

Soaring in a Post-War World

By SGT. CLARENCE J. BONNELL

MAGAZINES and newspapers; the radio; legislative sessions—in fact any type of outlet for Armed Forces personnel consumption—it's post-war this and post-war that, and always in the same tune. The prospects are painted most glowingly, and releases never surprise us overseas when they go to at least 1000 percent.

In particular, the post-war growth of aviation and its many complements such as international passenger and freight service in huge stratoliners; new express service by means of multi-place glider trains; necessary erection of huge airports to accommodate land and seaplanes; continued improvement of communications and instruments.

But what of gliding or soaring, if you will? Soaring the sport? Soaring, the grandfather of gliding in war and gliding for commercial purposes? What of the thousands of trained glider pilots grounded the minute victory is declared and discharge papers are handed out? Will they be able to keep a hand in and will they be able to get sailplanes and operate them economically when and where they want?

A full colonel who has been in the glider-for-war campaign in both the Mediterranean and European Theater of Operations, and who before the war, was an airlines official, told the writer pointblank that he could see no immediate necessity for using towed gliders after the war for express and heavy airworthy items.

Therefore, he continued, thousands of glider pilots would be thrown out of a post-war job, unless he might get on with one of the manufacturers as a test pilot. He might be able to purchase one of the sailplanes being used in the States for training purposes, for his own pleasure.

A glider pilot, fresh from the wars, just wouldn't be able to sit around, living on his War Bond money or unemployment insurance, while awaiting full development of the commercial aspects of gliders. Since all overseas glider pilots are also certified as at least co-pilots on powered planes up to as high as 185HP, a few might get jobs around airports as stand-ins, or to park planes on an airport. Too petty for a man more used to war activity.

But on the otherhand, I was asked by the Colonel, will all the GP's (glider pilots) want to handle commercial

gliders. Maybe they will have had enough of the game in a khaki uniform. Maybe they will be only to glad to stick to the wife and kids and the hearth. I set out to find the answer, polling and interviewing more than 150 pilots in the Troop Carrier Command in MTO (Mediterranean Theater of Operations).

One of them had made the first glider invasion of Sicily, though it was his lot to land short and in the Mediterranean Sea; several had made that nightmarish glide into forbidden Normandy June 6, and were awaiting their second mission, this time into Southern France on August 15; the rest were fresh from the States (March) and were the "Eager Beavers" awaiting their first combat mission, the same Southern France invasion, which has since become known as one of the mightiest and most successful airborne invasions on record, overshadowing the German invasion of Crete.

(The writer accompanied one wave of gliders in this invasion, and received reports from the "brass hats" that little distinction could be made as to performance that day of the experienced and the inexperienced glider pilots. They were all "hot.")

The first impression gained from these lads—very few had been able to rise above Flight Officer ratings—was that very few, perhaps about two per cent, had ever done any gliding or soaring before initial training days at Elmira, the South, Texas or California. Some had held power planes licenses up to 85HP. They got arguing among themselves as to whether it was easier to handle a glider after power plane experience, or vice versa, but far be it from me to try referee that one. BUT with only about two exceptions were they anything but most emphatic about being sure they wanted to continue operating motorless aircraft, preferably sailplanes, after the war, if only for the purpose of keeping a hand in. Doing it for the sport of it. They even painted pictures of soaring taking its place alongside of such sports as golfing, or even the great national pastime, baseball.

However, they sure wanted to get in some constructive "gripes." That's the Army for you. A soldier is never happy unless he has something to complain about. Oftimes he's right. Other times he is just blowing off steam. This time these GP's (glider pilots) were in the former class, I believe.

For instance. Whereas before the war, only a few in-