

# Carl Hiebert



It was a gust of wind that forever changed the life of Carl Hiebert. He was teaching a class on hang gliding in 1981 when the wind caught his glider and pushed him back toward a hill.

His friends rushed toward him, fearing he had broken his legs. But Hiebert, who was having trouble speaking said simply, “I think it’s a lot more serious than that . . . I can’t feel anything.”

During the difficult days that followed, Hiebert, who grew up in the quiet Mennonite farming community of Port Rowan, drew from the deep resources of his childhood to a cope with life as a paraplegic.

The Linwood photographer and motivational speaker said once, “When I look back at my childhood, I realize they were excellent training years for later in life. Certainly when I had my accident . . . within seconds I was able to face that opportunity with a positive perspective. I realized in reflecting on it that the ability to look on that positively and see it as a challenge came out of my childhood.”

Hiebert, who fell in love with flying at fifteen-years-old when a friend took him up in a small plane over the creek where he had canoed and swam as a young boy, didn’t allow his disability to drown his passion.

In fact, while he was recuperating from the accident, a friend snuck him out of the hospital for a two and a half hour flight in his ultra light aircraft. Remembering that flight, Hiebert said, “As I buzzed the field and saw my empty wheelchair below, I was overcome by this serendipitous moment. Even if I couldn’t walk, I could still fly.”

His disability also deepened his friendships. During a television interview, his friend Alan Hobson described how Hiebert’s spirit of adventure transcends and overshadows his physical limitations.

After a particularly beautiful flight with Hiebert, an exuberant Hobson left the aircraft and headed for the car. “I had totally forgotten the man was in a wheelchair. And that’s what his flying does. It releases him from that and it released me from my perception of him. I no longer saw the wheelchair anymore. I don’t to this day. I see only the man and that’s a beautiful thing.”

Within two years of the accident, Hiebert became Canada’s first paraplegic flight instructor and in 1986 he became the first person to fly across Canada in an open-cockpit ultra light aircraft, raising more than \$100,000 for the Canadian Paraplegic Association.

The cross-Canada adventure opened up new opportunities for Hiebert, a journalist and photographer. Within a few years, he was being asked to speak at community functions across Canada. In 1993 and 1994, he undertook a second cross-Canada flight, taking photographs for his book entitled *Gift of Wings An Aerial Celebration of Canada*.

Hiebert is also the author of *Us Little People: Mennonite Children* and *Where Light Speaks: Haiti*. In 2005, Hiebert traveled to Malawi to document the tragedy of parents dying of AIDS and their orphaned children.

Last summer (2006) he made another cross-country trek, this time in a 1949 McCormick tractor, to interview and photograph farm families for a book.

Hiebert, who has been named one of Canada's top ten adventurers by Canadian Press, said, "Only in the success of having risked and triumphed can we build our security from within. It is the only security that can never be taken away."

*Photo courtesy of Debby Battista.*