

The Baby's Last Flight

By DICK JOHNSON



Dave and Dick Johnson and the Baby Albatross

WHILE instructing at the glider school at Twentynine Palms I had been watching for my chance to gain a Golden "C" altitude or possibly a national record. June 12, 1942, seemed to be an excellent day judging from the thermal conditions on the previous days.

Warren Merboth, Bill Tracy, Paul Fletcher and I drove out to Deadman Dry Lake with the Baby Albatross behind. My ship was equipped for blind flying but in my haste to get started on the thermals I did not take time to hook up the suction gauge on the turn and bank line. It was this that was undoubtedly directly responsible for the performance that followed.

It was our plan that I was to get my altitude, then return. Warren was to complete his Golden "C" on the second flight. I made two attempts before I succeeded in catching a thermal from a 500 foot tow. The climb was rather slow but the lift became stronger as I gained altitude. After about 5000 feet on the first thermal, I went to a nearby lava mountain where the clouds were heavier. It was half an hour before I reached the cloud base at 12,000 feet. My barograph now registered the Golden "C" altitude safely.

Maybe I could pass Bob Stanley's record of 17,474 feet—so on we went. I climbed slowly on instruments to 14,700 feet before the lift reduced to zero sink. I then left this cumulus in search of a better one.

It was at this time I noticed a minute amount of ice on the leading edge of the wing but none on the windshield. The ship and instruments seemed to be normal so I returned to the cloud flying. After about ten minutes on instruments I lost control of the ship. The airspeed started to increase even though I had a moderate amount of back pressure on the wheel and the needle was very nearly centered. It was apparent the turn needle was losing its sensitivity but I did not know it had stopped completely due to the very light ice on the venturi. To make matters worse, it had stopped indicating a very slight turn to the right.

As the airspeed increased I applied left rudder lightly but, as I was already in a left spiral dive, the airspeed did nothing but scream louder. I was beginning to catch on about this point. I estimate the airspeed to have been around 120 mph. now. I was too busy trying to reduce the load on the ship to look at the indicator. The shriek of the Baby was enough to let me know the speed was excessive.

At this moment I broke out of the 12,000 foot cloud base in an almost vertical spiral. I cautiously applied the controls to recover but even on full control the Baby did not show the least interest in coming out. The right wing had pulled the strut fittings out of the wooden struts and had left the ship although I heard no peculiar noise and felt no jolt.

After about five fast turns I knew the ship had failed somewhere but I did not take time to look around. I checked my chute straps and thought of Paul Fletcher who had packed it two days before. The acceleration due to the spiral was fairly heavy as I started to pull myself out of the cockpit. Then the

Baby gave its final lurch and I was thrown clear. This lurch I believe was due to the disintegration of the left wing. Only four feet of the tip was recovered—the rest of the wing was almost matchwood.

I impatiently pulled the ripcord and the chute opened with a heavy jolt. I should have waited until my speed had reduced and I had cleared the debris. It took about fifteen minutes to reach the ground. I saw the pod going down without either wing and the air was literally a snowstorm of small pieces of fabric and wood. I had to slip the chute almost all the way down to avoid landing on the rough rocks of the mountain. After picking up the parachute I started to hike across the desert back to the dry lake. I found only one small piece of a wing rib on the way back. The chute straps had left welts on my body and I found it increasingly hard to walk. Warren and Paul came into view shortly with water, first aid kit, etc.

The following is Bill Tracy's account from the ground: "We had long since given up trying to keep our eyes on Dick (a sailplane at 12,000 feet is a small article) and were loafing on the roof of the flight shack. The three of us were suddenly startled by a noise that sounded very much like thunder but was considerably louder than average thunder. It seemed to come from a large cumulus almost directly above the field. Warren yelled, 'It's busted up on him.' We saw the ship in a steep spiral dive with one wing off, then the other wing disappeared and we saw the chute open. To put it moderately, this was quite a spectacle. One wing floated down lazily, the wingless pod screamed down like a bomb, and there was fabric and plywood in the air for the following twenty minutes. The only plausible explanation for the loud thunder-like noise which preluded the scene is that the base of the cumulus had intensified and amplified the sound of the disintegrating sailplane."

The wreckage was not located until three days later. The barograph had left the pod in flight and made a silver splash on some nearby rocks. Only the right wing minus two feet of the root and the rudder were salvaged.