

280 MILE Goal Flight

by Woodbridge Brown

Early on the morning of June 6, during the annual Southwest Soaring Contest, the weather man confronted me with some rather startling information. In all the neighboring cities, for a radius of several hundred miles, there was indicated a wind velocity of 40 to 60 miles, above 2000 ft., with a ground speed of 15 to 20 miles. Convection of some degree was already apparent by the appearance of small cumuli. There was no time to be wasted; especially as the Baby Albatross is one of the lightest loaded ships built today, making high speed a very difficult thing to achieve.

Dashing madly from the stupefied weather man to my ground captain, Allen Delane, all necessary arrangements for the ship were made. Figuring approximate time in the air, average wind velocity, ship speed, circling time, thermal strength, etc., a city due tail wind had to be picked for a goal, even though the possibility of greater distance was present (which actually occurred). Figuring in the neighborhood of 300 miles, Wichita, Kansas lay right in the path. With this as a goal, there were many loud (and quiet) laughs to be heard echoing from various parts of the airport.

With Captain Allen at the wheel of ground operations, all was ready and a take off made at 10 o'clock, with a bag of mail on board. Gaining approximately 700 feet on the tow line and running into a weak thermal, I spiralled away from the boundary of the airport at 800 feet with no chance to return against the head wind. My variometer read $1\frac{1}{2}$ feet per second climb. The usual strange disappearance of a thermal occurred at 1000 feet, and it was with a mixed feeling of despair and determination that I turned and started away tail wind from the rapidly receding airport. But the gods were kind, for there was another thermal waiting just a few hundred yards farther on.

For the next two hours, it was a hard battle between the altitudes of 1500 and 3000 ft., and although there were cumuli on the top of most of the thermals, it seemed impossible to get to the cloud bases which were about 4000 ft. In fact it got so bad that on several occasions continued spiraling at zero sink for fifteen minute stretches was necessary. This zero sink spiraling was sometimes done directly beneath a cumulus cloud, in order to maintain a minimum altitude of 1000 feet, and all the groping around was of no avail, as everything else was going down.

Finally, upon reaching Anadarko, at about noon, things began to pick up, and having barely entered the base of a nice round cumulus cloud, a very hasty exit was made out the side, as a result of neglecting to open the retractable venturi ahead of time. There was for the next few miles a very choice cloud street through which the baby flew a blind compass course at 50 M.P.H. However, this delightful experience soon came to an end and confronting me was 100 miles of cloudless sky. The beginning of this area provided very difficult going. Finally, sighting a single small cloud slightly off the course, and watching it steadily build, I decided to chance a run for it. As I approached, the ever increasing sink on the variometer soon

obtained the alarming value of 10 ft. per sec. The cloud continued to grow until finally upon my arrival at 1200 ft. altitude, it was a good sized cumulus. This cloud had a smooth 20 ft. per sec. updraft and at 5000 ft. I entered the base. For the next two thousand feet up, it was fairly easy going. Then suddenly, on half the turn there was 15 ft. per sec. down draft, and before the turn could be altered, everything was 15 ft. down. Blindly groping around, I finally found the lift again and continued up for another thousand feet.

Then everything went wrong. The air speed went from 0 to 70 M.P.H., the bank and turn went crazy, and both pellets on the Sanborn variometer disappeared completely. I stole one quick glance at the 24,000 feet altimeter, was visually descending and flew a compass course out. The altimeter at this point said about 7800 feet. Until El Reno, the flight had been navigated solely by compass with an occasional check on the map. But at this town a railroad joined the compass course. So now there were four checks for my course, section lines, wind direction, compass, and a railroad. The rest of the flight was made with a clear sky at an average altitude of 4000 feet.

It certainly was a thrill to sit there and watch the parade of cities pass by. Soon, way off on the horizon, there appeared to be an inversion which I must confess had me quite worried, as the termination of the flight seemed apparent. However, upon approaching, I discovered it to be a large city. At about this point, thermals were beginning to be few and far between, and the altitude was again only 1200 feet. There was a terribly strong impulse to land, for as far as one could see ahead, there were no more towns. But suddenly, a thermal appeared, and with it 3000 feet altitude, and from there what did I see? Was it? Could it be?

My heart gave a leap. There about 20 miles ahead in the haze was the biggest thrill of all. A huge city with its great white buildings reaching to the heavens, with the setting sun casting deep shades of red and purple—my goal—Wichita. But could we make it? With feverish hands, I caressed the Thunder Bird—Indian good luck sign. One more thermal, just one more, there has to be one somewhere! Finally, there was one; weak, yes, but it served the purpose.

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The author with Thunderbird