

## Cross Country

by "Chet" Decker (1936 National Soaring Champion)

THE weather on the last day of the Seventh Annual National Soaring Contest looked decidedly poor for cross-country soaring, but as it was the last day of the meet, it was a case of "now or never". There were scattered clouds, haze and N. N. W. to North winds of from 15 to 18 miles per hour. Little thermal activity had been reported by Mehlhose and duPont, who had been airplane towed from the American Airways Airport. Ted Bellak had attempted to fly from Harris Hill in his Cadet II and was forced down in the valley, even before he could reach the Airport. All indications pointed towards the day being a failure so far as any real soaring was concerned, and it was with little hope that I finally decided to try my luck from Harris Hill.

With barograph installed, I slipped into the cockpit of my sailplane "Albatross" and tested the release hook several times. By placing the cowl over my head, the streamline touches were completed.

Picking a lull in the gusty cross-wind, I finally took off at 11 A. M., and glided out over Chemung Valley. I immediately headed for a ridge that lay southwest of the take-off site, believing that if I were able to reach a point where the Harris Hill ridge and this ridge were closest together, I might receive a generous boost. By the time I had reached the other side of the Chemung River, I had not only lost all of the altitude the towline had given me on the take-off, but had descended below the crest of Harris Hill to a point only slightly above the valley floor. I found myself hovering over a grain field and banking so steeply to stay in a weak thermal current, that my lowered wing tip threatened to relieve the farmer of his job of cutting grain. While watching this waving grain closely to determine the average direction of the erratic wind, a few teaser puffs boosted me up to 350 feet, only to let me back down to 100 feet. On the strength of such discouragement, I slid down-wind a few hundred yards to make my approach to the field, but just as I was about to start slipping for the landing, I remembered all my father had told me about not quitting before the noon whistle. This thought, along with the observation that I still had one hundred feet of altitude, was sufficient mental nourishment to make me change my

mind, and try it again in my old position over the grain field. So back I went and began the battle again.

On each trip down-wind my indicator registered 0, but on each trip into the wind I managed to squeeze a few hundred feet more altitude. Finally, I judged that I was again level with the crest of Harris Hill, and this

time I was easily maintaining my altitude. By stealing another thousand feet from the slope winds of some ridges, a short distance to the west, I finally arrived over South Mountain with a healthy 2,000 feet to my credit. Here I saw several Utility gliders coasting back and forth on the slope winds below me. Then suddenly from nowhere the Funk Brothers' airplane appeared and circled me several times. Since my variometer showed



Fred T. Loomis

Author with "Albatross" I

that I was beginning to lose altitude in this vicinity, I held my course down-wind until I reached Glory Hill, some ten miles southeast of Elmira, and here is where I found my first real thermal of the day. It hit the ship with such force that the wings bowed fearfully, then up I went in a steep spiral from 1,200 to 5,000 feet with my variometer showing a steady climb of five meters per second. Thrill of thrills—reserved only for soaring pilots and one that is intensified rather than tempered with experience! I relaxed—the sky was suddenly full of good clouds—the ground was a mile away straight under me—and I was so happy I screamed and startled myself with my voice. The clouds were lined up like conveniently located service stations and we jumped from one to another for thirty miles, diving continuously to prevent being drawn into them. This was cloud-hopping at its best, and a thrill I'll never forget if I live to be a hundred.

Due to the foresight of my instrument man and chief cushion arranger, Carlton Schaub, the trip that followed was made reasonably comfortable for me. He had not only stuffed cushions around the proper muscles in my back, but had marked a strip map 50 miles wide and (perhaps optimistically) 300 miles long, which covered the territory over which I was now flying to the southeast of my take-off site.

With such marvelous conditions as I was now experiencing, I perhaps became a little reckless and pushed the