

SOARING IN A *Thundercloud*

Henry Stiglmeier

Friday, April 25, 1941, at the Fourth Annual Soaring Meet at Arvin, California, I got off on a winch tow at 12:17 p.m., in my Baby Albatross sailplane, and skirted the foothills for five miles in search of a thermal. Three hundred feet above the ground I found a weak upcurrent, and worked up to 1,200 feet altitude. Since my goal was Arvin, ten miles distant, and return, and I could not get higher, I set out toward Arvin. I worked two thermals to the last ounce of lift, and started back from Arvin with about 3,000 feet altitude. Thermals were scarce on the return trip and I flew in almost a straight line at a speed of about fifty-five miles per hour to a small cloud forming over the take-off area. I found a thermal there and I decided to earn some points on duration rather than to land, since I could not see any other sailplanes in the air.

Clouds were forming rapidly everywhere in the vicinity. In a short time I was under the cloud base at 6,500 feet altitude. Rain was falling from some of the clouds over the mountains to the East. I flew in and out of the cloud base a few times to 7,000 feet altitude and then flew west to some smaller clouds. It was difficult to locate the upcurrents under the clouds, but I finally got up to the base of one again. If I could only get a couple of thousand feet higher, I thought. The same day I had had my first glimpse of the thirty-inch gold trophy offered for the best altitude of the contest. The memory was still fresh in my mind. The best height to date was about 9,000 feet.

I rose into the cloud and flew straight until I came out of its side. The altimeter read about 7,800 feet above take-off. I flew along the edge hesitatingly and then turned into the cloud again. I came out into the end of a cloud valley with about 9,500 feet. Only large white clouds were visible banked around me. About 1,000 feet more, I thought, and turned back into the cloud. 10,000 feet came with satisfaction. At 12,000 feet, the wings were dripping wet. It was like flying through a fog. At 13,000 feet, ice began forming on the wings. I tried to fly straight west to get out of the cloud, but the air was so gusty I could not hold the course. At 14,000 feet hail pecked the windshield like popcorn in a tin skillet. Then the ship started in a series of dives and stalls which I could not stop. I gave up the idea of trying to get out of the cloud and started circling. I thought I was turning left but the turn indicator showed right. I relied on my instrument and flying was smoother. I held open the wing spoilers, and searched for a downdraft in which to spiral. I had visions of meeting hailstones as large as plums and air as rough as a bucking horse if I got much higher. With joy I found a downdraft but it didn't last long. The sailplane and I were going up higher.

I released the spoiler control, but it didn't move. Ice had frozen the spoilers in the open position. The windshield was covered with ice. I could see only through the sides. The hail came in surges, and sprayed through small cracks onto my lap. My short-sleeved sport shirt was not very warm.



Author and Ship after Flight.

At 15,000 feet the hand of the altimeter completed one revolution. Both peller-type rate-of-climb indicators had ceased functioning. Two bolts of lightning flashed by, giving me light shocks from the control wheel. Then the whistle of the wind ceased and the ship hovered. Here was a chance to put the plane into a spin. I pulled the control wheel back all the way. Then the ship seemed to fall, but the airspeed increased slowly. Soon I noticed that the airspeed showed zero. It had iced up too. The ship did not feel like it was spinning, but rather just circling. I held it in a right turn, and centered the ball bank indicator. The altimeter hand was well on its second revolution. I wasn't interested in it any more. Enough is enough!

I took a few deep breaths of air. It seemed fresh and cold. Doubtless the thin air at this high altitude was affecting me. I moved my fingers to keep up the circulation. My arms felt heavy. The hand on the altimeter had remained at 18,200 feet for some time. I waited and hoped for the end, whatever it would be. I had not moved the controls for some time and it occurred to me that they might be frozen fast. Carefully I tried the rudder. It was stiff! In a few moments I worked it loose. I did likewise with the elevators and ailerons. Thereafter I kept moving all the controls slightly and the ship responded sluggishly.

Since I had been flying blind for some time (about three quarters of an hour) I could easily have drifted over the mountains. I did not relish the thought of hitting a mountain peak which stuck up into a cloud. I watched carefully out of the side of the windshield where there was no ice. After a while I saw spots—actually white spots in the gray fog of the cloud. I blinked my eyes, and then the spots disappeared. While puzzling over this, I suddenly came out of the base of the cloud. Then I realized I was over a snow-dotted mountain top and not very far from it. As the ship turned I saw more

(Continued on page 5)