

GRACE ROBERTS TALKS - - -

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Patchas. Much of the heaviness on tow had disappeared when aileron gaps had been blanked in and, no doubt, the controls were loosening up with use.

I arrived in Sydney on the 15th of September and was smitten quite dumb—for once—by my first sight of "Explorer." I just walked around and 'round her, touching her gently and trying not to make a complete and utter ass of myself by sitting down on the concrete floor and bawling.

(When I was thirteen years old, I fell madly in love with a dreadful old Rhon Ranger primary on which my father and brothers were learning to fly I have not since returned to normal.)

On Sunday, the 17th, I had my first flight in "Explorer," when Fred and I flew on tow from Bankstown to Camden, with Nancy Ellis and John Patcha in Fred's Tiger Moth, "Brolga." With two up in both aircraft, little "Brolga" dances off and chuffs happily along without complaint. To my secret horror, Fred left everything to me. I was overawed by the TG's largeness, her obvious air of being an ex-U. S. Army Air Force type, her big-time look, that I really didn't think I was capable of handling her. Checking up since with other purely glider-trained types, I've found that they have shared my misgivings.

However, as soon as I had her, a feeling of pure delight swept me. Certainly, she was a little heavy to handle on tow and I had both hands on the stick, but she was sweet and biddable. The tow to Camden took half an hour then I dropped off and was newly delighted with her lightness in free flight. I tried her out in stalls and experienced her faint, protesting tremble followed by the warning shudder. There was no vice and no viciousness.

It took us eleven minutes to lose a thousand feet over pretty little Camden town. It was around 10 o'clock and the air was starting to bubble, but not enough to use. It was obviously going to build up nicely later. Already, over the misty Blue Mountains, little pearly cu. were forming and drifting our way.

Accustomed as I am to flying 1-in-18 types, I found it needed plenty of concentration and thought to plan my approach to the airstrip. The spoiler brakes were most effective. I touched down a little fast on a slight roll of ground, off the surfaced runway but let her float off again, then gentled her in. When she slowed down, I braked her to a standstill, grinning foolishly to myself at the thought of having brakes on a sailplane. When I climbed out, I wanted to tell Fred how awfully good of him it was to let me fly his Schweizer, but all I managed was an enormous and uncontrollable grin which spread from ear to ear and was promptly chastised by the others—"That Schweizer Smile."

The Hinkler Club's two Grunaus

were towed off one by one, then Fred towed Nancy off for her first solo in "Explorer." Nancy is a very capable power pilot, one of four women Commercial pilots in Australia and the only women power-flying instructor, as well as being the only woman tow-plane pilot. Nancy had her first flight in a sailplane early this year. She handled "Explorer" beautifully and looked very starry-eyed when she landed.

The Grunaus were doing quite well, the cu. had moved in on us, the ground temperature had that still, warm feel that sets one's eyes gleaming and the old head back scanning the sky—and I gulped and gaped as Fred told me to climb in and take "Explorer" off solo and see what we could catch for ourselves.

As Fred and "Brolga" towed us off, turbulence from the surfaced runway kept me with both hands on the stick, working hard. Seven minutes later, at 1500' over the end of the runway, I pulled the plug after a rough ride. I had a hankering to see if I could do some good from an altitude I'd have gained on a good winch launch, since all but four of the flights I've made have been launched by winch or auto-tow, as indeed are the vast majority of flights in Australia.

I was in very weak lift and had trouble centering it. At the same time, I was very much aware of the ease and maneuverability of the TG. More than twice as heavy as most of the gliders I've flown and with 14' more wingspan than our loved "Coogee," which I fly the most, she yet handled with a lightness and sweetness that brought the Schweizer Smile back to my face.

At last, the runway began to recede and soon we were going up steadily. The variometer went berserk and gave me 5 fps red and green at the same time. For a mad moment, I thought it must be a new type variometer, then I thought the hell with it and used the rate-of-climb indicator and the seat of my pants—the latter has never yet let me down, which is more than I can say for these instruments.

Cloud base was then around 5000' and the lift petered out about 500' below that. I recalled that for the first time I was actually carrying a barograph sealed by an Official Observer. So I sat up and decided this was as good a time as any to grab my Silver C height leg. During the next hour, cloud base gradually lifted until I was topping 7000'.

Incidentally, I'm sorry that this is not a more official-sounding report on the TG; I always intend to make efficient and coherent notes about things but somehow I get sidetracked. I start noticing how beautiful Sydney Harbour looks, a blue watery wilderness on the horizon—what strange patterns the weaving of that cloud is making—what an uncannily straight road that is down there and I wonder where it goes to—how the heck did that farmer keep his fur-

rows so mathematically precise and wouldn't he love to see them from here—what IS that bird doing over there and HEY he's getting better lift than I am, let's go!

Between clouds, I bumped the speed to around 80 mph, losing so little it made me feel vaguely hysterical. About a mile away, I noticed a cloud that seemed to be based a little higher than the others, building up rapidly and looking as though it would break up fast, too. I tucked the nose down and whizzed over. I think the speed was around 90 mph but it was quite possibly more as I was anxious to get there fast. We lost under 10 fps on the way. Arriving, I pulled up and had 8 fps green to 8000', my maximum altitude.

As I'd been up for around two hours, I thought I'd better get back and let someone else have a go. Not to mention the fact that, if I didn't find someone to earbash about "Explorer" soon, I'd bust! Camden was about fifteen miles away! I'd flown a roughly triangular course of about fifty miles and was surprised to learn later that I'd been out of sight most of the time and the boys thought I'd lit off for my home field at Berwick, 460 miles away! Pity! I didn't think of it. I can just imagine how the Victorian Motorless Flight Group's eyes would have lighted up, too.

Feeling very intrepid, I eased the stick forward until the a.s.i. said 100 mph. I was delighted with "Explorer's" steadiness. I eased back again and idled along at 50, just twice as fast as I want to idle along in "Coogee." I kept looking back and down at those clean, lovely wings below me, and twisting my head around like a hawk looking for field mice, just for the pleasure of taking in the marvelous visibility. Sorry if I sound like a salesman for Paul and Ernest!

I played around circling and practicing instrument flying until we were down around 4000', back a little from the airstrip. Then, taking a deep breath, I picked up 90 on the a.s.i. and took "Explorer" over in a big, wide loop, being distinctly shocked to feel myself apparently losing all the skin from my face, then swelling up with importance as I realised that it must be G's. I did a stall turn to face the other way, then another loop and stall back again, a couple more loops down to 2000', at which point I sobered up from my state of Schweizer-intoxication when I recalled that this was, after all, G. Roberts' first solo in the big ship and G. Roberts still had to do her first solo landing.

We stoged around for a long time losing enough height to make the approach over the river and the trees, going well up the runway on the time-honoured theory that it's better to push 'em back than pick 'em out of the trees.

And so the Schweizer collected her first Australian Silver C height and