

## HUNTING THERMALS *by a SEA* in the DESERT

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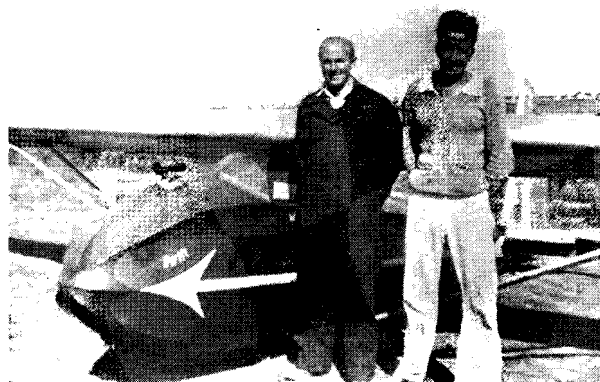
After covering some 2,000 miles of Southern California countryside looking for a suitable place for thermal soaring, we were on the verge of giving up hope. The thought of going into the desert in the Imperial Valley on the shores of the Salton Sea had been with us for some time but we had put it off due to the intolerable heat and the fact that there are no mountains nearby.

Now, after a careful examination of the desert in the vicinity of the Salton Sea, which is a large lake ten miles wide by thirty long in the middle of the desert, 245 feet below sea level, we decided to give it a try. First we made a trip to the sea to determine if it were possible to tow on the beach but found the sand too soft. However, we located a dirt road three miles long which led straight from the main highway down to the edge of the sea.

Starting out on Saturday afternoon, August twenty-first, with food, water, and camping equipment, we were in merry spirits. Arriving at the designated spot at approximately 4 o'clock, we decided to make a test hop that evening. We unwound 2,000 feet of steel cable and assembled the "Swift", which only took about 12 minutes—a fact we appreciated as the temperature was 110° in the shade with no shade. In short order all was set to take off.

I was first, and as there was a little head wind and the ship's cruising speed was about 42 m.p.h., we decided to tow at about 50. I might mention that on the first two trips, our instruments did not include a variometer. We had a compass, a bank indicator, an airspeed indicator and a sensitive surveyor's altimeter which will read about 15 feet rise and fall but has, of course, a great deal of lag. After taking off the ship climbed easily and the air was smooth as velvet. I shall never forget the sight that met my eyes—a deep blue lake lying in a bed of purple sand with little dots of cactus scattered about, the car racing below like a little toy and the tow rope going down until it disappeared into the reflected rays of the setting sun. As I reached 600 feet (which was about 800 feet above the car, as the road drops approximately 250 feet to the water) I noticed the ship was not climbing as well as it had been, so I released and started back. I was greatly surprised to find how much lift the air seemed to have. The Swift just seemed to float along, and yet the air was smooth, not a bump or disturbance of any kind. After I landed, Johnny Robinson made a hop with the same result which we decided must be due to a general thermal from the lake to the shore, as in travelling around the lake previously, I had noticed the wind blowing away from the water all the way around.

Camping that night was one long nightmare. As I mentioned before, it was 110°, and it stayed that way



Johnny Robinson, left, and the author standing by the Swift with which they have done 250 hours of soaring



all night. The grit and sand from the desert was in our mouths and clothes, so we decided to go into the water, but received quite a shock as the water was just as hot as our Coca-Cola bottles, which were so warm that they were hard to pick up.

Next morning, arising early, we found that it had cooled off somewhat, being now only about 100°. We staggered about making some breakfast and getting ready for the first take-off. This was made at 9 o'clock, and the air was smooth again. But about 10:30 things began to happen. After one of Johnnie's hops, he came down with the astounding news that he had climbed 200 ft. after he had released. Thereafter, on every flight we made until 1:30, we hit at least one and sometimes two thermals on each tow.

There was no mistaking a thermal when we hit one on the tow rope, even without a variometer, as the airspeed would jump from between 55 and 60 to 70 and 75 m.p.h. Releasing in these and making a steep turn to either side, depending upon which wing was being lifted, would insure climbing at least 300 or 400 ft. It was very difficult, however, to find the core of the thermal without a variometer. The usual thing was to go up viciously on one side of the turn and mush around on the other. Most of our time was spent in trying to get into the center of the thermal, which resulted usually in losing it altogether. What was even worse was, that once we cast off the rope, our altimeter was so slow to act that we would pass through the thermal without even knowing it. If we did not release in a thermal it just meant a glide back to the starting place, and we did not always release, as they were often encountered between 200 and 400 ft, and we hoped to get another one at 600 or 800 ft.

However, I was at last lucky and hit one at 800 ft. My airspeed, registering 55 m.p.h., suddenly jumped to 76 m.p.h.; the seat came up under me rather hard; the altimeter jumped 100 ft. or more; and the steel cable started to make all sorts of high pitched notes. I released and made a climbing turn all at once and, by the time that I had adjusted my turn and fished around for the core, which I caught this time, I had climbed to 1300 ft. Now, instead of the turns being up on one side and down on the other, they were very smooth; in fact, it seemed as if I were just gliding in smooth air, and I had to watch the altimeter to assure myself that I was really going up. When I reached 2,000 ft., the thermal

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