

America's Longest Flight

By JOHN ROBINSON

Anything can happen at a National Soaring Contest—even on the last day. That I learned on July 19, 1947, the last day of cross-country competition at the Fourteenth National, Wichita Falls, Texas.

The weather was clear, there was a light NNE wind and the sun beamed down warmly upon the Texas countryside. Already many sailplanes were circling in thermals in the vicinity of the contest site.

It was 11:33 A.M. when the Stearman PT-17 towed me aloft in "Zanonia," my small single-place high performance sailplane. Releasing the tow line 2000 feet over the airport (3000 above sea level), I joined a group of sailplanes circling in a thermal. Round and round, up and up we went, like a flock of buzzards, each one trying to outdo the other.

Presently the rate-of-climb reduced, and I glided down to the West to join Ray Parker in the "Rigid Midget" and Paul MacCready in the "Screamin' Wiener", who was circling in another thermal slightly below. Their thermal wasn't producing much climb, and soon we scattered in search of greener air. Since my pre-announced goal was Big Spring, Texas, more than 200 miles away, my course lay to the southwest.

I had dropped back down to tow release altitude before another thermal indicated itself on the variometer. As I turned to spiral, a sailplane piloted by one of the French contestants came into view below. He stayed with me during several thermals, dropping a bit farther behind in each until he disappeared. That was shortly after noon. From then on I was alone in the Lone Star state.

Cross-country progress was slow for the first 60 miles. Thermals were weak and more than half the time was spent circling and drifting with the wind which was still NNE, about 10 mph. By gliding slightly crosswind at 70 airspeed, I managed to remain over highway 277.

Texas highways make fine emergency landing strips when the conventional type is not readily available. A landing on a highway or on a field beside one is greatly appreciated by the hard-working ground crew which spends long hours driving the car and trailer, attempting to remain in the same vicinity as the pilot, in order to retrieve him as speedily as possible after landing.

Seymour, Texas, came along and presented me with a nice ascent right over the airport. Within a few seconds, I was sliding happily on toward Goree, 18 miles away, with 5000 feet, the best altitude so far. Bomarton came along next and I was sinking. At Munday, highway 277 turned a corner, so it seemed logical to save several miles by cutting the corner. Still no lift, and altitude was disappearing fast.

Glider pilots are not above accepting visible aids when it comes to locating the elusive thermal; consequently, with my altitude down to 1200 feet above



The ship that sailed 325 miles

the ground, I was overjoyed when a "dust devil" appeared southeast of the highway. These dust whirls indicate a thermal touching the ground and picking up loose dust or sand.

In this desolate region, common sense dictated that I stay near the highway. If I tried for the dust whirl and missed, an immediate landing out in the fields would be necessary, followed by a long walk to the nearest ranch. But my will-o'-the-wisp, the cloud of dust, was beckoning, and temptation won over common sense.

As I glided toward it, the dust whirl drifted over a green field and disappeared. By taking a bearing on its base location where last seen, and figuring its probable drift, I dove toward the spot. A sudden sharp gust hit, a quick circle, then it hit again. Twenty miles of straight gliding were over and the flight was saved.

This was by far the strongest thermal of the day, and I was soon flying a very tight spiral, holding a bank of about 60° in order to stay close to the core where the lift was greatest. When the altimeter indicated more than 8000 feet the climb slowed. It was nearly 2 P.M. I began to wonder whether this was a stray thermal, on a lone journey like myself or whether there were others in the vicinity.

With this altitude I decided to forsake my old friend, highway 277, and set out on a southwestward course in the general direction of Colorado City. Confidently, I left the highway at Haskell and met prompt retribution in the form of an altitude bandit, a strong downdraft which snatched away 2000 precious feet.

Happily, a strong "down" usually means a strong "up" is nearby, and the next thermal was strong. Enticing little cumulus clouds began to appear ahead and above. I reached cloudbase at 10,000 feet and swept onward at 80 to 85 mph, gathering distance by making speed while I could. Now this was fun!

It was apparent that I had entered a different air