

SOARING

OVER MT. WHITNEY

by John Robinson

**T**O soar a glider over the highest mountain in the United States, Mt. Whitney, 14,496 feet above sea level, has long been an ambition of mine. The opportunity to fulfill this ambition presented itself rather unexpectedly as it was not part of the flight plan until about thirty minutes before it was accomplished.

At 2:45 P.M., on September 4, 1943, I was towed to approximately 1,000 feet altitude above the airport at Bishop, Calif., by car tow with 2,500 feet of wire. Flying my Stephens RS-1 high performance sailplane, "Zannonia," I released the tow wire and glided back across the field, looking for the "thermal" I thought I detected while on the tow line. Soon I was flying the ship in tight circles and climbing between 3 and 5 feet per second in this rising column of air.

Bishop is at an altitude of 4,000 feet, so my release altitude was 5,000 feet above sea level. At about 7,000 feet the thermal disappeared, so I glided eastward toward the White Mountain range in search of another. Not encountering any in a reasonable time, I soon changed course to the south, in order to be able to make a return glide to the airport in the event that another thermal was not discovered before my altitude was expended. Just as I was about to turn back, a thermal presented itself, and I spiraled upward to nearly 8,000 feet.

From this vantage point it seemed reasonable that I could glide southeast to the western slope of Black Mountain and still have enough altitude to return to Bishop. I proceeded to the mountain. Meanwhile, puffy cumulus clouds were forming over all the high ranges, but none of these extended over the valley. Thus it was obvious that some good soaring could be enjoyed over the tops of these high mountains, if one could get up out of the valley.

The thermals over the valley were few and far between, netting a climb of less than 5 feet per second.

However, by persistently working them I soon topped Black Mountain, altitude 9,075 feet, and found a real updraft directly over it. Indicated rate of climb was 5 to 10 feet per second. It wasn't long before the altimeter showed 15,000 feet, and one of those enticing cumulus clouds was directly overhead.

About this time I remembered my barograph, which was behind the seat, neither turned on nor wound up. Reaching behind with my left hand, I moved the lever which allows the stylus to touch the drum, and then pondered the possibility of winding the clock works to set the drum in motion, without losing the thermal. This detail was soon accomplished, and I continued climbing to the base of the cloud.

The best looking clouds stretched off to the southeast toward Death Valley, which would take me considerably off course, for my announced destination had been Lone Pine, in Owens Valley. However, a few miles one way or another would make little difference with all this altitude under me, so I glided off toward the next cloud, meanwhile checking the map and enjoying the scenery.

My indicated airspeed for cruising between thermals was 70 m.p.h., and 60 m.p.h. in the climbing turns. The thermals under these clouds yielded very good rates of climb, and the sailplane nearly took care of itself. Every time we sank down to 15,000 feet altitude the ship would circle vigorously and climb up to about 18,000 feet. The highest altitude reached during the flight was 19,200 feet.

While revelling in this wonderful type of soaring, I was also admiring the beautiful scenery from this high vantage point. The trackless deserts form an interesting contrast with the mountains which are heavily forested in some spots and barren in others. To the west beyond Owens Valley was the High Sierra Nevada Mountain Range with its white snow fields and blue lakes. Over these several large thunder storms were building up and