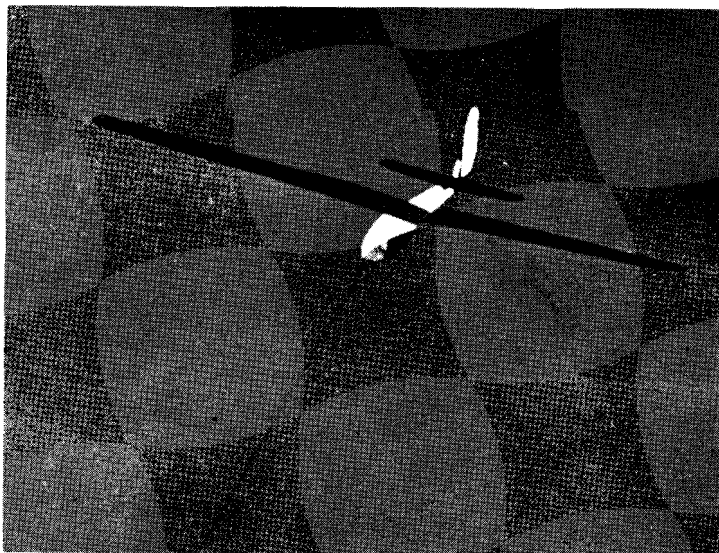


John Robinson



The "Robin" climbs in auto tow

ALTITUDE *over the* DESERT

by JOHN ROBINSON

A New Unofficial American Altitude Record

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Having been recently credited by the press with new altitude records, which were not records at all, it gives us real pleasure to present this account of a flight which exceeded the present record by no less than 4,000 ft. Although it is unfortunately unofficial, it nevertheless dramatically demonstrates the tremendous possibilities of desert thermals.*

As the sun came up on the morning of Sunday, May 8th, we were driving over the desert east of San Diego. The early sky was covered with cirro-stratus clouds, drifting with a west wind. When we arrived at our take-off site on Clark Dry Lake in Borego Valley at 9 o'clock, these clouds were rapidly disappearing and soon the sky was clear.

At that hour it was already quite warm, but when we made our first flight from auto tow at 10:45, it was really hot. Before taking off, it was necessary to keep the cockpit enclosure open until the very last second, in order to reduce the painful similarity between the pilot in the cockpit and a roast turkey in an oven.

On this expedition with my new sailplane, "Robin", which I designed and built, I was accompanied by Woody Brown and Dick Essery. Woody made the first take-off and soon caught a thermal, which he climbed to 3,000 ft. When he landed after 35 minutes, I made ready to fly the "Robin".

The dry lake is 400 ft. above sea level, and I released from the auto tow at 400 ft. above the ground. Immediately I caught a strong thermal of 10 to 15 ft./sec. and soon was over 5,000 ft., after which I was no longer bothered by the heat—which was more than my long-suffering crew could say far below. Continuing in this thermal, I reached 7,000 ft. before losing out.

As I straightened out, I kept a sharp lookout for buzzards, but saw only one during the day. He was at 4,000 and had the thermal first, but he took as much

advantage of me as I did of him in staying in the thermal. Once I nearly hit him with my left wing tip, after which he left me.

The sky was cloudless and the downdrafts were quite strong all day, as were the updrafts. I got used to seeing the needle of my Kollsman sensitive altimeter pass the thousand foot marks nearly as rapidly as it passes the hundreds while slope soaring on the coast. My average sinking speed between thermals was 8 ft. per second and my average rate of climb about the same. I also had a Kollsman sensitive vertical speed indicator, which I consider as valuable for thermal soaring as the ship itself.

After my first thermal, I was down to 3,000 before I caught another which carried me up to 8,000 ft., my best climb being 17 ft./sec. With this altitude I crossed the 6,000 ft. Santa Rosa Mountains and headed north for Palm Springs. My altitude varied most of the time between 6,000 and 3,000 ft. At 3:00 o'clock, I arrived over Palm Springs with 5,000 ft. altitude. I now noticed small puffs of cumulus clouds forming about 8 to 10 miles distant, on either side of my flight path, but never came near enough to them to use them to advantage. I didn't carry a thermometer on this flight, but I opened my hood several times up to 6,000 and found it quite cool outside.

Proceeding down the mountain range, I tried to look around the corner. The terrain didn't look too encouraging and I began dropping fast, so flew back over the town with the intention of landing at the airport. At 1,500 ft. over the field I found a thermal so continued soaring over the city until 4:30, when I was, at 5,000 ft., very near the San Jacinto mountain range, which rises directly behind Palm Springs.

(Continued on Page 11)