RECORD AMERICAN *Distance Flight*

by John Robinson

Saturday, July 13, 1940, was the next to the last day of the 11th Annual National Soaring Contest at Harris Hill, Elmira, New York. The sight of cumulus clouds in the morning was very encouraging as we had been having comparatively poor weather for soaring our sailplanes. Shortly after 11:00 A.M. I was towed aloft in my sleek sailplane "Zanonia" to about 500 feet altitude by the launching winch. There was no slope wind on which to ride after I released the two line, so I glided down while searching for a thermal, or rising column of air, in which to gain altitude. Unable to find one, I landed on the take-off field to be ready for another try.

At 11:45 A.M. I was towed aloft, this time by an airplane. We usually airplane-tow to an altitude of 1500 feet to enable the sailplane to release in a favorable place, and to cover more territory while searching for a thermal. However, I encountered what I thought was a thermal at a mere 500 feet altitude just after taking off. Deciding in a split second to risk landing and losing valuable time, in order to win more contest points for altitude gained above release, I released and started searching for the thermal. Using two rate of climb indicators of my own design and construction, I quickly located the lift, which varied from 2 to 4 feet per second, as I circled tightly to stay in the region of lift.

Climbing in this thermal in a smooth spiral, I finally reached the cloud base at about 4000 feet above the field, where the lift weakened till it was useless. Meanwhile I had been drifting slowly southward—the light wind was less than 10 miles per hour. I glided down in a southerly direction and soon found another thermal under the next little cumulus cloud. Again the lift was relatively weak, only 1 to 3 feet per second, as were most of the thermals all day under the clouds. However they were unusual in that nearly every little cloud had some lift under it, instead of the usual large percentage of "dead" clouds. This fact enabled me to remain at a comfortable altitude—always above 3000 feet—while spiralling up and gliding down on a general southerly course. I kept zig-zagging east and west to take advantage of all the convenient clouds, for I was heading toward Williamsport, Pa., over exceedingly rough terrain, famous for its heavily wooded slopes and lack of landing fields.

My "Zanonia" is faster than the average sailplane with the result that I can cruise it 70 miles per hour with the same efficiency that most ships have at 40 to 50 m.p.h. Although the thermals were relatively weak, forcing me to spend more than one-half the time spiralling and slowly drifting, I was making better than average time and I soon passed over Williamsport.

South of here the sky was clear, but the clouds stretched off to the west, so I altered my course to stay with them. Soon thereafter I found several thermals that continued up inside the clouds. By flying blind, entirely on instruments, I found increasing activity and a rate of climb of 5 and 6 feet per second taking me as high as five thousand feet.

The clouds began to be spaced farther apart as I headed on a more southerly course, bearing a little to the west. When I was about 30 miles west of Harrisburg, Pa., I glided down to 1500 feet before finding the next thermal. This was the lowest altitude to which I was forced to descend on the entire flight.

Spiralling up to the clouds again in a convenient thermal, I continued merrily on my way. My thermos bottle of drinking water was still one-third full, and as I seldom get hungry in the middle of the day, I was quite comfortable. I had been in the air about 3½ hours.

Very soon I reached the border of my New York sectional aeronautical map, so I looked through my group of maps beside the seat for the adjoining Washington section. Imagine my dismay when all I could find were the Albany, Detroit, and Cleveland sections, but no Washington section! Not even a road map! Now I was in a fix! How was I to know where I was going, and how could I find an airport on which to land without a map? I had been making a habit of landing on airports—six of them and one golf course on my seven previous distance flights in this contest.

From here on, the country all looked pretty much the same from the air, and I determined to fly as far as I could as fast as was practical. Not being familiar with the Eastern Seaboard, I realized just one thing—that I had to keep heading west of south, so I wouldn't fly out over the Atlantic ocean. It had stopped one of the other pilots once, but it wasn't going to stop me.

Some of the clouds in the late afternoon developed a little thicker and the lift was occasionally a little stronger up to 7 ft. per second. This enabled me to spend more time climbing through them flying blind (my greatest pleasure), and to reach the highest altitude of the flight—about 6000 feet. The clouds were now fewer and it was farther between them. About this time I sighted the only prominent landmark since I had been off my map. To the East was a body of water, which I later recognized on a map to be a wide bend in the Potomac River.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening when I was struggling to climb under the last one of a group of clouds. Leaving this I glided south and at 1000 feet altitude I commenced to look over the fields ahead for a suitable landing spot. At 300 feet altitude I was struggling with a very weak little dry thermal and deciding that one pasture was smooth enough, long enough, had a house with a telephone nearby, and had no cattle on it to bother the ship.

I slid in to a landing at 7:35 P.M. and saw a farmer's boy climbing through the fence as I was unfastening my cockpit enclosure and climbing out. Never having seen a sailplane before, he was naturally bubbling over with questions, and because of my map trouble, so was I. Due to my unfamiliarity with the entire territory, and having been over Pennsylvania when I ran off my map, I innocently asked him "Sonny, what part of Pennsylvania