Former Milton resident finds freedom in the sky

By NORMAN NELSON

The day after a high pressure weather system comes into the area, Bill Tom looks achingly at the puffy cumulus clouds splashed like white paint across the blue sky.

It's in those wispy clouds that the retired former Milton resident gets the greatest satisfaction from the hobby he took up two years ago at 63 years of age — as a glider airplane pilot.

Satisfaction, he said, is riding an 'air thermal' the way a surfer rides the waves. "Seeing the altimeter go up at 500 feet a minute," he says. "You know then that you're really working with the elements. It's really a thrill."

Now settled in Newmarket, Mr. Tom, who lived in Milton 28 years, was back in town on Monday to share his fascination with the hobby, and to put in a plug for the Erin Soaring Society, a non-profit private club which is holding ground school classes in Bramalea on Tuesday nights from Feb. 6 to April 24. (For more information, phone 451-3165.)

His fascination for the airborne hobby began as a teenager in the 1930s when he first viewed the silent winged machines on the newsreels that used to be shown in theatres.

Like many youthful dreams it remained just that, while his attention was concentrated on family, career and community service.

As he and wife, Dorothy, raised their three daughters Mr. Tom taught at Milton District High School and later became vice principal. He also held subsequent vice principal postings at Burlington Central and Georgetown District high schools.

In Halton he was heavily involved in the United Way, the Canadian Mental Health Association and the Social Planning Council.

Retirement, as it does to many people, left a big gap in his life. He still had his family, and in fact the couple's move to Newmarket put them closer to their daughters; and he still had a strong committment to community service. In his new community he's the vice president for the Newmarket Mental Health Association, and is also on an advisory committee on mental health for York Region.

But what to do with the space his career used to fill?

"When I retired I got control of my time, and that was one of the biggest blessings," he says. "And I didn't want to do less with that time."

So two years ago he went to ground school with the Erin Soaring Society and passed the medical and the intensive ground school training course.

Then they took him up to 2,000 feet and cut the tow line.

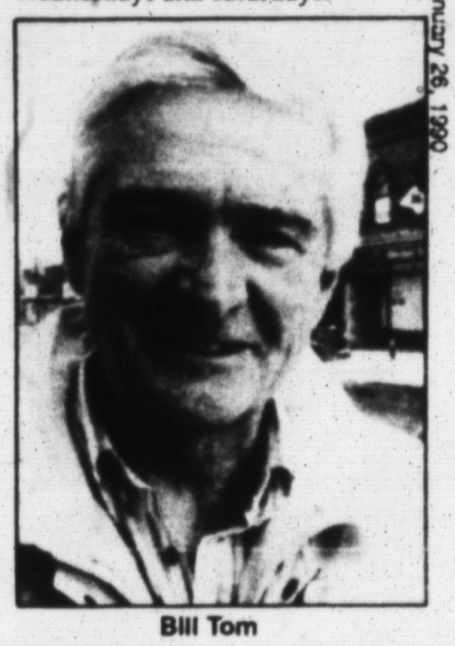
Since that time, he's been up about 125 times. Once he was able to take advantage of three 'thermals' and flew up to 6,000 feet. "Breathtaking," he says.

The record, which he has neither the desire nor the money to attain, is about 52,000 feet. "That's 10 miles," he emphasizes. "At that height you need oxygen and a heater unit." You also need mountains, he says, to create the proper wind conditions to propel you up from 2,000 feet.

The long-time Milton resident earned his C badge this past summer. That means he flew solo for one hour. This year, he's aiming at a silver badge for a five-hour solo flight.

Acquiring such a licence this summer, he estimates, will have cost him less than $1,300, approximately one-quarter the price of a single-engine pilot licence.

He usually flies one of three gliders owned by the Bramalea-based club. "I go up on Wednesdays and Saturdays."



Bill Tom

For those wanting to fly their own machine, he says $7,000 will get a used clunker while $160,000 will get a 'Cadillac'. Very often, he adds, a group of pilots will share a plane so that costs can be split.

His wife, he admits, is a bit nervous about the hobby. But he stresses that glider pilots are very safety conscious and are "being reminded continually by officials of the club and of the national organization of the need for obeying all safety regulations."

Classes will be held each Tuesday evening from 7:30 p.m. to 10 p.m. at the Terry Miller Recreation Centre on Williams Parkway in Bramalea from Feb. 6 to April 24.

Photo by JON BLACKER

Kicking the habit

Joanne Robinson (left) of the Halton Council on Smoking and Health spent Weedless Wednesday at Milton Mall giving smokers some tips on how to quit. Tanya Kuinies took some time out from shopping to get her carbon monoxide level tested.

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