

14 July 2003

I had a really good day flying yesterday!! In the morning, when I was preparing, I decided to attempt Rush City, from our airfield. Rush City, directly North of our field, is some 65 km away, and would allow me to attempt the Silver Distance portion of the Silver FAI badge. This destination also had the advantage of being an easy navigational goal. All I'd have to do is to follow I-35, the interstate highway, all the way up. Plus, it was beside the St. Croix river.

I got down to the airfield a little late, about 11:30am. 10am would have been better for getting ready for my first cross country flight. Famous hindsight. At this time someone was already towing the Pilatus B4 single-seater to be launched, so I checked out the Blanik L-13, my preferred other club glider. I got the barograph ready to record altitude and distance, and I was going to use the club parachute, but with my preparations behind, I decided to opt out on that.

After getting Roger Payne to be my official observer, calling for the barometric pressure, preparing the barograph, filling my camelbak, stowing the barograph, putting on sun screen (it was a warm day!), and getting the glider pulled out to launch, I was about ready. Alan Benfell asked "Do you have a ground crew?" I responded "No." He cringed. Bob Winston said "You'll make it back."

I planned on a release altitude of 1,900 feet above ground, inline with the rules for the Silver Distance. Rush City being some 60+km away, this should give me what I needed for distance. Just before launching, I was talking to Bob Winston, and told him my criterion for deciding whether to

really attempt Rush City (which was downwind, it turned out) was to be at 3,000 AGL, within 1/2 hour of launch. So, Roger towed me up. I noted it was reasonably bumpy on tow. Cumulus were everywhere, so it looked quite promising that there was lift. I released at 1,900 feet AGL, and started to look for thermals. After getting a couple of weaker thermals, and gaining a hundred feet or so, it was about the third thermal that took me up to 3,000 AGL. I grinned :). I was within my 1/2 hour criterion. I had been heading my glider North, so I committed myself to the Rush City attempt.

The trip downwind to Rush City (yes! I made it!) was relatively uneventful. Lift was variable, but available. Perhaps mostly on the downwind side of thermals? I managed to keep an altitude of 2,000 AGL or higher the whole trip to Rush City. I didn't get low enough to really get excited about the prospects of having to land, on this leg of the flight. Perhaps the only really notable thing about this leg of the flight was the navigation. I realized I could see the river rather well. It became clear to me that the river served as the preferred landmark (rather than the Interstate) for finding Rush City. Plus I realized that it was damn easy to get disoriented. I was flying over terrain that was entirely new to me. I had my map, of course, and my compass. Both of these were valuable, as was my noting landmarks in my morning preparation session. There was a bit of an anxiety sensation though: "Am I lost?" But, I could see the Interstate to the West (I tried to always stay East of it), and I knew my general heading was North. Both of these helped me to realize that the river was really my primary navigational landmark.

I came in to Rush City from the East. I flew an East, North,

West course above the city, taking lots of "turn point" pictures. I think I got the water tower well photographed. Perhaps this was the start of my "issues" for the return leg. I was obsessing a little over the turn point photos. I was excited about having made it to Rush City, and a little cocky. Of course, I thought, I can make it back (65km upwind.... Yes, a little cocky). I got down to about 2,000 AGL above Rush City, and made a "mistake." I had noted a nice strong thermal near the airport at Rush City. However, I didn't go back and use that. It was farther North (downwind) to the airport at that point. Instead, I kept heading upwind, South. I started not finding lift of a strong nature. And not using the weaker lift completely. Mistake #2 :). I got about 5 miles South of Rush City, on this return trip, and started getting excited about the prospect of having to land. I was about 1,000 AGL at that point. Still trying to find lift, I had a landing site in view, and I was upwind of it. I had my pattern laid out on the ground, one that would give me a landing into the wind. Still, it wasn't until about 500 to 700 AGL that one of my instructors words of wisdom seeped into my mind (perhaps from Jim Hard?): "New cross country pilots always leave the decision to land until too late." In my mind I was perhaps desperately resisting the idea I would have to land. I'd never before put my glider down in a farmer's field. Plus, I knew that it would involve some practical difficulties. I didn't have a crew set up, and this glider (the L-13) is heavy and would take some effort to take apart. Still, at between 500 to 700 AGL, my better judgment cut in, and being in position to head into a base leg of a pattern, I committed myself to landing and the base leg. "No more attempting to thermal for this pilot!" I got my landing gear down, and I have to say much of my landing checklist "went to the wind". I did manage to check my spoilers, I think. And I'm 95% sure I

used them on landing. (Though, suspiciously, the flaps were fully extended when I returned to the glider after landing). The field had a hay crop in it, but was nearly perfectly flat (Les said later it was about as long as Benson's airfield), and had some relatively low trees on my base leg end. Once I cleared the trees, I applied full spoilers, and put a bit of a slip on as well. The landing was pretty gentle, and the roll out was short. I got the brakes on quickly. On stopping, I opened the canopy, and opened the can of coke I'd brought along for the ride. My champagne? :). I also got out my camera and took several pictures from the glider, still not having released my belts. I then got out of the glider, and saw what appeared to be a house in the distance. I turned off the power to the radio and audio variometer, picked up my things (it was fortunate I brought a small handbag-- I put all the gear I stowed, including the barograph, which I then turned off, into the handbag). I started walking to the farmhouse.

It was a bit of a hike to the farmhouse. The hay was between knee and thigh height. The field was relatively flat, but had some roughness. Near the glider, I tried my mobile phone, but I was off network, and couldn't even get emergency service. This was part of the reason for my need to get to the farmhouse. It seemed I needed to borrow a phone. After getting to the farmhouse, a knock revealed that no one was at home. However, checking my mobile phone again, it was working. Standing outside of the farmhouse, I called Benson's. I got Bob Winston on the line and jokingly said "Your prediction was wrong!" "What?" he said. I then told him I'd managed to make it to Rush City, but was about 5 miles South of there, in a farmers field. He was pretty cool about it. I was anticipating some growls, having not set up a ground crew. At about this point, the house owner poked her head

out of the farmhouse, and looking at me said "Are you lost?" I was on the phone and starting to work out my retrieval, and walked over to her, and tried to let her know that I was a pilot, and had just put my plane down in her field. She smiled and nodded, and seemed really nice about it. So, I started to give directions to Bob Winston, for my new crew. The farm owner, it turns out her name was Ruby, helped out by supplying directions.

Ruby and I then pulled up a couple of lawn chairs, under a tree facing the road, and had a nice chat for a couple of hours. Ruby and her husband owned the house and the farm. Actually, Ruby's husband had passed on, and he had both been born and died in the farmhouse. Ruby was a very nice person, and told me lots of stories about her neighbors, and listened to my stories as well. Ruby, it turns out, had never been in a plane, and no plans to do so.

My landing was at about 3:30pm. I had taken me a little less than 2 hours to make it to Rush City. Les Stordalen was at the farmhouse at about 5pm, in his car. (It turns out that I'd not only failed to organize a ground crew, but I'd also failed to leave my truck key at the airfield). I thanked Ruby, and Les drove me back to Benson's. I was a little surprised at how long the drive was. Later, on my way back up to Duluth, I found out it takes about 35 minutes on the highway to get from Benson's to Rush City. We went back to Benson's, connected up the L-13 trailer to my truck (I had bought my 4WD Toyota Tacoma truck in 2000 with the plan to use it for this purpose). Recently I had acquired a drop hitch, and a 2" ball. The hitch and ball worked fine. (The Pilatus trailer needs a 1 7/8" ball). Most of the lights on the trailer were working, or should I say "enough of the lights"? Bob Winston

and Les were both going to help me, and we arrived back at the hay field, took the glider apart, loaded it onto the trailer, and were ready to go almost exactly timed with sunset and running out of light. And the mosquitoes descending in earnest. Scratching like mad, we drove in 4WD mode out of the field. Bob got out of the truck for the last few hundred feet and guided me as the terrain on the last bit of the field was uneven.

It must have been 9:30pm when Bob and Les got into Les's car, and I was ready to head back to the field. I offered dinner to Bob and Les, to pay them for their help, but they took a rain check as it was late, and we were all dirty, mosquito bitten, and generally tired.

I noted down the road address of Ruby's house. I'll send her some pictures and a thank you card shortly.

All in all, it was a great flight. Certainly one of my most memorable so far. I think God was looking down on me saying, "OK, you did a good job in getting to Rush City, but don't get too cocky now. Don't think you can get to Rush City and *back* to Benson's in your first cross country flight."

Sliver distance evaluation: It turns out that this flight did not meet all of the criteria for a Silver Distance flight. Jim Hard came back up to Ruby's field with me, and we measured the latitude and longitude of my landing site, estimated the altitude of the landing site, and he computed the distances and percentages. We also obtained altitude for the landing site from <http://www.topozone.com>, a free source of topographic maps at least for the USA. After the evaluations, Jim looked at me and said "You should have landed at Rush

City.” With the attempted return from Rush City, my flight did not officially meet the Silver Distance criteria, whereas a landing at the Rush City airport would have accomplished the goal. This leaves the Silver Distance for one of my next flights. I look forward to the day!