

MOONLIGHT *Soaring*

by Jay Buxton



Those who have never seen a full moon in the clear night air of our western deserts have missed something very beautiful. However, to have seen it is one thing—to have flown by it is yet another.

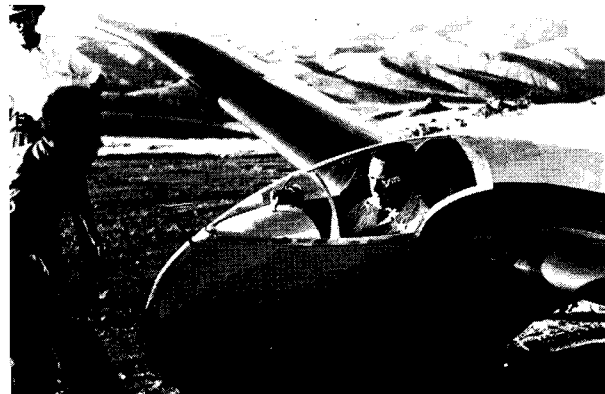
About noon on Saturday, October 8th, Douglas Hugill, Miss V. Scott and I left San Fernando with the Transporter for Muroc Dry Lake, 120 miles to the north, for some moonlight flying. We were to meet there several well known pilots with their sailplanes, as well as a crowd of students, motor as well as motorless pilots, and curious spectators, arriving by cars and airplanes.

Pulling onto the level, dry lake bed, we found we were the first to arrive with the exception of Mrs. Brandenburg, who was already busy nailing a wind sock on the *Keep Off* sign put up by the Army Air Corps. They use this level area, 17 miles long by 5 miles wide and 30 miles from the nearest town, for bomb dropping practice. Knowing that theirs was daylight rather than moonlight activity, we set up camp right by the sign.

These dry lakes in the arid areas of the West are sometimes covered with water that rushes down the mountain sides during the rainy season of wet years, but are seldom more than a month in drying out. Thus, the lake bed is kept level with a smooth surface which includes alkaline deposits preventing any vegetation. An indication of its pavement-like hardness was shown one day when a boy on roller skates came two miles from "shore" to watch some gas model flying.

Our camp headquarters were situated about half way down the lake, ideal for towing but not so good for protection from the chilling night wind which is apt to rise from a calm to a gale in nothing flat. So with this excuse, we moved the Transporter camp three miles south to a "cove" with fifteen foot banks. While enjoying there a camp fire supper, we were joined by nine enthusiasts who arrived in three airplanes. We then moved out to our Coleman lamp, put off shore a bit, so other moonlight pilots could find us.

About one a.m., the light wind became so cold that we gave up and returned to camp only to find our hitherto private cove filled with eight airplanes and all our equipment either over or under a jitterbug gang, found to number eighteen. Fortunately, their nice fire of old railroad ties thawed us out in more ways than one. Lacking possession of our stove, we begged a handout of hotdogs and coffee, borrowed our bedding and moved to the outskirts—but not to sleep. By three a.m., most of the power plane boys had used up their surplus gas by power washing the fire as they zoomed camp.



A. Hoefflich

Harvey Stephens in his revamped
Ross-Stephens sailplane

By daylight, everybody was up and milling around so we had hopes of an early start for student gliding in the quiet morning air. After waiting a seemingly endless half hour, hunger again forced us to borrow our stove and pans. With the bacon and eggs frying and the coffee sizzling, the Baby Albatross and Volmer's sailplane passed overhead.

Finally under way, we made three mile tows using 4,000 feet of wire and always glided back to camp. Although everyone had raved about the fun of flying in the light of the full moon, they agreed that it was also mighty satisfying to make these high tows in the daylight. What a relief not to have to worry about high tension lines, trees, fences or rocks, with not even a blade of grass to hide non-existent gopher holes or ant hills!

This is an ideal site for thermal soaring from auto tow. During the midday heat, there was little difficulty in finding thermals even on tows to only 600 feet. Only a week before, Howard Morrison, flying Harvey Stephen's beautiful ship, made over 5,000 feet altitude and nearly two hours duration from such a tow. No doubt longer and higher flights could be made if the ship didn't have to be shared by so many pilots.

At 9:30 Fred Barnes and Doc Klemperer flew in with a Porterfield. The lake was just beginning to warm up, but Doc managed to get an 18 minute flight from a 1,250 foot altitude. Unfortunately, by the time the thermals were really picking up in strength, we had to pack up and start for home to avoid the Sunday night traffic around Los Angeles.

Volmer Jensen's well organized group remained until midafternoon. With only twenty hours at the lake, including time out for eating and sleeping (?), they made 72 flights. Some tows were for five miles. Their longest flight was 32 minutes. Volmer clocked 165 miles of towing on his car's speedometer, part of it for moonlight flights.

Hawley Bowlus didn't do much flying but kept himself and everybody happy with his big campfire beacon and his untiring efforts to keep his Baby Albatross in the air. It made the best soaring flights of the three ships. We all agreed that despite certain difficulties and inconveniences, the trip was highly worthwhile and a probable forerunner of many such expeditions.