

## The Legacy of Trike Instructor Mike Jacober

It's always a terrible loss for everyone when an aircraft accident occurs. The people affected the most, of course, are the injured victims, and their relatives and loved ones. Many others are affected as well, including witnesses, rescue personnel, investigators, manufacturers, flight schools, insurance companies, the FAA, and the victim's friends, employers and employees.

Seldom has an accident touched an entire community as much as the death of Mike Jacober and his student on June 5, 2003, near Anchorage, Alaska.

Mike, age 52, was one of the most experienced trike pilots in the world. He was a renowned ultralight instructor. He had thousands of hours of flight time in both fixed wing and weight-shift ultralights, as well as hang gliders. His flight school, Arctic Sparrow Aircraft, is known throughout Alaska.

Mike and his student, Robert Pelkey, were on a routine training flight in clear, calm conditions when the trike went down in the tundra, only a few miles from Birchwood Airport. There were no witnesses to the accident, although a fellow Arctic Sparrow instructor had departed the training area just moments before the crash. The instructor, Rick Huggett, reported that he had seen Mike and Robert flying straight and level with no apparent problems.

The accident has completely confounded the trike community. No one can fathom just how an experienced, safety-conscious pilot, could possibly meet an untimely fate in such a mysterious fashion.

I can personally attest to Mike's incredible skill. I met him in July 1994 while enjoying 24-hour layovers in Anchorage as a pilot for Delta Airlines. At that time, I was already a fixed-wing ultralight instructor, and owned a Buccaneer amphibious seaplane and a Quicksilver. But I had never flown a trike.

At my layover hotel I saw a copy of an Anchorage magazine called *We Alaskans*. Featured on the cover was Mike Jacober sitting in a trike, dressed in heavy winter clothing and a ski mask. The article was about his magnificent flight over the top of 20,320-foot Mt. McKinley (also known as "Denali"). Mike accomplished this feat in May 1993, flying an Antares trike with only a 55-horsepower Rotax 503 engine.

There were several secrets to his success. One was spending several days on the glaciers below the summit—studying the wind patterns and waiting for the right weather. When it was time to make a run for the top, Mike utilized the uplifting wind currents to help him soar to high altitude. Even with help from the updrafts, Mike accepted the fact that he would run out of gas during the flight. For an old hang glider pilot, this was no problem. Mike *did* exhaust his fuel, but he simply glided engine-off back to Kahiltna glacier on the side of Denali.

In order for the Rotax to run at high altitude, Mike devised a way to control the mixture in the carburetor. His invention turned out to be so useful that he later marketed it to ultralight pilots throughout the United States.

Another secret to Mike's success was his thorough preparation. He carried oxygen with him, and wore long underwear plus a goose down suit, as well as a helmet, windshield, thick gloves and boots. He also chose his assistants carefully – experienced triker Joel Wallace, Mike's mountaineer stepson, Matthew Howard, and photographer David Swendiman.

Mike's greatest asset was his courage, determination, and hang gliding experience that allowed him to understand mountainous weather and wind currents.

A videotape of Mike's adventure, as well as magazine articles such as *We Alaskans*, afforded him the opportunity to parlay his accomplishments into a successful training center. But success didn't happen overnight.

When I met Mike he was operating out of a small shop in the center of Anchorage. Although Merrill field was just across the street, Mike couldn't operate from the airport, because the FAA does not allow ultralights to fly in "congested areas" such as a metropolitan city. In order to teach his students, Mike had to pack up the trikes, and truck them outside of Anchorage for the day's flights.

Even though I was an outsider from the "Lower 48," Mike always treated me with patience and respect, despite my lack of experience flying small airplanes in Alaska. Mike even listened to my advice when I told him that perhaps he should establish a flight school at an airport outside Anchorage, so he wouldn't waste so much time hauling trikes back and forth.

The closest suitable airport at the edge of town was Birchwood. It was a 30-minute drive away. Would potential ultralight students really travel that far to take flying lessons? I told Mike, "Yes," because I had seen students drive over two hours from Los Angeles (where I'm based with Delta), to ultralight schools on the outskirts of town.

After a careful analysis of the cost of renting a hangar at Birchwood and moving all his equipment there, Mike finally did what any prudent businessman would do—he consulted his wife, Ginny. Like any loving wife, Ginny was concerned about Mike's safety, as well as the reality that it's very difficult to make a living with teaching ultralights. But Ginny knew that flying was Mike's passion, and that he could never be truly happy in a job that didn't allow him to get into the air.

Much of Mike's success can be attributed to her support and extensive assistance in setting up shop. Although she was busy as a professional travel agent, she dedicated her spare time to working with Mike at Arctic Sparrow, Birchwood Airport. Not only was she the secretary, shop-keeper and Chief Morale Booster, Ginny spent hours each June preparing for the annual Birchwood "Summer Solstice Fly-In," which has become the premier flying event in Alaska.

Mike encountered one hurdle after the other at Birchwood. There were insurance problems. There were general aviation pilots who didn't want to share runway space with "those flimsy ultralights." The FAA wasn't really sure that Birchwood was a "non-congested" area. What about those cabins that were sporadically located around the airport? Mike had to create a traffic pattern that satisfied and avoided the general aviation pilots, as well as avoided the cabins nestled around Birchwood.

Mike held conferences to educate the FAA about the capabilities and limitations of ultralights. He became an Aviation Safety Counselor, one of the few *ultralight* pilots to hold that position. Mike had to monitor transient ultralight pilots, who would occasionally fly into Birchwood without knowing about the rules of the road there. Mike was an EAA Technical Counselor and a Flight Advisor. He was so professional and safety conscious that the FAA presented him an FAA Safety Award, ironically, in the very week that he was killed.

As a business entrepreneur, Mike succeeded at Birchwood beyond his expectations. He conducted ground school classes which contained dozens of students. He acquired more and more hangar space to accommodate the increasing number of trikes that needed housing. He became a dealer for the Antares trike.

Thanks to his extraordinary mechanical skill, Mike was able to create and market his in-flight adjustable carburetor mixture control—the same invention that allowed him to lean the fuel-air mixture as he increased altitude to cross over Mt. McKinley. Over the years, Mike assembled dozens of trikes, working late into the night after a full day of teaching. He meticulously maintained the engines, and Arctic Sparrow was designated a certified Rotax Repair Station.

Mike created a simple and very effective windshield for the trike. He devised a way to fold back the trike wings while still attached to the frame, so that more trikes could be squeezed into the rapidly vanishing hangar space. Mike also manufactured and sold skis for both trikes and fixed-wing aircraft.

Mike sponsored the immigration of Sergey Zozuliya and his family from the Ukraine, which was once part of the former Soviet Union. As the founder of the Antares trike, Sergey worked with Mike to modify the

trike kit so that it would qualify as an FAA-approved "amateur-built" experimental aircraft. To date, the Antares is the only trike kit that has received such an FAA designation.

As to his instructional ability, I can't praise him any higher than to say that he was able to teach me to solo a trike. This was no easy feat, considering that 25 years of flying fixed-wing aircraft had me ingrained to pull *back* to flare for landing, not push *forward*. Mike presented me with the novel idea that every landing be accomplished with the engine power *off*, even when flying in the pattern at Birchwood. Needless to say, it didn't take long to learn precise control of the Antares' glide path when the engine was turned off on every downwind.

Thanks to Mike, I experienced my first flight on skis. Alaskans don't quit flying in winter. They just exchange skis for wheels, and take advantage of the frozen lakes, such as the 20-mile long Big Lake, northwest of Birchwood. I'm still in awe of Mike's ability to strap on the Antares, and fly it as if the wings were an extension of his shoulders.

My last winter flight with Mike was in January 2002. On a calm, crisp day he took control of the trike, and tore up the sky, buzzing, turning, weaving and flying just like a hawk, without reference to man-made instruments. He'd swoop down to the frozen surface of Big Lake, just barely touching the powered snow on top of the ice. He turned left on one ski, making a full circle, followed by a right turn on the other ski, making another full circle. Then he gently pulled up, rolled the trike, and I could look down and see that he had created a perfect eight in the snow, just as an Olympic ice skater would do.

I still remember that figure eight to this day. The ancient symbol for infinity is a figure eight, drawn horizontally instead of vertically. And that's where Mike is now. An infinite soul, no doubt making lazy eights in heaven, and teaching the angels a thing or two about flying.