

Ski hero

Blade



Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing



Just one of 10: Skiers say au revoir to their high-speed lift as they prepare for yet another run. (Left) Wiegele and Wilson warm up over lunch at the Grizzly Hut.



Mike Wiegele is the founder of the biggest individual heliskiing operation in a single location in the world, with no fewer than 10 helicopters at Blue River, British Columbia. Recently he celebrated his eponymous company's 40th anniversary. There was much to celebrate. **Arnie Wilson** joined in the fun.

runner

When I drove to Blue River, a remote Canadian township half way between Kamloops and Jasper, to ski and talk with Mike Wiegele, he saved the best till last. 'Wiegele's World' covers 3,000 square miles and more than 1,000 peaks in one of the most reliable snow belts in the world for high-quality, reliable powder. Accumulations of 30 feet or more are normal.

Soft Cotton and *Early Basket*, the runs we shared before chatting over lunch at the on-mountain Grizzly Hut were OK (unusual luxury to eat indoors rather than picnic on the mountain on a heliskiing day). But I hadn't really come for the skiing – I'd come to interview the boss. Then, after lunch, Wiegele took us down what could easily have been the run of the week (had I been there that long). I suspect the Austrian-born heliski guru had been craftily keeping *Cache Run* (2,200 vertical feet of perfect powder in the *Mud Creek East* zone) up his sleeve on a day when there wasn't an awful lot of really good skiing to be had. As any regular heliskier knows, it's not always waist deep powder in the Cariboos and Monashees. Or as Wiegele himself says, "not every day is

bluebird brochure day." But that one single run did the trick, and when we met that evening to continue our chat, I was still elated.

When he'd started this operation back in 1970, I asked him, did he ever think he'd still be guiding heliskiers 40 years later? "Not really" he said. "But it was pretty well set that this is a life's work. We wanted to establish our existence, and the goal was just to find the best skiing place. So I travelled Europe and I travelled North America and visited lots of great resorts. And of course at that time snowmaking didn't exist. So you relied on a consistent snowfall, reliable snow. And it just didn't happen anywhere – there was nowhere where it was reliable every year." Wiegele wasn't thinking helicopters back then.

"Not at all" he said. "My friend Hans Gmoser started heliskiing in Canada in '65 with Canadian Mountain Holidays (CMH) and he proved it was a viable business – for him and for my own existence. And it was planned for life, not just for tomorrow. So – where should this place be? I left Austria because we had these Chinook winds that came in and drove me crazy. The snow might be in great condition, but then - whoosh. It's gone overnight!"

Indeed, it was one episode of freak weather that drove Wiegele out west.

"One day when I was 15, and still in Austria, I thought I'd train for a race in Carinthia that I wanted to do well in" he said. "I was living on a farm, half way up a mountain. I wanted to prepare myself. It had snowed a metre, and I attacked the slope all by myself. So I said okay, I'm going to get an advantage over the city slickers. I was busy packing the slope, and I packed all day long. Then I thought, okay, the second day I will pack some more. Then I'll set the course. And then I thought, now it's getting dark, and I have to go feed the cows. But I had to at least take one run after I'd spent two days just packing the course. It was already dark. So I took a run down, feeling really good. And went to bed. Then, just past midnight, I heard drip drop, drip drop. And I thought 'I'm dreaming!' But there it was again – drip drop, drip drop. I woke up. The snow was melting off the roof, and it's dropping like crazy. I ran over to the window - and all the snow was gone. Incredible - to look out there and see the sun hitting the mountain!" 📺

Ski hero

Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing



One leap for heliskiing man: Powder is almost guaranteed in Canada's Caribos and Monashees



That did it. "My dad was in Canada" he recalls. "He said 'it's cold – about minus 40!' But the snow was consistently good. My mind was made up. A few years went by. I went into the army and then I said, okay I'm out of here.

"There was something about Canada that had to do with a strong feeling of freedom. It was just awesome. Even though I didn't really know what it meant, I just liked the idea of Canada.

"I was 19 or 20 by the time I got everything together. I was into ski racing. I travelled to North America, and I was good enough that I was invited to all the races. I didn't have any money, but I got invited. I didn't have a penny in my pocket. There were some early sponsors. If you got a pair of skis and poles and boots, you were somebody. I got to know the resorts and I was already thinking of looking for something in North America. I went to see Hannes Schroll, a fellow ski racer who founded Sugar Bowl ski resort in Norden, California. He was a legend.

"When he heard there was a new Austrian in the ski school, he came looking for me. I was sitting at the bar and the bartender pointed me out. I wondered what he wanted. He came straight up and said: 'What are you doing here?' He was a very dominant but brilliant



person, and he had figured me out in five questions. After a brief conversation, he put his finger up to stop me saying anything else. He said: 'Find yourself a good mountain with good snow. It doesn't matter where it is.' So I stayed three more years at Sugar Bowl, and then one spring I did some exploring.

"Every place in the Rockies that had some rank, some name, I explored it for skiing, all the way through to Alaska. But I eliminated most places quickly because they had no trees.

"I ended up running the ski school in Lake Louise, where I met my wife Bonnie. Then Hans Gmoser started up CMH in the Bugaboos, and that demonstrated that it was possible to start a

heliski business. It was relatively easy because at that time the helicopter companies had no business in the winter. So that's when I started my own company, in Valemount. My friends were my first customers. I'd say 'You pay for the helicopter, I do the guiding.'"

From such small beginnings came the Mike Wiegele heliskiing phenomenon. His fleet of helicopters increased as if they were locusts breeding. Unlike Gmoser's CMH, which proliferated to 10 different heliskiing lodge locations, Wiegele put all his eggs in one basket in Blue River, which had started life as a Canadian Northern Railway railhead. Now there are more helicopters per square kilometre than anywhere else in the world. It's helicopter central. And at 72, Wiegele just can't give it up. "I stop guiding when I die," he says. "It's totally magical. I'm not going to stop now. It's too late." 🇯🇵

Those were the days: Wiegele and his wife Bonnie in the early years



After you! Wiegele lets Wilson go first on Cache Run

