

DESERT *Thermals*

by John Robinson



On Sunday, May 7, 1939, Woodie Brown, Alan "Dick" Essery, Sparky Koenig and I decided to see how the thermals were over a little dry lake in the desert region east of Julian, California, where we had never flown before. This particular lake is about 2500 feet above sea level and closer to San Diego than any of the other dry lakes, and is favorably located—near the mountains and the paved highway and only a few miles from a service station and telephone at Banner, California.

Towing my sailplane, "Robin", and Woodie's Bowlus Baby Albatross, "Thunderbird", on our trailers, we arrived at the lake about 10:00 or 10:30 A. M. After looking the lake over, we set the ships up at the south end of the lake and stretched out the tow wire, and I loaded my barograph and put it in the ship, just for fun. The variable wind had now set in the southeast so Woodie and I each made a low tow tailwind to get the ships to the north end of the lake. On the next tow I cut loose at about 400 feet and turned around so I could land at the starting point. At about 200 feet I started to spiral in a little weak thermal of about 0 to 2 feet per second climb. As I spiraled, I was drifting toward the hills to the west of the lake and only maintaining about 200 feet above the sloping ground as I climbed 5, 7, 9, and then 10 feet per second. I looked back at the lake to see Woodie's ship still on the ground.

As I passed the top of a mountain about 3,000 feet above the lake, my thermal ceased to be active, so I headed for the mountain to see what the other side looked like. Presently, I found another thermal and as I spiraled I looked at the lake for some activity. Woodie's ship was now in the air spiraling over the lake—with Dick at the controls, I later found out.

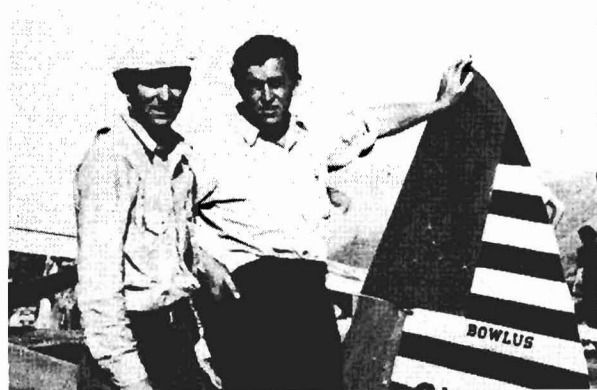
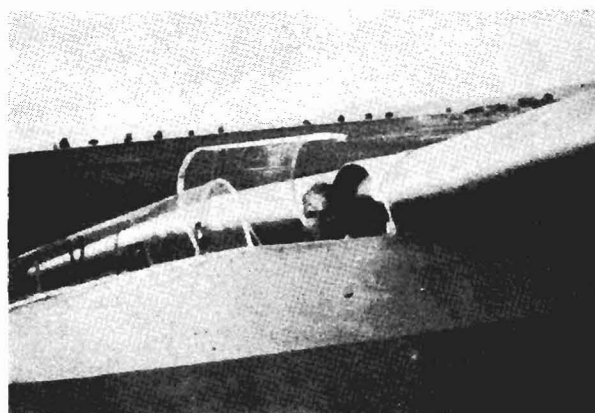


Photo by Fred Westphal

Dick Essery, left, and Hawley Bowlus with "The Thunderbird".



Sailplane "Robin"

I climbed at about 10 feet per second for a while and then it picked up to 15 feet and finally 20 feet per second. At this rate the altimeter needle was fairly winding around the dial. I was not drifting any more as there was almost no wind above the mountains. I kept looking back at the lake for the other ship but I could not find it nor the cars on the lake—in fact the lake itself began to look pretty small. It was fascinating to watch the rate of climb vary between 12 and 20 feet per second, the altimeter needle pass the 7,000, 8,000, and 9,000-foot marks so quickly, and the horizon spinning around beyond the instruments.

Suddenly there was a noise like a gun shot and one panel of pyralin on the nose of my ship split. As the wind coming in the hole was cold, I looked at the thermometer and found it was below freezing outside. Due to the drop in temperature, the contraction had split the tight pyralin panel.

The rate of climb slowed down and finally stopped at 9,700 feet above the take-off, which was over 12,000 feet above sea level. The temperature was now 24° F. I saw some clouds that had been forming to the south were on a level with me, so I headed for them while I looked the country over. I could see half the lakes in the county, and the 6,000-foot mountains, Laguna, Cuyamaca, and Volcan, looked like mere ant hills.

I turned on my turn indicator for the little clouds, but I didn't need it, for they dissipated just as I slid under them. I then turned west and glided over Cuyamaca Lake and Cuyamaca Mountains. When I found no more thermals, I remembered that the area from the mountain to the ocean had been under a stratus cloud all morning and that this stable air was still there, altho it was clear now—but rather hazy. I decided to glide toward Linda Vista Airport, San Diego, our home telephone headquarters. I still had 11,000 feet above sea level, and the prevailing west wind which I had to buck was fairly weak.

I arrived at Linda Vista Airport with 1,000 feet altitude to spare after a very smooth even glide interrupted by only two very small thermals when I was nearly there. I landed after 21½ hours in the air and covering 42 miles airline.

While all this was going on, Dick Essery was having

(Continued on Page 12)