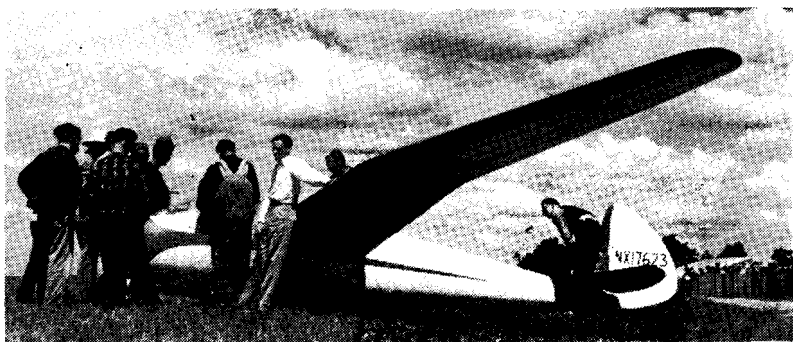


The author, with parachute, prepares to take-off.



Hans Groenhoff



WASHINGTON TEST FLIGHT

by Robert M. Stanley

Far to the left, the Chesapeake lay mirrored in bronze. To the right, beckoned the placid Potomac. Ahead Washington's sunset-tinted spires seemed vainly upstretched as if trying to grasp this late some fleeting remnant of its tattered cumulus canopy, scattered now by Aquilo, god of the north wind.

Seated in my trim, staunch craft with but the lulling rhythm of rushing air to intrude on the silence, it was with mingled emotions that I watched this fourth of July and the flight it dated drawing to a close. Truly, I flew on silent wings, for stilled now were the savage puffs of gusty air, the cold, clammy swish of gray oblivion.

As if to atone for previous caprice, my noble steed had at last displayed itself a thoroughbred. Tiring of its initial spirited attempts to unseat its rider, later hours of perverse obstinacy, shying from wayside thermals, jolting stiff-legged through wandering cumuli, mount and rider had at last achieved harmony, striving as one to reach a still distant but rapidly approaching goal.

When some souvenir hunter had two days previously deprived my own sailplane of its flipper, my hopes of a goal flight to Washington were dashed. It may be imagined then, that no great amount of coaxing was required to make me accept the Soaring Society's offer of the Ross "Ibis" for a try at some distance. I'd never even so much as sat in the ship before, so it was indeed optimistic of me to expect any performance from it, yet somehow I did, and it was with some degree of confidence that I shouldered a 'chute, buttoned myself in the cockpit, and took off.

From the instant my skid left the gravel, I realized it was a new manner of beast I rode. Not for this sensitive creature was the easygoing technique into which my own stable plane had lulled me. At Pensacola, we were transferred from big, twin-engined, eight ton flying boats to tiny Boeing fighters without benefit of any intermediate stages. The first five minutes, it seemed even the thought of a gentle turn or climb produced a loop or snap-roll. This present transition was analogous, and, at first, rather disconcerting.

Flying very conservatively as a result of the first involuntary spin of my flying career, and easily the lowest, it was nearly an hour before I had gained sufficient altitude and self-assurance to strike out from Harris Hill. A camera plane circling around gave me an op-

portunity to try something about which I had long been curious; the possibility of flying formation with sailplanes, the more streamlined plane staying abaft the leader, using flaps as a throttle to slow down, relying upon superior gliding angle to regain speed. Unfortunately, my nearness alarmed the camera pilot when I charged in close, so he gave it the gun and dived out, leaving my pet conjecture still unproven. My childish whim gratified at chasing away this invader of my domain, I decided to risk continuing the flight and set out towards Corning.

A long valley extending southwestward from Corning seemed very inviting, plenty of farms and meadows upon which to land—I still have that "look for a landing field" complex—and atmospheric conditions as good as elsewhere. As the valley began to narrow, I had misgivings; when it ended abruptly in the wooliest, most forested hills I had yet encountered, I still had those misgivings. Too late now to attempt to work back toward Elmira and a new route, too stubborn to land so near home, the only avenue open was over the top. For about twenty miles it was pick 'em right—or else. Not once during this time, however, did I drop so low as to be alarmed, my average altitude being above three thousand.

Crossing the Susquehanna ten miles west of Williamsport, I breathed easier. Handling the ship having become automatic, I began to relax and enjoy myself, watching the variometer only casually, and the rest of the instruments not at all. Crossing the river I had ample opportunity to verify the theory of Herr Riedel concerning downdrafts over river channels. At this point, I decided to reject a plan half formulated enroute, of heading southwestward to Altoona, following ridges rather than crossing them until later in the day, slope soaring when convection gave out. It had been my experience from the previous flight that convection outlasted wind, so I headed south by east, quartering across those wooded welts that are Pennsylvania's mountains.

Aroused from a lengthy study of my map, I came back to earth, figuratively and almost literally, to note my variometer reading three meters down and signs on the village store below saying much, much too low. Down to six hundred feet over Beaver Springs, those cloud bases looked awfully far up. But hope forever springeth anew in the hearts of men, so I headed toward the largest field in sight, either to find a thermal or sit down. Arriving over the field, it appeared to be devoid of any help, but upon heading downwind, I found it, and rode upward to 5,500 feet on the day's strongest thermal, coming through on instruments atop a very new cumulus cloud.

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