

Soaring in SOUTH AFRICA

by Frank Hatfield

(Mr. Hatfield, a well-known South African writer on aviation and gliding affairs, is a Silver "C" pilot who also holds the South African and German C certificates besides having a fair amount of civil and military powerflight experience. He is a member of the executive council which controls the South African gliding movement, is acting chairman of the Rand Gliding Club, and is an instructor and aerobatic demonstrator.—Ed.)

It may as well be admitted at the start that it does our old heart good to see, via some odd copies of "Soaring" which have been kindly sent out here, that at least somewhere in this barmy world there is a place where a man can ride on the wings of the wind without going agin' the government. You will gather from this bitter remark that something has gone wrong with the stew in South Africa. It has. Without a word of warning, at a time when the weather was never more glorious nor the sport more vital, the government has cracked down with a total prohibition on civil aviation, which includes gliding. You are a malefactor inimical to the State if you dare even to ground-hop. And woe betide you.

We in this country seem to have a good deal in common with portions of the United States. Where they lie is by no means clear, American geography being somewhat neglected in these parts. But our best soaring territory is in what Cecil Rhodes called our hinterland, of which we have quite a bit.

There are eight gliding clubs here. They are situated at Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Durban, Bloemfontein, Johannesburg and Pretoria. There is in addition a small club at Umtali, in Southern Rhodesia, and a very vital training school, Segelflug Swakopmund, in South West Africa.

The most advanced clubs, and the ones from which real gliding news emanates, are those situated in or near the Witwatersrand goldfields, in the midst of superb soaring country, and close to the area of densest population in South Africa. These clubs are three in number—The Rand Gliding Club which is a section of the Rand Flying Club, and the most powerful club in the country; sharing honours with it is the Defence Gliding Club, run by the mechanics of the South African Air Force for their own amusement; and the Transvaal Pioneer Gliding Club, headquarters of the German soaring pilots in this country, which has put up the best shows in cross-country work with their Minimoa.

Cape Town is a club handicapped by internal difficulties and a bad soaring site—a sort of pimple some miles from the road, accessible only by motoring at dire risk through heavy sand. Durban, another coastal club, has no soaring site at all, and exists in an area apparently completely devoid of thermals.

Grahamstown is a stout little club operating a frequently cracked-up Grunau Nine primary with indomitable courage.

Bloemfontein operates off a small site in superb thermal country. The weather there is fantastically good and we hope to record some crackerjack performances yet.



The Author in the Rhonadler

The Transvaal Pioneer Club operates off a flat site some miles south east of Johannesburg. The Rand and Defence Gliding Clubs work at Quagga-poort, the soaring centre of the Union of South Africa. It is 36 miles from Johannesburg.

In South Africa we have 40 registered gliders. These are mostly Grunau Nines, Grunau Babies and Wolfs. The Defence Gliding Club swears by a brace of English Kirby Kites which have given them fine service. Durban also has a Bowlus Albatross. It has not yet been soared by an experienced pilot in good condition so we have no idea how it flies.

The Rand Gliding Club uses Grunau Nines as trainers, like everybody else here. From these students graduate to a battered, faithful, and experienced Kirby Kadet, and thence to Grunau Babies. Our High Performance Section, composed of the club's aces, flies Philip Wills's old sailplane Hjordis, an aircraft of considerable trickiness and phenomenal float, but with a thrilling performance. She is the only sailplane in South Africa with very sensitive aileron control, operated through a steering wheel the size of a coffee-saucer.

Quagga-poort is right next to army headquarters and a now highly embarrassing steel-works. This is a prohibited area. We chose it originally to be close to the army, because we hoped to extract subsidy. (Censored).

It is 400 to 500 feet high, and covered with tremendous rocks on its windward side. It is not a good site. It is partly masked by the Kennel ridge upwind from it and the valley in between is not very roomy for landing. Thermals for some obscure reason are not so frequent there as they are elsewhere in the Transvaal.

South Africa has a coastal belt which gives way to a tremendous central plateau via some gigantic escarpments. This central plateau is where the soaring country lies. It is composed of several hundred miles of rolling plains in each direction, and must rather resemble your prairies. These plains are situated from 4,000 to 6,000 feet above sea-level, so we start with this height handicap. Above these plains, day in day out, hang tremendous cumulous and cumulo-nimbus clouds, with bases