

# Distance Over The Desert

By DICK JOHNSON

On September 8, 1946, a new American twoplace distance record of 314 miles was established by Dick Johnson flying a Schweizer TG-2 with Bob Sparling as passenger.

I HAD planned for this flight for two years with my brother, Dave, with Bill Tracy, who was with us last year, and with Bob Sparling, who is here now.

Last year the best distance was 135 miles in a Baby Albatross. We knew then it was too late in the year to get the long days necessary for long distance flights.

Having five weeks vacation from Pan American Airways, a Schweizer TG-2 and a Waco tow plane, we planned to make the most of it. From August 26 on I checked with the local CAA weather office once or twice a day for the right conditions. We made several local flights for practice and always returned to the airport. Bob Thomas came up from Los Angeles with his Laister-Kauffmann to join us for a few days. I was becoming skeptical about finding the right weather, as it was now rather late in the year. We had a number of thunderstorms but on September 5 the air became rather dry and very few cumuli would form. On September 7 the weather reports showed high level winds at 10,000 feet and above along our route. The air was still dry and the thermals seemed to be only fair. The reports on the 8th showed even better winds, up to 44 mph at 14,000 feet, and we knew then that this was to be, most likely, our only day.

The Schweizer was loaded with water, flares, a pistol, ammunition, jackets, maps, a signal mirror, parachutes and a barograph. Bob Sparling and I took off with a tow from Dave's Waco. During the takeoff the ship grated on the skid and Bob announced that the tire was flat. At this time I did not care if it was, and we were off at 10:42 A. M. I had told Dave to tow no higher than 2,000 feet above the 5,000 foot airport at Prescott, Arizona. We climbed to 1,300 feet and no higher. I thought at the time he had misunderstood and was going to cruise at 1,300 feet until I released. He explained later that the air was bad and he was using full throttle. A mile south of the airport we thought we had a thermal and released at 1,350 feet. 'Round and 'round we fought only to sink to 1,100 feet in fifteen minutes. Slowly we climbed to 2,200 feet after 25 minutes of fighting. I say "we" as Bob was working just as hard in spirit as I was, thereby earning his ride as a passenger.

We then turned downwind across Lonesome Valley. Here we were just as bad off and descended to within a few hundred feet above the hills. Zero sink was looked to with joy. Conditions were definitely poor at the time. At 12:10 P. M. a good thermal took us to 10,000 feet above sea level and I felt comfortable for

the first time. From then on we were never less than 3,000 feet above the terrain. We crossed the Verde River Valley and the forest south of Flagstaff. Winslow came by at 2:10 P. M. The ground speed was 30 mph so far but conditions were picking up and we were climbing into the heavier winds. Soon we were able to climb to 12,200 feet.

The only disadvantage in Northern Arizona is that it is rather desolate and one has to plan his course. We had planned either for Albuquerque, New Mexico or Durango, Colorado. The wind now blew along the Durango course and we left Winslow and started across the barren but scenic Painted Desert. It is obvious why we carried the emergency equipment. The groundspeed increased to 50 mph in the unstable desert air and the Schweizer went as high as 14,000 feet. We used no thermal less than 2 meters per second, although the strongest was only  $4\frac{1}{2}$  meters. It was 4:00 P. M. when we crossed the 9,000 foot Chuska Mountain covered with pines. This was 230 miles from Prescott and we were overjoyed at our progress. I now expected conditions to stabilize as we descended 5,000 feet before reaching the barren valley beyond but, to my surprise, the thermals were just as good as ever. We climbed to 16,000 ft. still on dry thermals and the air was extremely cold. I had now given up Durango as a goal and was intent on the best distance possible. Anything to exceed John Robinson's record of 291 miles.

At 5:30 P. M. we finally crossed a highway and were losing altitude. At 5:45 we gained 1,000 feet on our last thermal. Nothing could bother us now as we knew we had a new record. We reached a farm house 31 miles east of Aztec, New Mexico, and landed beside it at 6:15 P. M.—7 hours and 33 minutes in the air and 314 miles later.



Bob Sparling and Dick Johnson in their TG-2.