

Unbelievably Different

Uys Jonker (Photos by Katrin Senne)



The 2020 Helli Lasch Challenge

Heaven on earth!" This is how every glider pilot would describe the Helli Lasch Challenge Located in the Kalahari in the northwestern part of South Africa, three hours' drive west of Vryburg and one hour's drive south of the Botswana border, Tswalu is the largest privately owned nature reserve in South Africa, extending over 140 000 hectares.

Tswalu is a labour of love for the Oppenheimer family, who took responsibility for this remarkable reserve in 1998, continuing the vision of the late Stephen Boler, from Manchester in the United Kingdom, whose dream it was to return this previously farmed land to its natural state. Since then, their commitment to conservation has seen indigenous species re-introduced,

and real strides made towards the restoration of the Kalahari, undoing of years of neglect. In its new incarnation as a private nature reserve and conservation success story, Tswalu is bringing their ultimate ambition of "leaving the world better than we found it" a little closer each day.

This prestigious challenge was introduced in 2001 by Carol Clifford and the Oppenheimer family as a living memorial to Helli Lasch, Nicky Oppenheimer's late father-in-law. The aim of the challenge is to promote international gliding relations and South Africa as a glider destination, while developing the capabilities of the South African gliding team. This year was the ninth time the Oppenheimer family has invited some of the best glider pilots in the world, with their partners,

to this exclusive Kalahari lodge. Well-known names, such as Sebastian Kawa, Michael Sommer, Louis Boudierique and Wolfgang Janowitsch, to name just a few of the very best, have been among the pilots previously invited to Tswalu to enjoy a luxurious nine-day glider pilot's dream of a lifetime! The most exquisite food and five-star lodging is not the only item in this package. Travel expenses, cars, gliders, aero tows, helpers... everything is sponsored by the Oppenheimer family. The invited champions have the times of their lives, and unselfishly share their knowledge and experience in the form of daily lectures and workshops with the South African team and fellow pilots.

The first challenge was held in 2003, inspired by the 2001 World Gliding Championships

held in Mmabatho, South Africa, and has been held every two years since then. But actually who was Helli Lasch? Helli was born in Germany in 1912 to a family that had run a large and successful machine-tool business. He came to South Africa in 1932 to gain some experience before taking over the family business. After getting to know Orcilla, getting married and facing war in Europe, he stayed and started his own business in Johannesburg. The two had three daughters. In 1968, the eldest daughter, Strilli, married Nicky Oppenheimer of the Anglo American mining company and former owner of De Beers). Nicky and Strilli had one son, Jonathan, who is following in the business footsteps of his father.

Nicky and Jonathan are both aviation fanatics and exceptional pilots. Both fly their impressive Augusta AW139 helicopter, which they used for many private applications and even game counting at Tswalu. Jonathan also has a love for fast jets and spends almost half of his life as P1 in his personal Global 6000.

Helli started gliding in Bern, Switzerland, in 1947. On the fifth day of his entry-level course, he completed his first solo flight in a Grunau baby. Sixteen days later he had completed his Silver C with a DFS tit and a Spalinger S18. Highly inspired, he flew in the South African National Gliding Rallies in January 1948 and December 1948 and won the second event in a Minimoa. In 1950 he took part in the World Gliding Championships in Örebro, Sweden, with an Air100. While he was on a business trip to Berlin, Helli took

an opportunity to look at the SB6 of Akatleg Braunschweig where he met Björn Stender, the man behind the SB6.

Helli and Björn spent a day sketching a radically new glider which Helli financed in full – a super high performance 18m glider with full span ailerons and flaps and sleek composite construction. It first flew in 1962, two years before the D-36 designed by the legendary team of Fries, Lemke, Walbel, and Hellighaus. While Helli revelled in flying his BS-1, he had to bail out following an unfortunate

Tswalu, South Africa

inflight wing failure in 1967. Orcilla ordered an H-301 Libelle to replace the BS-1 and, at Helli's request, Porsche supplied Glasflügel with the leather for the cockpit, so that it matched the latest in Helli's taste for sports cars. In 1982 Helli acquired a DG400, in which he died on approach to land at Parys.

Helli preferred to fly long distances and liked to be the "lonely eagle". Instead of "goldfish bowl flying", he set goals that tested both man and machine. He was very successful in many things and did everything with a distinctive sense of humor and eccentric style. Klaus Keim, father of Katrin Senne, worked for Helli as an engineer in South Africa for a few years, taking care of the "modification" of his gliders. Klaus became friends with Nicky, who started dating Strilli, and took him for some glider flights – and this was the start of a life-long friendship. At this time Carol Clifford stayed with the Lasches during her visit to South Africa after completing school. Helli

has been described as a modern hero who loved extreme things and is a true legend. On February 29, the international pilots invited to the 2020 Helli Lasch Challenge arrived in Johannesburg where they were received by event organiser Carol Clifford, the "mother of South African gliding" and for many decades the South African team captain. They included Lukasz Grabowski, runner-up in the world champion 15m class; Wolfgang Janowitsch, the reigning 18m class world champion; Sjaak Selen, standard class world champion; Felipe Levin, runner-up in the open class world championship; and Katrin Senne, 2017 women's world champion.

The South African team included Laurens Goudriaan, Attie and Uys Jonker, Nico Le Roux and Dori Pretorius.

This year was very special for a few young upcoming pilots, Jason Adriaan, Michael Tiffin, Philip and Tienie Jonker, Dicky Daly and Cameron Ireland, who were invited to join the senior pilots for the first four days of the event. Imagine being a junior with the opportunity to fly in two-seaters with the best glider pilots in the world! During the second half of the week promising seniors, Riaan DXenner, Hanno du Toit and Rob Tiffin, joined the training group and Eva Senne, Katrin's daughter, was there for the entire week. Where in the world can you get daily gliding lectures by the top pilots in the world? Daily theory workshops – "Mental Strength" by Wolfgang Janowitsch, "AAT Correct Flying and Planning" by Felipe Levin, and "Team Flying" by Lukasz Grabowski and Katrin Senne – were



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