

Sixty Years of Gliding on three Continents

(Condensed from an Article in the October 2004 Krautkoerant by Hans Lobach)

My first 'slide' in an SG 38 open single seat training glider, took place on April 23, 1944. This was followed by the first flight at launch number five. I still remember the elation of being airborne to a height of about half a meter for roughly 10 to 15 seconds and my 'A' Badge was launch 30 and my first full winch was launch 44. Due to petrol rationing the winch cable was manually retrieved.

Nowadays, sitting in the back seat at the first launch of a novice on aerotow at Worcester, for a flight lasting about 30 minutes, I am not so sure that he feels the same excitement that I had with my first flight of 15 seconds. My own training eventually finished with a GPL.

After WW 2 Germany was not allowed to fly any kind of aircraft, full stop. Then, in 1947, a group of old wartime pilots with glider experience as well as some others like my young self, who had only got a bit of prior glider training, got together clandestinely to collect old parts of gliders, some hidden in farm barns, and put them together again. Eventually some plans were obtained and the building of an SG 38 started.

In 1950, many of us others made a pilgrimage to the famous Rhön mountain at the Wasserkuppe where the sport of gliding had begun immediately after WW I, when the same non-flying conditions had been imposed on Germany by the Allied Forces. It was here that the new German aero-club was founded. Some now very famous names in gliding attended, among them Wolf Hirth, Fritz Stamer, Oskar Ursinus and Hanna Reitsch. But the only aviation activity allowed then was gas ballooning!

As a founder member of my home-town flying club at Remscheid, I was for many years active in the running of the club, first as Secretary and later Vice-Chairman.

In 1951 gliding was at last permitted again in Germany and soon the home-built SG 38 (Primary) was ready to be bungee-launched from a hill. Again the flight durations of up to one minute were the order of the day. About then the first winch launches were done – and what elation it was to be totally in the open. But that was not enough, so a two-seater Doppelraab training glider was built and taken all the long way to Unterwossen in the Alps, to enable the pilots to do "proper" gliding, which included ridge soaring. Only in 1957 was power flying allowed, and before long I obtained my PPL.

I feel strongly about the importance of safety and self-discipline in flying, as I witnessed three fatal accidents. Afterwards I had to face the stunned widow and relatives, a task for which nobody else wanted to volunteer. On analyzing the tragedies it always came down to human shortcomings in some way, reason enough to be meticulous and calm when in action.

In 1961 I was sent to New Delhi, India, by my company. There the famous Pandit Nehru was patron of the Delhi Gliding Club, and I was made Honorary Chief Engineer, receiving a trophy for being "the most disciplined pilot of the club" (see Picture 1). This award was handed to me by Nehru himself. Once again, all my leisure time was spent on the gliding field, though I also enjoyed the power flying

opportunities there. I persuaded Hanna Reitsch, who had visited the Delhi Gliding Club, to help arrange for the German State President, on the occasion of his state visit, to hand over a glider as a gift. Alas, this never materialized because of bureaucratic bungling.

It was here that I met Elisabeth, my future wife. While not a gliding person, we happily enjoyed gliding though hardly ever together - the cables used were of poor quality and not all that strong, so after a few cable break surprises, they saw to it that each one of us had a lighter-weight flying partner!

In January 1966, I was transferred to Durban and soon sniffed out the local gliding folk, making weekend treks to Pietermaritzburg airfield. After one of the previously mentioned fatal accidents, the club made me their chairman, a position I occupied for the ensuing 17 years. Fully conscious of the need for discipline, I was well supported by Dick Becke as CFI.

After a temporary move to Estcourt, the club moved to Underberg near the Sani Pass, and a new happiness began – but this resulted in longer traveling times and attendant increases in costs. Fortunately the scenery on Dennis Wilson's of the farm dam in front of Bamboo Mountain, Rhino's Horn and the other ranges, and the camaraderie made it all worthwhile. Not long afterwards, a hangar was built to protect the precious gliders from hail and storm. Later a clubhouse was on the men's minds, but the women protested vigorously – they rather wanted a toilet! So a toilet they got! The clubhouse did follow later. Caravans were also placed, braais were arranged under the sparkling stars in the crisp mountain air and lovely fellowship was enjoyed by all who came along. (see picture 4)

The members' children became part of the scene from birth. For me it was particularly rewarding to train and see my daughter, Briggita, become one of the country's youngest glider pilots at age 17. (see picture 3) Her driving licence only followed at 18. Nowadays, she has no time for gliding, but the love is still there and has infected her husband and two little boys. Who knows, maybe one day...

The Drakensberg Soaring Club is well known in the South African gliding fraternity. During my chairmanship I helped to obtain a few gliders from Germany, after which time new hands came along to lead.

Since October 2000 I have enjoyed my membership in the great, really large and wonderful Cape Gliding Club at Worcester. Never had I imagined the kindness and spontaneous welcome of the members, in particular some of the "Old Krauts"! Rudi (Schurkes) and Gerhard (Waller) in particular. I later joined their syndicate and a more harmonious partnership could hardly be found.

Coming to the Cape, I was not expecting to be busier and more involved in instructing and rebuilding club gliders than when I was at "my" old Underberg club, but this is how it has turned out.

I am grateful from the bottom of my heart after sixty years of gliding, to all who have helped to make my day, my week, my life so much happier by helping to hold the red thread of life in their hand with me. The award of "Instructor of the Year" it the recent AGM was a joyous surprise and the cherry on the top! Thank you all for this recognition!

It was Hans' life-long ambition to complete 60 years of gliding which he did on April 24th 2004. In 2005 he was awarded the Soaring Society of South Africa Sixty Year Award for his Services to Gliding (see picture 2). (Editor)