

Father-son Odyssey is now in the record books



By Mark Pavilons

The world is a very big, beautiful place. But it's made a bit smaller because we're all members of one big human fellowship. Kingscross resident Steven Dengler met some consummate hosts and genuinely interesting souls during his seven-week Canada 150 Global Odyssey.

The trek, which landed Dengler, his father Bob, a resident of Aurora, and ace pilot Rob "Dugal" MacDuff in the history books, was the first Canadian circumnavigation of the world by helicopter, and the first father-son circumnavigation by light aircraft in aviation history.

The team flew the Canadian-made Bell 429 helicopter over 35,000 kilometres in a month and a half. The crew visited some 14 countries in all.

The Odyssey helped mark Canada's 150th birthday and helped two important charities along the way - Southlake Regional Health Centre Foundation and True Patriot Love Foundation.

Despite being plagued early on by bad weather, significantly extending the journey, it was "an amazing experience." Eighteen months of around-the-clock preparation helped make the journey less problematic, but where flying is concerned, anything can happen.

And it did, more than a few times.

Fuel logistics, inclement weather, scheduling conflicts, and even forest fires all came into play.

"Flying was the easiest part," Dengler admitted.

Given all the variables in play, Dengler said all scheduling of a trip of this magnitude needed to be flexible, and able to adapt to changing circumstances on the fly.

Despite being on a tight schedule, Dengler said he spent his down time exploring towns and villages, and meeting as many people as he could. Some have become life-long friends.

He said the majority of people he encountered, regardless of the country, spoke English, and showed a very genuine interest in the adventure. It wasn't adulation, but rather a keen desire to know and share. So many people had a "host mentality," and welcomed the crew with open arms. In almost every place they set down, people went all out to accommodate their needs and show them around.

Given compounding delays, the team was worried their Russian visas might expire too soon. Fortunately, they had forged a strong relationship with the staff of the Russian Embassy in Ottawa. They contacted their colleagues at the Russian embassy in Prague who were helpful and accommodating, extending the team's visas. Dengler noted that the universal language of hockey did wonders to cement friendly relations with the officials in Prague.

He found the long flight through Russia particularly fascinating and enjoyable. The country is massive, and seemingly endless when you're flying day after day, crossing one or two time zones a day on a regular basis.

The Russian leg went smoothly thanks to Russian navigator and communicator Sergei Komarov. He accompanied the team through

Russia, making that segment almost seamless.

Dengler said he learned about geography, history, and culture at every turn. He found Kazan, Tatarstan, a city of 1.2 million on the banks of the Volga and Kazanka rivers, quite interesting. Later he spent several days exploring Yakutsk in the Sakha Republic, and made a number of great friends further on in Magadan.

Travelling by helicopter presented some challenges, since they're not long-range vehicles. It resulted in the crew landing in some very remote places, including a remote fishing camp at the edge of a rushing river in central Russia.

The beauty of the world didn't escape notice and Dengler said he was presented with a cornucopia of photographic images. He was particularly taken by the landscape of northern Labrador and the Canadian Arctic, including the Akshayuk Pass on Baffin Island. Other memorable spots included Whitehorse, Yellowknife, and Nome, Alaska.

The trip resulted in an arm's length of must-visit places for Dengler and his family in the future.

Dengler praised his wife Bruna who was often the team's "mission control and lifeline to the outside world." Helping with logistics and being the trouble-shooter on the ground became her full-time job while the crew was travelling.

Dengler noted there's a unique fraternity of aviators the world over who provided much support and respect.

Living and flying together in cramped quarters presented some challenges, but the trio became a well-oiled machine. Dengler said he has a great deal of respect for MacDuff, a larger-than-life character whom he considers one of Canada's foremost helicopter pilots.

Dengler himself, an experienced fixed-wing pilot, said his helicopter skills increased exponentially.

Dengler has already been invited to publicly speak on the trip. In the near future, he plans to convert the c150go.ca website into a day-by-day retrospective, and also publish a book containing many photos of the historic journey.

For more, visit <https://www.c150go.ca>