

Silent Auction Prize

CuNim Glider Flight

Shirlee Matheson's Excellent Adventure

When the CuNim Gliding Club generously donated a silent auction prize for our Neil Armstrong Memorial Awards Dinner in 2007 I earnestly outbid any contenders to win the Discovery Flight prize.

I chose a semi-cloudy day, September 6th, 2008, to drive out to the CuNim gliding site near Black Diamond. "Perfect weather for lift," said my instructor, Wilf Plester. We walked across the grassy field and approached the aircraft, which he explained was a Blanik L13 and one of the most popular two seat trainers in the world. It weighs around 660 lbs empty and is of all aluminum construction, with a wingspan of over 50 feet. He first acquainted me with the emergency equipment, helped me strap on the parachute and then showed me how to pop the canopy in the unlikely event that I'd need to make a quick exit. I climbed into the front cockpit, completely calm, just excited at the thought that I'd soon be up in the air, soaring like a bird (after all, birds don't have engines either, do they?). Wilf made sure I was safely tucked in, and then he climbed into the rear cockpit. We wouldn't even need helmets, or headphones to communicate.



The Blanik L13 was a perfect aircraft to take Shirlee for a Discovery Flight

Attached to a tow plane by a nylon rope, we bounced along the field for a very short time until we were in the air. We released at 3000 feet above ground level and flew at speeds of between 40 and 55 knots. Wilf explained that we were experiencing thermal lift from 100 to 500 feet per minute at times. The highest we reached was 4000 feet above ground, which is 7700 feet above sea level.

Our flight lasted a total of 44 minutes, but other glider flights that day, with experienced pilots, were as long as 2 1/2 to over 3 hours.

The thrill of flying without an engine, hearing the soft whisper of air flow past our aircraft, seeing those long wings dip and soar as they carried us up and around; viewing the Big Rock near Okotoks, the multicolored squares of autumn fields and forests, the Sheep River winding through the valley; swooping back toward Black Diamond with the Rockies etched on the western horizon – gave me a lasting gift of sensory memories.



Gliding at 4,000 feet over Okotoks is a wonderful experience

It was a great day, and on behalf of the museum, I thank the CuNim Gliding Club for donating the discovery flight for our silent auction. I would definitely recommend a soaring flight to anyone who yearns for experiences that are a bit different, exciting yet basically safe. Just check out the Cu Nim Gliding Club's website www.soaring.ab.ca/cunim or call to book your own discovery flight (403-813-3155).



Fields, foothills, and mountain ridges roll silently beneath the wings of the glider.