

SILVER C *in the high Sierras*



by Paul Tuntland

I HEARD a woman scream as I landed my sailplane in her back yard after a 60-mile cross country hop for my Silver C. She thought that I had a load of Japanese soldiers aboard and that the invasion of California had begun.

She was a wrinkled old Indian squaw who lived in a three house community called Basalt, Nevada, perched on the northern rim of desolate Death Valley. After assuring the old lady that I did not have slant eyes, I hiked over to the Highway Maintenance station that I had seen while circling the "town" and phoned back to Bishop, California, to have my ground crew come out and pick me up. I had qualified for my Silver C.

This cross country soaring flight was made during the Sixth Annual Western States Soaring Contest, held last September in Bishop. Our soaring space was sharply limited by the Western Defense Area, that 150 mile strip along the Pacific Coast where no civilian flying is permitted. This year the contest was not to pick a

champion but rather to develop new training ideas for a post war training program.

I hadn't flown my Baby Albatrose in a year and a half and had not been in a glider for six months, since the Army closed down the Glider program at the Twenty-nine Palms Air Academy where I instruct. After flying Stearman primary trainers and Vultee basic trainers for six months I felt a little uncomfortable in the Baby. I was really scared for a day or two. It seemed as though I were flying on the ragged edge of a stall all the time. In fact, I didn't venture away from the airport area for three days and made sure that I got back to the airport every time. During the first few flights I flew from ten to fifteen miles faster than necessary. Frankly, it was a real thrill to get back into a sailplane and do some flying.

Before I go on, let me tell you something about the town of Bishop. It is located in the High Sierras, about 250 miles north of Los Angeles. The elevation is 4,000 feet and the landscape isn't hard to look at after two years flying in the desert. But those rugged mountains and big trees sure didn't look inviting for landing away from the field.

We were given the use of the local airport for the Meet. Three hard surfaced runways made it possible to pull up to 1,000 feet on straight auto tow. The bunch of Army Air Corps boys stationed at the field were most cooperative but pictures were taboo and only authorized personnel were permitted on the field. Local arrangements were made by George Diebert, pharmacist, and soaring enthusiast, and Bob Symons, former basic glider instructor at Wickenburg, Arizona.

Soaring conditions were only mild for the first three days of flying. I took off daily shortly after noon and managed to work my way over to the east range of mountains eight miles away, then sneak back to the field after an hour and a half of flight. My best altitude was usually not more than 3 or 4,000 feet above the field.

My first good flight was the day before the Meet when I flew cross country into Nevada and qualified for my Silver C. I released from tow at 15:15 and within a few seconds connected with a five-foot-a-second thermal, which increased to seven and eight feet per second as I gained altitude. I was a little peeved at not getting off earlier in the day, so I left the now dying thermal at 5,000 feet and started east toward the White