

# Will pilot's dreams take flight?

Former Canadian Air Force pilot **Andreas Ruttkiewicz** hopes to build an airstrip near Sooke — and teach the physically challenged to fly. The Province's **Mike Roberts** tells his story

**H**ard, brutal things don't happen for a reason, says former Canadian Air Force pilot **Andreas Ruttkiewicz**, they just happen. And when they do, you pick up the pieces, take stock of the small mercies and try to move on the best you can.

"It never goes away," says Ruttkiewicz of the accident along a wide-open stretch of country road that sunny Saturday afternoon outside Montreal. "But I separate my life: that was the first part; this is the second part."

Ruttkiewicz has packed more adventure — and hard-won, personal milestones — into the second part of his life than most of us would in handful of lifetimes.

Overcoming the grave legacy of his accident, Ruttkiewicz has sailed the world, ridden the dot-com wave, and become an entrepreneur and a restaurateur, opening the Little Vienna Bakery in Sooke, which has become as famous for its pastries as nearby Mom's Café is for its heaping logger's breakfasts.

He's a dreamer. And his dreams have a knack for coming true. And this summer, he's working on his most ambitious dream to date.

Through all of the adversity he has faced, Ruttkiewicz, an upbeat and energetic man who teaches sailing to the disabled when he isn't busy running the bustling cafe with his pastry chef wife, Michele, has maintained his lifelong passion for flying.

"When I was four years old, my dad tells me, I became angry when I realized I was heavier than the heaviest bird that could fly," recalls Ruttkiewicz, who had graduated to CF-18s and was mere weeks away from becoming a full-fledged fighter pilot when sudden tragedy changed the course of his life.

Ruttkiewicz was driving the motorcycle. His older brother Thomas, a stockbroker, was riding on the back. The brothers were en route to their father's home in rural Quebec.

To this day, Ruttkiewicz has no recollection of the 1991 accident.

"The police report doesn't indicate any other vehicle," says Ruttkiewicz. "I really don't know... we hit the only tree there."

He awoke from a coma in hospi-



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tal a week later. Two weeks after that, his brother, who would never leave intensive care, succumbed to his injuries.

"I never saw him," says Ruttkiewicz. "It was really brutal. Brutal. I lost my brother. I lost my career."

Ruttkiewicz's injuries were extensive. He lost the use of his left eye and his left hand. The plastic surgeons attempted to save his left leg, but the tissue broke down and the pain became unbearable.

Eventually, Ruttkiewicz opted for amputation, just below the knee.

"I'm lucky, I'm really lucky," says Ruttkiewicz, the father of two young boys. "That's how I have to look at it. Sometimes I have to remind myself."

To its credit, the Canadian Air Force offered Ruttkiewicz a desk job. But the near-death epiphany, and the wrenching heartache he suffered over the loss of his beloved brother, set Ruttkiewicz on a different path.

He went sailing. He took computer and business courses. He married and had children. Ultimately, the Montreal native moved about as far west as you can move in search of solace and a fresh start.

Today, Ruttkiewicz, who recently re-passed his pilot's medical, flies a small Cessna with the Victoria

## Airstrip gets some ground support

### Sooke Mayor Janet Evans:

"Any entrepreneur who wants to contribute to the community, absolutely, council and I would support that. And we'd give total support to helping the disabled and getting them involved in the community. It's a good idea — if it's in the right location and it doesn't bother the neighbours, I'd support it for sure."

### Duncan Flying Club director Gary O'Brien:

"We're very short of airstrips. There's nothing on that side of the island at all. None. And a runway of any sort in the Sooke/Renfrew area would be a godsend for most pilots."

Flying Club and is building himself an amphibious, fixed-wing ultralight aircraft called a Challenger in the workshop of his 12-hectare farm a short drive west of Sooke.

A sadness lurks just below the surface of his life. But Ruttkiewicz, whose body bears the grafts and scars of his formative experience, will not let it pull him under. Nor, for that matter, will he let it interfere with his latest dream, the construction of a private airfield near Sooke.

"My goal in the next five years is to start an airfield out here and start a little flying school," he says. "Ultimately, I would like to establish a small fleet of planes and offer the services to young people and the physically challenged."

Ruttkiewicz, who would like to build the airfield on a tabletop slab of land called Blueberry Flats, which borders Sooke and nearby Shirley, has yet to approach the area's landowners to discuss a lease agreement and naming rights. Even dreamers, he says, have to get their ducks in a row.

Steve Lorimer, manager of public affairs with TimberWest, the company that owns an extensive portfolio of development lands on Vancouver Island, including the area around Blueberry Flats, says his firm would certainly take a meeting with Ruttkiewicz.

"This is a new initiative and a new idea," says Lorimer. "We do look over some of our lands on a periodic basis... certainly if the pro-

posal was semi-reasonable, we'd take a look at it."

Lorimer says, however, that TimberWest would have to have a detailed proposal on the table before committing further to an airfield on its lands.

Ruttkiewicz has spoken with Transport Canada.

"As long as there are no scheduled flights to and from the airfield, there's no regulations, none," he says. "You need a wind sock and, if you're operating at night, the wind-sock needs to be lit."

The former fighter pilot envisions an affordable community flying school and an airfield that could open up new avenues of tourism, as well as providing an essential strip of landing turf for regional police and emergency responders.

"I've written to this guy," he says, pulling a photo of actor and aviation buff John Travolta from his satchel. "I haven't heard anything back, but rumour says he has some property out in Sooke... Who knows, some support and a bit of money?"

Says Ruttkiewicz of his field of dreams: "It's kind of like a bowl of Jell-O and it's starting to get firm. It's still a little jiggly. But this is my bowl of Jell-O."

"And it's such a beautiful spot to fly." [mroberts@png.canwest.com](mailto:mroberts@png.canwest.com)