them with the fact that we were flying our ultralights to such a distant and remote place as Cold Lake.

Airborne once more with all radios fully functional, we turned again toward Stettler. Glen informed us of a tailwind originating from the southeast. Trouble was, it's rare around here to have a warm southeast wind in any season but summer. Sure enough, the temperature was dropping as we flew north. I was

starting to worry about Bob and the effects the cold might have on him. He discovered it was a little warmer at lower altitude, so we all wandered down a few hundred feet.

I couldn't help noticing the change in landscape beneath us. About halfway to Stettler, the world went from velvety blonde prairie to, well, just lumpy. Like crossing a street, we were suddenly over an endless and alien array of small hillocks punctuated with slushy sloughs and unruly stands of caragana. It looked positively incorrigible.



*The Renegade glows in the morning sun.
Too bad it's so cold! Photo by Stu.*

Stettler appeared right where it was supposed to be. After landing we drained our fuel cans and started looking around for a way into town for more. No sooner had the thought crossed our minds when a pick-up truck pulled up to the airport building. Gary Fink was the driver's name and he graciously offered to drive me into town for some go-juice. Gary, who's from Forestburg, is an aviation nut like us. He just happened to be in town to get plow blades and decided to stop at the airport to see if anything interesting was sitting on the ramp. He was very happy to help, but perhaps not as happy as we were to have his help.

Back in the air, it got even colder as we went north. Our altitude didn't matter much, it was just cold. Glen reported the air temperature as four degrees below zero. Normally Bob never flew the Renegade unless it was better than 5 above.

This leg, to St. Paul, was 130 miles long and all over featureless, unfamiliar terrain. Navigation was without question the toughest I've done yet. Map reading was both a miserable and exhilarating chore as I tried matching a sparse assortment of landmarks to the few shades and scribbles of my chart. I'd search out a creek here, or perhaps a pipeline there, if the land hadn't grown over it in the 20 years since the map was drawn. An odd bend in an otherwise ruler-straight road was an infuriating treasure, forcing me to scrutinize the constantly leaping map to find it. Only rarely was I successful, but I had to try. The convective bumps of the afternoon only made things worse, especially down low where we had to stay for warmth. A couple of times I was more than a little worried about exactly where we were. But, sure enough, the railroad I'd been trying to keep my thumb on wandered into view; or we'd cross a powerline near where it crossed an irrigation ditch, just like the chart said it would. With each little victory I allowed myself a silent cheer. But make no mistake - all this fun was a hell of a lot of work.

St. Paul finally drifted into sight. Half frozen, Bob made an admittedly bad landing, but was happy to just be on the ground again. Before anything else we headed to the airport lounge to warm up. We met Harve Heeg of Airdrie, who has a cabin north of St. Paul. He flies a C-172 out of the St. Paul strip and was busy cleaning the foot or so of soggy snow from in front of his hangar.

While refueling I discovered I left my rear gas cap on the ramp at Stettler. This maddened and embarrassed me because I should know better. Glen and I quickly fashioned a temporary cover from a piece of tarp and some duct tape.

Just as we headed out to the airplanes to go, Glen noticed Bob's left tire was flat. Turns out part of the inside of the tire had rubbed a hole in the tube. We had to use my spare tube, which was entirely the wrong size. Bob agreed to try it after accepting the fact it only had to survive one takeoff and one landing.

The Dragonflies seem to have a short, but troubled history at St. Paul. In 1999, during our first Air Adventure Tour, Adrian Anderson's brother had a stuck valve on his Champ there. On top of that, we had to wait several hours for the wind to subside enough for us to continue the trip. I thought of all of this as we shivered in the icy wind fixing Bob's tire. At least there was no doubt this trip was an adventure.

Once the tire was fixed we pondered the prospects of Cold Lake tower clearing us straight through their control zone to the Regional Airport. This would be important to minimize flight time for Bob. Would military flights preclude our transit through the zone? Looking at my watch I chuckled and realized we weren't going to have any problems.

"Wait a minute, guys," I said. "It's nearly 5 o'clock on a Friday afternoon. Any CF-18 drivers are already well on their way to a beer."

We launched out of St. Paul and stayed as low as we dared over the broken bush and lake-covered country side. Southwest of Bonneyville, we all had a good laugh when Kirkby lost his map through the front cockpit hole.

Once past Bonneyville, we dialed in Cold Lake tower.

"Cold Lake Tower, ultralight Dragonfly 1 is with you," I radioed.

"Dragonfly 1, go ahead," the controller replied. She sounded about 15 years old, but no less professional for it.

"Tower, Dragonfly 1 is lead ship in a package of three ultralight aircraft currently five east of Bonneyville at 2900 feet, inbound to the Regional. We'd like permission to transit the zone."



Bob and Glen re-assemble the Renegade wheel after changing tube. Photo by Stu.

"Dragonfly 1, you're cleared direct to the Regional. Wind is 180 at 10. Call the Regional in sight."

I acknowledged the instructions, happy my hunch was correct. It was tough to find the airport in the snow covered bush, but it soon appeared as a long grey stripe near a tree line. I called the tower again and the controller cleared us to the local ATF.

We gratefully set down on runway 25 just a few minutes before 6 p.m. I was a bit sad for Bob since this was the end of his last adventure in the Renegade.

A couple of guys flagged us down and waved us to the last hangar in the furthest corner of the field. And sure enough, by the time we stopped taxiing, Bob's tire was flat. But he'd delivered the Renegade safe and sound, and in one piece. All in all, Kirkby was pretty happy.

Our night in Cold Lake was busy. We had to find a proper tire and tube for the Renegade so Bob could give Gerald, the new owner, a proper check out the next morning. We found the right tire in the Renegade's new hangar, but finding the tube proved to be more difficult. We eventually located one at the local Wal-Mart. Incidentally, Cold Lake's Wal-Mart is about the size of Lethbridge.

Gerald is an avionics tech on CF-18s in 416 Squadron - the same squadron we toured in '99. He proved to be a magnificent host. He bought Glen and I each a bucket of gas for the trip home, and then bought us all dinner. He also arranged accommodations at the Lakeshore Inn; a bed and breakfast that was simply the very best place I've stayed in anywhere.



Kirkby shows Gerald Fehr, the Renegade's new owner, what to look for in the pre-flight inspection. Photo by Stu.

The next morning dawned clear and cold, but the wind was light. After a bit of running around town to get a few more things in shape for Gerald's check flight, we headed back to the Regional. Once the Renegade's wheel was back together Bob showed Gerald all he needed to know to start learning to fly it. Gerald crammed himself carefully into the front cockpit of his new plane and could hardly contain his excitement for the first flight.

The checkout with Bob went well despite the gusty crosswind that now plagued the field. It was scooting through the sock at 10 - 15 knots from the south. Since we planned to be heading south soon, I wasn't too pleased. Glen and I agreed we enjoyed Cold Lake a lot more in '99.



After the check ride, Gerald's smile tells all. Photo by Stu.

After Gerald and Bob shot a few circuits it was time for us to go. Kirkby jumped in with me, happy to be warm in an airplane again. Bish was kind enough to carry the gas cans and extra equipment. The wind on the surface at the air base was southeasterly at 10 knots when I'd checked it an hour earlier. Lloydminster was showing 15 gusting 22. That news worried me. I hoped to stay as close as possible to right angles to that wind for as much of the trip as we could. We decided to make for Vegerville for our first gas stop.

Naturally, the wind was much stronger aloft, so we tried to stay low. But even below a thousand AGL, Glen's GPS showed an average headwind component of 15 mph, sometimes 20, and sometimes 25. This was going to be a long day. One bonus for me was having Bob along to navigate while I flew and fought with the turbulence. Having him read the map cut my workload by half. We were all rather surprised to see convective turbulence from snow covered land.

The leg to Vegerville took two hours. Sometimes our ground speed was less than 50 mph. We were very glad to turn onto the downwind for Vegerville's runway 13.

On the ground we once again found a willing aviator to help us get gas. Tom Wharton drove us to town, and even lent me an extra gas can so I could fill up completely. During the drive, Tom bragged



Farewell to the Renegade. Photo by Stu.

of the fantastic amount of recreational aviation activity that happens at Vegerville. For instance, when we arrived he and several others were busy fabricating a wing on an Avid Flyer re-build. The other wing was in the paint booth in Tom's hangar, where he keeps the RV-6A he's building. A trike resides in the hangar next to Tom's, and the list goes on. Just before we left, four conventional aircraft flew in for the donuts the Vegerville guys have on offer each Saturday. The Vegerville crew has a lot to brag about, indeed.

It was while taxiing out to the active that one of my tires went flat; our third flat tire of the trip. Luckily, I bought a replacement tube in Cold Lake so fixing it was really only an annoyance. We were soon back in the air southbound for Stettler. Winds were 10 gusting 15 from the south-southeast.

This leg was the toughest one of the return trip. Navigation was still difficult; the turbulence was worse than the day before because the snow had melted; and to top it all, my radio failed. Still, we were enjoying the adventure and I definitely didn't want to be stuck on the ground driving home. Being aloft granted us a privileged view of some interesting sights. There were flocks of bright white geese or swans, each assembly at least a thousand in number. They swarmed like white fireflies against the dull barrens below. And like a smaller version of the Red Deer River, the Battle River trickled southeastward with dramatic rock protrusions guarding its banks. The late afternoon light exaggerated their parched formations, compelling them to appear even more exotic.



Bishell and Simpson, and their Bushmasters. These proved to be very capable airplanes for such an adventure. Photo by Bob Kirkby.

Then the land got lumpy again and we knew we were nearing Stettler. About ten miles north of the town, we finally outran the cold. The temperature on the ramp was a pleasant thirteen degrees. Hopping out of the Giant, I heard Glen call my name. I looked up to see my gas cap whizzing toward my head. I caught it just in time and resolved to wear my helmet around Bishell anytime I've lost something on an airport ramp.

Glen soon found another kind soul to drive us for gas; a fellow who works on the airfield and was just a few minutes from heading home. We also picked up a couple of hot dogs at the gas station. Back at the field, Bob and I agreed there's not much better than having your supper on the cowl of airplane, on a warm spring evening, in the middle of a flying adventure.

We left Stettler and turned southwest for home. I noticed Bish slowly drifting off to the west and radioed that he should turn a bit more to the left for the proper course. He replied that he was right on the course his GPS said was right for Three Hills. After a few more minutes, and some convincing navigational evidence from Bob and I, Glen reasoned he might have the wrong coordinates entered for Three Hills. He checked later and found the GPS was directing him to a field southwest of Innisfail. At this writing, there's no word back on how the wrong coordinates got entered. I was suddenly vindicated in my stubborn refusal to adopt GPS as my primary nav device. And I had Kirkby as a witness. I didn't say anything about it to Glen, though. That would have been indiscrete.

We soon crossed the line where the lumpy part of the earth turned flat again. Bob and I each felt relieved to be back over familiar and beautiful territory that felt much closer to home. The lofty towers atop Three Hills' three hills soon slipped by our right side and we cursed such structures like ultralight pilots everywhere do.

Glen broke off for home when we reached Linden, peeling easily away toward the falling sun. We continued on toward Kirkby Field, still fond of the evening and loving the simple fact that we were flying. We raced a sports car for a few minutes south of Acme and then spotted a pretty yellow Cub poking its nose out of a hangar at the Lemay strip near there.

I turned the Giant into the circuit at home about 10 minutes before sunset, then greased it on to runway 16. It was a good end to another good adventure in the sky.

The adventure might be over, but we sure got our money's worth out of it, I decided. Not only was it a chance to test our airplanes and ourselves, we got the chance to say goodbye. I know I'll miss flying alongside the Renegade, but I'm pleased we gave it a good send off and a proper escort to its new home. It was the least we could do for a friend.



Simpson and the Giant, glad to be home. Photo by Bob