

How I flew 2,463km

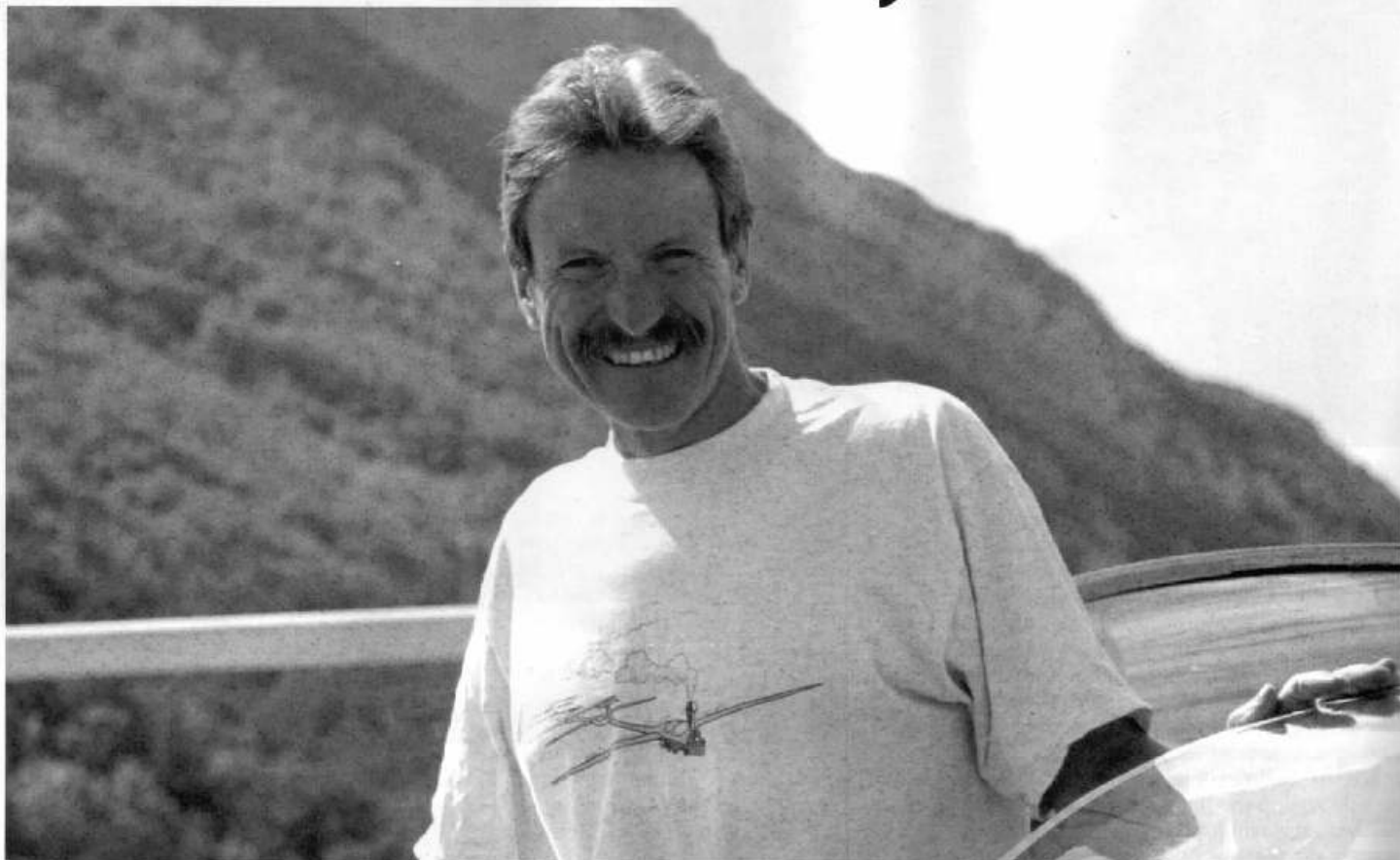


Photo: Régis Triper

Klaus Ohlmann talks to S&G about the highs and lows of his truly amazing flight, believed to be the longest ever

IN YOUR freezing cockpit, you've been racing close to VNE for much of the last 14 hours. The sun is going down over the unlandable mountains to the north – and you've already flown over 200km further than the previous world record.

Your co-pilot thinks you should turn back and land. What do you do?

If you are Klaus Ohlmann, you make a neck-or-nothing decision to go on... and claim a new world record with seconds to spare. A minute later, it would have been official night at the Argentinian airfield of Malargue – and the 2,463.7km flight, now awaiting ratification by the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale, could not have qualified as a world record.

The 48-year-old German dentist from near Frankfurt, who gambled and won in such a spectacular fashion, is no stranger to mountains. On his "days off" he shepherds compatriots on Alpine lead-and-follows in his Calif, KO (above). An infectiously positive person, he has 11,000 gliding hours, as well as 20 weeks' experience of

wave in Argentina gathered on three visits with the OSTIV Mountain Wave Project.

That bold decision to continue was based, he says, on the knowledge he has accumulated since his first visit to the Alps 22 years and 8,000 hours ago.

"I didn't want to damage the glider," he explains, "but people don't realise how fast you can go in the final hour. I know it's possible to do 200km in an hour if you are at this height and know how the wave

works – and I knew that the waves in the north were very good. At 20.10 we had exactly 40 minutes because the last legal time to land in Argentina is 20 minutes after sunset. We had 180km to fly.

"My co-pilot Alois Urbancic said: 'no, let's go back,' and I said: 'I will try it'. It was fantastic because it was a race against time. It was amazing."

Not even landing was straightforward: strong winds at height had dropped to

The flight of a lifetime, all thanks to

WE TAKE OFF from San Martin de los Andes around 06.00hrs, a little late, on a world record attempt: I want to do a 1,700km out and return flight to the south.

Unfortunately, after about 500km the initially excellent weather deteriorates dramatically. We abandon our task to try a record free flight around three TPs (Open Class) which currently stands at 2,049.44km, flown by Terry Delore in 1994 in New Zealand.

At 13.15 we're back over San Martin, having covered 1,050km. To the north there are lots of clouds from the approaching cold front.

After a long glide we contact rotor lift right over Zapala – the stepping stone for the wave system reaching from the Valley of Loncopue to the Cordillere del Viento. From there we continue in the lee of the main ridge via the Barrancas Valley and the Rio Grande, always above 5,000m. At around 16.00hrs we turn back south. If we make it home, we will have beaten the world record. But with 120km to go we decide to exploit the extraordinarily good soaring conditions in the north rather than fight the bad weather back to San Martin. A wise decision: we learn that a Brazilian DG 500 takes forever to make it