

Eulogy for Otto Heithecker

Written by Karl S. Heithecker & spoken at Otto Heithecker's memorial service on October 25, 2007

Good morning. First, I would like to thank everyone for coming out to celebrate the life of Otto Heithecker. I speak with utmost regard when I say that Otto was a great brother to my Aunt Hilda and my late father Bill, a wonderful brother in law to Uncle Doug and my mother Joyce, equally to my cousins Lynn, Sandy, Dan and my sisters Kris, Karen and finally myself. I think it would be fitting at this time to mention how thankful our family and friends are to Aunt Hilda and her family for their persistence in caring for Otto over the last 2 years. Our thanks also to Lynn and Sandy specifically for their endless attention to Otto's needs when Aunt Hilda and Uncle Doug needed to handle affairs back at their home in West Branch.

Otto had some amazing talents and equally amazing accomplishments in his life. He was also an intense man. He did nothing half way. Everything he did was "by the book" or if not in this manner, he wrote the book himself. He was a natural at drafting and design long before any of us considered creating a sketch on a computer. I can recall one day many years ago when I visited Uncle Otto at his apartment in Royal Oak. I was admiring his new television and decided to ask him where he bought it. He replied that it wasn't the kind of TV you would purchase at the store. He actually built this one himself.

As a young man, while others were headed off for college, Otto was creating plans for gliders and building as well. He didn't need a college education in aeronautics like most would. He had the natural ability and insight to design based on trial and error. This was an inborn talent that many who knew him would envy. I can remember as a boy when my father told me that my Uncle Otto was very good at building gliders. Of course to me a glider was something you picked up for \$.99 at the drug store. You would put it together, throw it up and expect about 10 second offlight at best. I soon learned this was not the case when it came to uncle Otto. I can remember the first time when I saw a picture of Otto holding up his Snoopy glider. I was amazed when I saw the size and intricacy of these delicate planes. It was at this time that I learned Otto was a pioneer in this arena. I'm sure everyone here knows of his record achievements with the Snoopy and Challenger sailplanes.

In recent days I have had the privilege to speak with a number of Otto's friends. Some of them have made the trip out here this morning. Some have sent emails to share their condolence and thanks for the time they had with

Otto. Some had stories they wanted to share. Dick Kowalski had this story from the mid 1940's.

I can recall when Otto would travel across town from his home in Fraser to attend the Balsa Bugs airplane club meetings at Earl's Bike Shop. After the meeting, several of us teenagers would gather at Paul Simon's house to talk about and build model airplanes – sometimes all night long. Paul's mother worked until well after midnight and when she got home, we would turn out the lights and be quiet until she went to bed. Then we would continue on until about 6:00am in time to go to school.

One particular story was circulated widely among the soaring community. At a 1974 national competition, Otto was involved in a cumulative gliding event spanning a time frame of about 15 minutes. In the first round, Otto launched his Challenger in the usual manner with one exception. He forgot to turn on the remote control. Try if you can to imagine 145" of sailplane going up the tow line straight as an arrow, coming off at the top and circling flatly to the other side of the woods in total free flight with no one at the controls. Suddenly, upon realizing the controls were completely useless, Otto ran to the other side of the woods to retrieve his plane. Everyone was breathless anticipating the impending demise of his grand sailplane. Then, to everyone's astonishment, he returned from behind the woods with a perfectly unharmed Challenger. Not a scratch on it. The other day I had the pleasure of talking with Gordon Pearson, one of Otto's long time friends. Gordon remembers this event well and says it was proof that Otto was a master at aeronautic design. Those with expertise may expect a sailplane to behave totally different under those conditions. It was truly a defining moment for Otto and it was around that time he was given the nickname "Otto Von Helium".

Ray Hayes and Tony Estep wanted us all to know that "Otto was the hero and inspiration of a whole generation of early soaring guys on this side of the country. A great craftsman and even better flyer, he was a determined competitor who showed us all how it ought to be done".

Tony went on to say he recalled one day at a competition when Otto was sitting in the pits with his Challenger. Tony had walked by Otto with his new plane when suddenly Otto stopped him to take a look at his plane. After a few moments of scrutiny, he looked up and shook his head and said, "a lot of parts in that wing".

On another memorable occasion, at the FAI team trial quarterfinals in 1976, competitors were required to land their planes in an area similar to a bulls

eye. Each ring within the bulls-eye would have a different value with the center being the highest. In the last round Otto was coming in to land hot against a fairly strong wind. He touched the heavy 12 foot Challenger down at the outer circle. The plane began to slide fast so Otto let go of the stick, held up his hand like Moses and commanded "stop"! Instantly the plane stopped without advancing another inch. Unfortunately it was a good 8 feet short of the center of the bulls-eye. Tony couldn't help from bursting out laughing. He said, "if you hadn't said anything champ, you would have hit the center for sure". Otto picked up his plane and under his breath Tony could hear him say, "shoulda kept my damn mouth shut".

Al Mangani is another friend of Otto's from Portage, WI. He couldn't attend today's memorial but he did request that I read the following.

I believe it was the 1972 Snow Fly contest, held at the Midwest field outside of Howell that I first met Otto. He was young and exuberant then, and was, to me, a walking encyclopedia on RC soaring. Somehow, I never forgot that meeting. Otto was always very gracious in sharing his vast repertoire of soaring knowledge with me. In the field of RC soaring he stands as one of the giants upon whose shoulders this great hobby has grown. He will be sadly missed by all of us who participate in the hobby, but never forgotten. Good lift, Otto! I look forward to the day when I can again soar the heavens with you.

These are just a few of many accounts from a small cross section of friends Otto had. He was truly admired by all of his friends and family and also by those who have read about his accomplishments. In closing I ask that we try not to remember Otto by his recent hardships and decline in health, but by the pictures and stories we shared today. Somewhere in heaven Otto is teaching new friends how to fly and catching never ending thermals with old friends from days gone by.

