

TCU Gold Altitude



Some years back, a visiting German pilot friend was thermalling the Blanik while I dosed in the back seat. I slowly became aware that it had become cooler and darker so I opened my eyes. 70+ year old Herbert, who held a German glider instrument rating, was happily beginning to follow a strong thermal into the cloud. After I explained that this was unfortunately not allowed in Canada, Herbert grumpily opened the spoilers and descended. For Herbert's and our father's generation, cloud flying use to be either sanctioned (Germany) or widely tolerated (Canada).

Back in the 1950s, eastern Canadian glider pilots frequently achieved their FAI Gold 'C' climbs in clouds, often in Tower Cumulus, TCUs. Our father Elvie Smith like many others at Gatineau Gliding Club was intent on achieving his Gold 'C' climb. So he would regularly practice needle-ball-and-air-speed flying in clouds. When he eventually felt he had achieved the required proficiency, he started looking out for the right cloud for his Gold 'C' climb, one in which he could climb roughly 10,000 feet.

One day, a promising towering cumulus presented itself so Elvie climbed into it. Elvie had anticipated that climbing in a towering cumulus would be hard on his nerves so he periodically took breaks by exiting into the sun to the south, returning to the towering cumulus once he had regained his composure. Elvie was operating with the knowledge that, if he was to lose control, he could use the Olympia glider's speed limiting dive brakes to prevent an over-speed. Because of the turbulence inside a towering cumulus, an over-speed was almost certain to lead to an in-flight break-up. Late in his climb, while in heavy rain and significant turbulence, Elvie briefly lost control of the Olympia so deployed the dive brakes as planned. As he was able to regain control, Elvie stowed the dive brakes and resumed his climb. Eventually Elvie achieved an altitude that qualified him for his Gold 'C' so Elvie exited the towering cumulus.

Elvie was now ready to start his descent from nearly 15,000 feet back to Pendleton airport and so pulled on the dive brake handle. To his dismay, the dive brakes would not extend, their previous deployment in the rain having resulted in their freezing stowed! Had Elvie lost control of the Olympia a second time, an over-speed resulting in an in-flight break-up would have likely resulted.

Elvie did have a plan "b" as he was wearing a parachute!

Elvie would eventually achieve Canadian Gold 'C' No 4 in June 1957.

The attached photograph was taken in 1956 at Pendleton. Just before takeoff from runway 26, Elvie is helping a fellow pilot get ready for (hopefully) a TCU climb in the Olympia glider. Note Elvie's crutches!