

Diary of a

# Soaring Vacation

at El Mirage

By WILLIAM S. IVANS, JR.

**M**ONDAY—Flew up from San Diego this afternoon in the Cruiser and was able to get in almost two hours of dual with Doc Smith, one of Gus Briegleb's instructors. Doc coached me through the takeoff behind the big red BT-13. Once airborne, I was able to do pretty well on my own, owing to some previous aero tow dual with Gus. I found the little Cinema TG 1A which we were flying to be very sensitive to control movements during aero tow, in spite of the fact that Gus flies the BT at incredibly low speeds, usually about 65 m.p.h.

Doc told me to release after we had been towed to a little over 1000 feet above the field (which has an elevation of 2860 feet MSL), saying that we had just passed through a thermal. This was news to me, as I had been too intent upon keeping the Cinema under control to pay much heed to our rate of climb. He was right, however, and under his guidance the little sailplane slowly spiraled to a point several thousand feet above our release altitude.

Here we began the most important phase of instruction—that of teaching me to orient myself with respect to the thermal. I had had some previous knowledge, largely second-hand, of the signs by which a thermal makes itself known to the soaring pilot—the raising or dipping of a wing, the occasional turbulence, the indications of the airspeed, altimeter and rate-of-climb (variometer)—but this was my first real opportunity to practice. This proved to be a completely fascinating game, and one which requires a high degree of concentration. I made many wrong guesses, often losing the thermal completely.

After an hour or so, however, when we had worked a number of thermals and had climbed to almost 10,000 feet, I had acquired what I felt to be at least a working knowledge of thermal soaring, and even Doc declared himself to be pleased with my progress. One final thermal brought us to 10,300 feet MSL, after which we made a rapid descent to El Mirage Field, tie-down and supper.

*Tuesday*—It was hot at 10 A.M., and by 11 large dust devils began to rise from nearby El Mirage dry lake; puffs of cumulus appeared high above us. Gus decided that auto tow from the dry lake would be appropriate for the start of my first solo thermal flying, inasmuch as I have had a good deal of basically similar winch tow experience, gained while ridge soaring at Torrey Pines, just north of San Diego.

Soaring conditions looked so good that I decided to take along a sealed barograph in the hope of making the altitude leg of a Silver "C", despite the strong probability that in my inexperience I might not be



The Author with the "TG-1A"

able to make a successful flight from a low altitude release, where thermals are comparatively weak and highly localized.

The tow, made along the six-mile run which the dry lake affords, was fairly smooth. When the Cinema had reached an altitude of about 1000 feet above the lake, I noticed a sharp increase in the climb rate, from 400 to about 900 feet per minute indicated, and pulled the release. Then came trouble. For fully 20 minutes I spiraled between 700 feet and 1000 feet above the ground, trying desperately to locate a consistent lift area, and resigning myself to the imminent necessity for returning to the dry lake before wind drift had carried me beyond gliding range.

Then, suddenly, the lift became stronger, and the Cinema was soon established in a thermal which produced a quite uniform lift of better than 400 feet per minute. Fresh confidence, ease, and a feeling of general *Gesundheit* came over me as I watched the movement of the altimeter hand adding thousands of feet to my previous position above ground.

The steady spiral upward coincided with a steady increase in the rate of climb, as the thermal gained velocity with altitude. This condition held until the altimeter registered past the 10,000 foot mark, at which time the rate of climb began to slowly decrease, reaching a zero rate at an altitude of somewhat over 12,000 feet MSL.

Though somewhat dazed by my unexpected success, I was able to relax still further and to take stock of the situation. One of my first impressions was that of being chilly; the light sport shirt which was