

## Not Really Henk's Year

Henk Müller whistled softly to himself as his V8 Fairlane swept down Bunker's Hill on his way towards Durban's docks. The drive from Johannesburg had filled him with anticipation and had put him in a state as closely approximating happiness as the Teutonic mind dares allow itself.

Having taken up gliding a few years ago, he had worked hard at becoming proficient enough to enter competitions. All that remained was to acquire one of the best gliders that money could buy.

On a recent business trip to Austria, to conclude a further contract for his burgeoning import agency, he had taken the plunge.

At long last, after an impatient wait for a delivery slot and the vagaries of the maritime industry, he was about to take delivery of a fifteen metre beauty - the top of its class.

Finally, the inevitable, laborious bureaucratic formalities at the docks were complete. He hitched the glider trailer behind the V8, immediately pointing its nose northwards. He couldn't wait to get back to Baragwanath.

However, smirking fate often sits by waiting to intervene, to catch the unwary and the careless. Somewhere outside Ladysmith he would have cause to rue not having checked every little detail of this exercise – just as thoroughly as one should carry out a pre-flight check.

You see, South Africa, enamoured by the Europeans - who thought that they had conquered the planet and displayed [and display] an insensate and moronic desire to control everything from sausage lengths to when, where and how to engage in sex - had rushed into metrication a few years before.

Heaven knows why. After all, the printing and fledgling computer industries were, and to this day remain, with imperial measurements. Very sensibly, the aero industry had also not been over eager to retool everything designed since Darwin discovered life, at what would have been galactic expense.

But I digress.

The net result of all this was, alas, that the V8 had a fifty-millimetre ball on the tow bar while the glider trailer has a two-inch cup.

A strong crosswind was pushing hard against the side of the trailer, straining the tow hitch, which had just enough play between the ball and cup to slip out of the safety catch as the trailer bucked and twisted in the crosswind.

With the weight behind gone, the V8 seemed to lurch forward causing Henk to instinctively glance in the rear view mirror. To his dismay, he saw the detached trailer begin slowing as it started to find its own path in the world, amid an impressive shower of sparks. Then he watched horrified as it slowly drifted over towards the road running in the opposite direction.

Henk had been dragging up a long steady incline, which naturally meant that the down road was a long steady decline. The approaching, impressive, bull-barred, heavily loaded twenty-five ton Oshkosh horse and trailer had nowhere to go – other than dead ahead.

Henk braked sharply to a stop and watched spell bound as the twenty-six wheeler destroyed the glider trailer as easily as a mighty C5 Galaxy transport might destroy a light plane against a minor wing fairing, leaving only a small dent in the aluminium. In this case, a few paint marks on the bull-bar.

The Oshkosh hit the trailer at a combined closing speed of well in excess of 100 kilometres an hour. This, despite copious clouds of blue-grey smoke pouring forth from every tyre on the big truck.

Bear in mind that both the trailer and the glider were made of glass fibre.

As if in slow motion, Henk saw the remains of the glider and its trailer disappear under the truck, as meat into a mincing machine, only to re-emerge moments later at its rear end having been miraculously transformed into tiny shards of non-descript white material.

During his frustrating wait for a new glider to be shipped out from Austria Henk continued to enjoy his gliding. One memorable Sunday he rode the Highveld cumulus as far as Rustenberg when suddenly all lift disappeared. He hadn't bothered to get a detailed met forecast, which would have warned him of the cooler air from the north, which was pushing in and taking with it the last semblance of any up draughts.

Now Henk had the habit of listening to loud classical music during his little incursions into the wild blue yonder and on this particular Sunday, as his lift ran out, his eyes were scouring the ground below for a suitable landing ground to the strains of a soul stirring organ concerto.

Just next to a farmhouse lay a newly ploughed field, its straight furrows promising a successful landing.

As Henk swooped lower the farmer, his wife and daughter pulled up at the farmhouse in their Sunday finery. They had just returned from a pious sermon.

With the cockpit pulled back Henk banked low over the three and yelled, "I'm coming down." The farmer promptly sank to his knees before keeling over prostrate on the ground.

Hastily landing, Henk rushed over to help. The farmer was just struggling to his feet as he reached him.

It seemed that the sermon, the whooshing sound of the glider as it cleft the air, the organ music from the sky and the voice hailing him were all enough to convince the devout old man that his time had come and that God was summoning him.

Three months later, we were all gathered at Baragwanath to inspect Henk's replacement glider, which he wisely had railed up from Durban.

The entire gliding club clustered around the state of the art machine, which was designed to carry jettisonable water ballast. The extra weight of the water ballast is an advantage if the lift is likely to be strong but it becomes a distinct disadvantage in weaker thermal conditions and in these cases, the pilot can jettison the water to lighten the glider. Finally, in order to avoid stressing the airframe, the water ballast must be jettisoned before landing.

Forgive this little technical excursion but it is cardinal to my tale of Henk's misfortunes.

Because of its smooth lines - and in addition to its spoilers, or dive brakes - the glider also had a small drogue parachute to slow it down rapidly on landing.

Soon Henk was hitched behind the tug plane, a Piper Super Cub with a beefy 180hp Lycoming engine.

The pilots and ground controller signalled each other and the tug pilot opened its throttle.

All our eyes were on the two aircraft.

Now, I must explain the topography of the airfield. They were taking off from the northeast end of the runway. From this point, the runway slopes upwards toward its middle point whereafter it drops away sharply towards the valley below. From the side it looks like a surfacing whale's back.

The glider soon became airborne closely followed by the tug.

Suddenly a collective gasp arose from the assembled gawking throng.

When the pair reached the apex of the runway Henk, for reasons best known to the fates, found another knob in the glider's cockpit and pulled it or bumped it. By accident or stupidity? We'll never know.

This lever released the drogue parachute.

The tug immediately began levelling off and then slowly began losing height with the sudden immense drag behind it.

The tug pilot frantically searched his instruments for the problem area but all readings were normal. Except for the rate of climb indicator, which now revealed - in that wonderful piece of Yankee political double speak - a negative rate of climb.

Knowing him, back in the glider Henk no doubt began cursing the "idiot pilot" in front of him. What the hell did he think he was doing? Didn't he know how to fly a bloody airplane? Was he trying to kill them both?

The terrain immediately beyond the boundary fence was filled with rocks that would smash the glider to pieces. Realising this, the tug pilot set his eyes

on the first flat piece of ground ahead. Before this lay the hospital building and then the dual carriageway to Johannesburg. The tug and its charge were now heading straight for the hospital.

By some miracle the tug cleared the high point of the hospital by some dozen feet. The glider, riding higher than the tug, had a few more feet to spare.

At this point Henk obviously decided that the tug pilot was either beyond lunacy or dead behind the controls and he punched the towline release knob.

Predictably, the tug took off like a rocket, climbing like a homesick angel.

The glider, this magnificent, aerodynamic marvel, now deprived of its sole motive power, with its belly full of water and its drogue parachute deployed, immediately assumed the flight characteristics of a jagged, tumbling brick.

We had watched the unfolding drama with baited breath through all available binoculars.

Suddenly we saw the tug rear up and Henk disappear behind the hospital buildings. Fearing the worst we were galvanised into action by great rivers of adrenalin. We leapt into our cars and rushed off like a fleet of demented maniacs towards the highway at breakneck speed.

Faced with the inevitable and impending reunification with Mother Earth, Henk must have suddenly remembered the full ballast tanks. Hastily, he pulled the water dumping lever hoping to prevent over stressing the glider, which was about to unceremoniously meet with tar rather than grass.

In the same movement he must have turned and aligned the glider with the dual carriageway.

Streaming water and coming down at a steep angle, the glider thumped into the outbound lane sending cars scurrying in all directions.

With the last bit of momentum, he slewed the glider off onto the grass verge.

Miraculously it came to rest with its tail just off the road and absolutely no damage.

However, it had been dumping the water ballast till the end leaving a wet streak along the road. The offending drogue parachute now lay in the water, sopping wet, and half in the road.

We were guided to the scene by the tug circling overhead, still trailing the 200-foot towrope.

We screeched to a halt on the shoulder of the inbound lane to be greeted by the picture of a wildly gesticulating Henk talking to an agitated traffic policeman in the most animated manner.

As we unceremoniously fell out of our cars, our relief on seeing that he was unharmed spurred us on to uncontrollable mirth over the ridiculous situation that we had just witnessed. This unseemly mirth appeared to irritate Henk and to further enhance his wildly gyrating explanation.

Unfortunately, in his profoundly animated state, he stepped back, tripped over the soggy drogue parachute and fell into the road.

The Valiant taxi's tyres aquaplaned on the trail of water ballast as it braked hard in a vain attempt to avoiding the prostate Henk.

Apparently he died instantly.

**Ray Hattingh**