

## Soaring into Stettler

Sunday, 31 August 2008

'Bird genes' keep 87-year-old Walter Mueller in full flight

Written by CRYSTAL RHYNO - Herald-Tribune staff  
With his keen eyesight, expert navigation and white hair you might be forgiven for mistaking Walter Mueller for a bird of prey.

Even his wife, Grace, says during his creation some extras must have been thrown in for good measure, but the octogenarian himself sums it up best.

'During evolution there must have been some bird genes put into my system,' laughed Mueller, from his home in Mission Heights.

At 87, Mueller could very well be one of the oldest glider pilots in the Peace Country — he holds that honour in the Grande Prairie Soaring Society. But that matters little as he is just as agile and active as those half his age.

'Slow down? Not yet,' he chuckled some more. 'I am still pretty fit.'

Recently Mueller did experience something that will make for conversation fodder for years to come.

On the final day of the annual Cowley Summer Camp — a major soaring event in southern Alberta — Mueller decided to go up one last time in his Open Cirrus sailplane because the weather conditions were exceptional. Once in the air, Mueller headed north to Chipman, hoping to encounter an evening thermal (updrafts of warm air) to move him along the last stretch from Tofield to Chipman.

However, the weather conditions changed and Mueller had to make an unexpected landing.

'Halfway between Drumheller and Stettler I could see a large, dark air mass blocking my course and as I came closer I could see heavy rain falling over Stettler,' explained Mueller. 'I decided to land at Stettler rather than go further north.'

Shortly after 6 p.m., after being in the air for five hours and 49 minutes travelling 364 kilometres, he landed his plane at the Stettler airport and entered his arrival into the airport log sheet.

“It’s a great sport and it is a challenge,” said Mueller, who retired in 1985 from the engineering department at Canfor.

“It’s a mental and a physical challenge. People think you just sit in there but it’s not that simple. After five or six hours when I get out I am usually bushed.”

Grace, his wife, faithfully supports her husband in all his flights. She said boredom is not a word in their household. While her husband of 15 years — it’s the second marriage for the couple — takes flight and enjoys the view from above, Grace reads, paints or plays cards.

“I just really hope he can keep going as long as he feels he can and enjoy every moment of it,” she said, noting she has gone up in the two-person gliders and loved every minute.

“It is definitely not a spectators’ sport. You see them go up once and you see them come down.”

She said when her husband gets out of the plane the look on his face says it all.

“Happiness is all over his face. His eyes are lit up and he is like a little kid.”

Seventy-one years ago, Mueller first took to the skies in Black Forest (Schwarzwald), Germany as a teenager through an organization similar to air cadets. Over the last seven decades of his life he has flown both engine-powered and non-engine aircraft. Mueller moved to Canada in 1951 and received his Canadian Private Pilot’s licence in 1960.

He got back into gliding in 1981 in Grande Prairie, where he flies with the local soaring club and hasn’t let up since that fateful day 27 years ago.

“Unfortunately our club is not very active. Most of my flying, I

do on those camps where you get together for a week or 10 days," he said, hoping more people will give the sport a go.

"One has to always look for the updraft or the lift and then, of course, you go across country and then you get low and think where could I land? Preferably, of course, it is in an airport, like in this case, I made it to the airport at Stettler."

On Oct. 6, 2006, Mueller received his Gold C Badge — a badge system was established to recognize a glider pilot's achievement — where the requirements consist of a minimum flight distance of 300 kilometres and an altitude gain of 3,000 metres or more. On this fall day during the Cowley Wave Camp, Mueller's flight recorder showed a high point of 6,554 metres.

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