

ACROSS THE *Continental Divide*

by Peter Riedel

EDITOR'S NOTE: Last month we announced that Peter Riedel was making the transcontinental soaring trip which he had planned for so long. Unfortunately, he was unable to make the whole trip as planned, but he did make several spectacular flights. The following account is part of a story which he wrote about his experiences. It begins as he and his two companions, Friedel Lang and Erich Mueller are driving east and admiring the remarkable soaring weather.



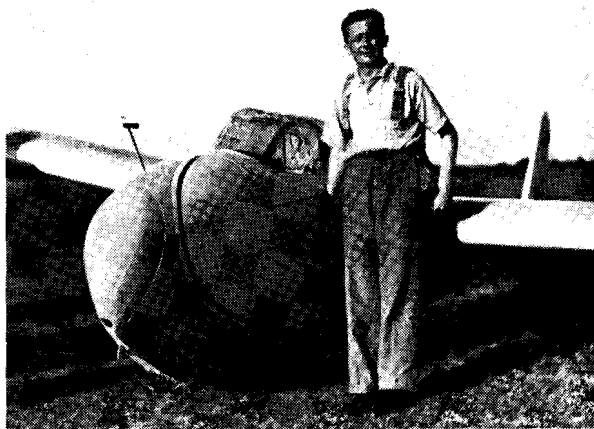
Driving from Flagstaff to Winslow over the high plateau, I was surprised suddenly to see the forests ending and an enormous plain beginning seemingly good for landing and even for *take off* everywhere. So I decided to consult the U. S. Weather Station on Winslow Airport about weather for the next day.

We received the greatest cooperation from both the Weather Station and the TWA officials of Winslow Airport. It seemed likely that there would be excellent conditions the next day, June 21st. Early in the morning I looked at the weather. The sky was clear blue to the horizon. A slight eastern breeze was not very welcome, but I was still hopeful that the wind might turn around at high altitude to the desired western direction. We put the ship together and waited. At 9:00 A. M. I started to worry about the fact that no clouds formed anywhere. It was a great disappointment. But since the airport people had been so nice to us and had helped us to repair some little damages, I decided to take off even though I was expecting absolutely nothing. We did not hurry at all. The northeastern wind was pretty strong near the ground, so I had all reason not to expect a distance flight to the east, where I intended to go. Fortunately I had filled up the water bag of one gallon capacity, which was hanging in the passenger's seat of the *Kranich*. Later, knowing that, I decided to dare the flight over the deserted stretches between Winslow and the Rio Grande in New Mexico.

At 11:50 A. M., I was towed up by the car. I released at 600 feet above the ground. A few minutes before the take off, we had seen some tiny white clouds forming over the National Forest, some 25 to 30 miles to the south. But over the Winslow area the sky remained clear blue.

I hit an upcurrent of six feet per second climbing speed immediately after releasing the rope and climbed steadily to several thousand feet above the ground. Winslow Airport is 4,878 feet above sea level. During the first half hour, I circled over the Airport just enjoying the sights. I saw the big meteor crater not far away which we had visited the day before and the strange looking red rocks scattered around all over this lone plateau.

In the meantime, the clouds over the National Forests in the south had augmented considerably. They seemed to follow exactly the range of mountains covered with forests as far as I could see. The weather station's balloon of 8:30 A. M. had showed that the wind shifted around to the west in higher altitudes. After playing around the



Peter Riedel and his *Kranich*.

Airport without purpose one upcurrent carried me up to almost 10,000 feet above sea level. From this altitude I looked south and was surprised to see the clouds swimming at an even much higher altitude, at least 3,000 or 4,000 feet more than my altitude was at that moment.

Around 12:30 I decided to try a hop to the south to approach the clouds. I had taken off just for a short ride, in shirt sleeves, without any food, having only water, a compass, and matches on board the ship. My maps were Standard Oil or Shell auto maps which showed only a very few roads of second rate down there to the south and east. I followed a lone road over the plateau, so that in case of a forced landing I could wait for a passing car to take me back.

I hit pretty strong downcurrents gliding away from Winslow, but soon I found very strong thermals, each one carrying my ship higher than the altitude I reached before. At first, ten thousand feet altitude had seemed quite a nice distance from the sea level to me, I got accustomed to that very soon. Twelve thousand and fourteen thousand feet, still without clouds, made me feel the cold air, so I closed the little windows of my cockpit. After two hours I was close to the mountains and forests. In the last part of my flight I had followed a river which had cut a steep canyon into the flat surface of the plateau. In vain I tried to recognize whether the river bed had some water or not, I did not like the idea of flying out of sight of water-carrying creeks.

Two things surprised me again. First, the clouds were still much higher than my present altitude, which was around 13,000 feet at that moment. I confess, this did not please me so much because after flying for two hours already in altitudes between 12,000 and 14,000 feet, circling around in steep banks many times in bumpy upcurrents, and feeling already a little bit cold, I was not very enthusiastic about the chance to climb up to such high altitudes. But on the other hand, I knew very well that deliberately giving away altitudes or other chances in soaring is a crime against the first rules of this sport. The second surprise was that the clouds were far away from the beginning of the forests, just over the line of the