

A Summer's Tale

By E. J. REEVES

Soaring contests are not generally considered to be one of the great spectator sports, and I guess I can go along with this supposition—up to a certain point. There is however one phase of these tournaments, that if not sporting is then, dramatic. This is a phase too little known, either to the casual spectator or the avid follower of the sport.

I am referring to all of the action of varied nature, leading up to and reaching a final climax at the communication headquarters of the contest. The place where calls are received from crews and contestants who have 'gone.' Here you are smack behind home plate, having play of football terminate on your yard line—orchestra seats on the aisle. Here is the nerve center of the entire contest once the launchings are complete and the pilots start winging their way on cross country flights.

During TSA's Record Attempts at Odessa, Texas, last August, it was my fortunate opportunity to remain at the launching site and assist with the 'chores.' It was here that I rediscovered the real sport in tournament soaring. And hereby hangs my tale.

The clerks charged with recording, relaying and dispatching the crew and pilot calls, are soon aided and abetted by all other contest personnel; line crews, tug pilots, pick-up boys, visitors, loafers, hecklers—everybody. At first, business at communication headquarters drums along placidly enough.

First calls come about one hour after first launchings. Most likely it will be the crew of the first pilot away, reporting from a village 30 miles out. Or perhaps it will be an unlucky pilot, sheepishly reporting his landing $19\frac{1}{4}$ miles out. Where unfortunately he encountered a "meteorological ambushade" and through absolutely no fault of his own—was unable to negotiate an area of "all down."

Sunday, August 5th at Odessa, was a soaring day to end all soaring days; of a kind that even the Texans had not equalled in their brags, and that, gentle reader, means nothing short of—super ultra, colossal and stupendous. But there it was and the events of the day later proved it.

On this day, Johnson, Wiberg, Elliott, Mulloy, Watkins and Yerian were launched in that order. I was flying tug, assisting Jon Carsey the Official SSA Observer and pinch-hitting wherever a man was short. Half up on first tow, Johnson 'cut' and zoomed back for the starting line, air brakes full open. He had overlooked starting his barograph. I go immediately back to the deck and relaunch him in short order.

It is 10:30 now, puffs of new born Cu are showing their short-lived faces like exploding A.A. shells. Johnson cuts low at 1,800' over launching site and is seen to go quickly into a rapid spiral climb, not to be heard of until later—much later. The balance of the line is launched and all are away.

Dust devils move across the dry lands surround-

ing, whirling along like ballet dancers. As if bidding farewell and reaching up to touch those graceful man birds circling overhead. The Cu are by now beginning to come of age, boiling and billowing, their snowy columns climb against the azure sky. They too, seem to join in the spirit of the day by leaning and pointing the way the silent birdmen should go—"north young man, go north by maybe a mite east—sail on and on and on."

Now we of the ground-bound are silent, the roar of the tug is stilled. Retrieve crews call a cheery farewell as they speed away, a rattling skeleton of empty trailer in tow.

We trek back across the now broiling runways and taxi strips to the hangar line, headquarters and shade. Stepping warily to avoid puddles and patches of gummy asphalt returning to liquid form by the now torrid sun. A soaring day 'Texas style' for sure. The gentle breeze from the south has now freshened and the sock atop the main hangar is pointing a knowing finger—as to say "They went that-a-way Pard."

Towing gear is stowed, the launching crew is seen to lounge about, having a 'coke,' speculating on the possibilities of the day. But, it is noted that they keep well within earshot of that magic bell on the telephone, something about that bell, holds them like a magnet. As the P.M. progresses they will make a gradual narrowing circle around this magnetic point.

The first calls excite no particular attention, but even so a hush is noted as each call comes in and no one misses a single report relayed by the clerks. Each ring of the phone you perceive a slight 'start' or sort of tensing of each one. It is something like the slight 'move' by players at baseball as each pitch it thrown.

This thing is contagious — even the uninitiated round about have caught it. The tempo of everything slows. Mechanics in the adjoining hangar work with a new quietness; as if with felt hammers on rubber engines, they may as well knock-off and join the ever-narrowing circle. Already the lad at the near-by gas pit has attempted to pump 30 gallons in a 20 gallon tank. Old soaring hands are making obvious attempts at assuming nonchalance and doing very badly as they light the cork end of cigarettes and scratch the uncharged end of their matches.

The crew calls come with regularity now. June Wiberg is evidently leading the pack north, her calls at one hour intervals indicate 60 mile laps between. Elliott is down first—140 miles by Lubbock. Not too bad for a TG-2—but he had done 200 miles the day previous. Maybe this is not 'the day' after all. Yerian should most likely be the next down. "No operator, Mr. Johnson cannot be reached at this time, he is flying. Tell the party to call later." Jo Ann reporting for Johnson's crew at Amarillo 250 miles away. Hope she hasn't overrun. "No crew can over shoot Johnson," someone allows.