

HOW TO LIVE A LONG TIME

in a Short Time

Major Fred R. Dent

Wright Field, Dayton, Ohio

At 1:55 P. M., on June 18, I took off from the Big Flats Airport with a dual airplane tow in a Schweizer two-place sailplane, NC29085, with Mr. John Robinson in the rear cockpit. In the other sailplane where Captain M. J. Lee and Mr. Raymon Parker. The airplane, a Waco trainer piloted by Lt. Luke, towed the two sailplanes in the vicinity of the airport for 30 minutes, at which time the formation was at an altitude of 4000 feet. By previous arrangement, it was agreed that if good thermal activity was encountered, Dent and Robinson would proceed in the direction of Williamsport, whereas Lee and Parker would return to the Big Flats airport.

Upon cutting loose, Robinson suggested that I head for the cloud which was on our left. I looked to the left, and seeing two clouds, I headed for the "white one." John informed me that I was headed for the wrong cloud, a fact which I had suspected, but never having flown a sailplane on instruments, I would have been content to have started my experience on a "white one." The black cloud looked mighty black, but I figured John must know what he was doing.

We entered the cloud at 3700 feet, and were immediately on instruments. Soon the variometer showed a good rate of climb, and we started the spiral. How many turns we made, I'd never guess, but it seemed that I had never been in any other position. The altimeter climbed 5000, 6000, 7000, then 8000 feet. Here, I lost lift and came out of the side of the cloud. I had a fleeting glance at Elmira and pulled back into the cloud. The variometer again recorded a good rate of climb and the spiraling started all over. The altimeter was rising rapidly and we started picking up ice. The front of the windshield and the leading edges of the wings were taking on a good load. I wondered how long we could continue to rely on the instruments. Soon the airspeed indicator went out of commission. However, having become familiar with the sound of the sailplane at various airspeeds, this did not worry me too much. The altimeter now read 9500 feet, and we were still climbing. About this time the variometer in the front cockpit ceased functioning, but John kept me informed of our rate of climb by telling me continually what the one in the rear cockpit indicated. At 10,000 feet the altimeter hit the stops on the instrument but we continued to climb for a period that I now compute as seven minutes but which at the time seemed like an hour. Then the bank and turn indicator went out. I could see the ice-covered venturi. I figured it was time for the cloud and me to part company. I had gotten rather acclimated to the rumblings of thunder and it gratuitous gift of frozen precipitation, but honestly I was a long way from enjoying the situation.

There was that beautifully arranged instrument board; airspeed indicator, variometer, bank and turn indicator,

altimeter, and compass. Of them all, only the compass continued to give me a reading. From the rate of climb indicator in the rear cockpit and the time of climb after the altimeter hit the stops, I am sure we had reached at least 15,000 feet.

I tried to hold a south course and after what seemed like a lifetime, we broke out of the side of the cloud. By this time, we really had a nice load of ice. The bottom of the inside of the sailplane was covered with what looked like snow. Robinson took the controls while I installed an additional variometer in the front instrument panel, and hooked it into the trusty gallon jug. We continued a south course, and I had no idea where we were. The sky ahead was clear with no clouds in sight. One by one the instruments began functioning as the ice melted; first the airspeed indicator, then the bank and turn indicator. The new variometer in the front cockpit was working fine. Although we held the south course for sometime, and I had the map, I am ashamed to say that I had trouble getting oriented. But we continued this course with a constant rate of descent and no apparent thermal activity. After sometime, the altimeter dropped to 9500 then 9000; even it was working again.

The sky was perfectly clear, and we were pretty sure at 5000 feet that we wouldn't make Williamsport. At 2000 feet, we got a weak thermal. After playing with it for a few minutes we left with a 200-foot loss of altitude. To the left was a mountain pass that opened into a level valley. To the right was a plateau between ridges running 30 degrees to the right of our course. The latter appeared to have fields where a landing could be attempted. We could have probably made it through the pass, but there was no altitude to spare. I just couldn't push on the left rudder, and leave those fields on the right. In my power plane experience, I have returned to the Rio Grande Valley in the Big Bend Country, where as a young pilot I had flown the river bed, a few feet off the water and hundreds of feet below the canyon sides. But on my return trip 8 years later, I just couldn't push forward on the stick hard enough to get the airplane down in the canyon. I guess it's just "old age"—smart people call it experience. I found myself confronted with the problem here. I couldn't force myself to abandon a course, when a good landing was probably, for a sweep-stakes ticket through the narrow pass.

We settled to 1200 feet, then 1000. Those level fields I saw at 3000 feet all seemed to slope greatly at the lower altitude. Eight hundred feet altitude and I selected my field, a narrow one without planted crops and sufficiently long provided I made a good approach. At 600 feet, I changed my ideas as to which way the field sloped, so I made a 180-foot overhead, and put her down. Except for a ditch, grown over with weeds, that wasn't apparent

(Continued on page 7)