

THE 1952 WORLD SOARING CHAMPIONSHIPS

By **WALTER SETZ**
Member of American Team to Spain

From the standpoint of pure physical enormity the '52 International was the largest soaring contest ever held. Several German nationals had more entries and a number of contests on both sides of the Atlantic have turned in more impressive results, but, in the over-all picture, this meeting topped them all. There certainly has never been gathered at one time and place such a concentration of the World's leading sailplanes, pilots and authorities on motorless flight. It is problematic that the Madrid scene will ever be repeated as many participants and experienced observers felt that the crest of the "maximum productivity" curve had been severely pressed.—at least it was quite generally conceded that no other country could mount a contest embracing such ambitious facilities.

No attempt will be made in this writing to describe in detail the aircraft and equipment of the contestants. For the first time post-war sailplane designs have shown a definite superiority in Internationals over the pre-war single-seaters. The Slingsby Sky-3 of the first 4 places—did admirably. The venerable Weihe could place no higher than tenth place. In the 2-seater category the old Kranich II still makes an impression; — possibly because the newer sailplanes are largely advanced trainers. It should be noted, however, that more so than any other large contest the supporting equipment figured significantly in the performance of entrants. Marginal or deficient highways, vehicles, communication and meteorological information exacted a severe toll on the ill-equipped. Of all teams the French were fitted-out the best. The British were a close second. Of all teams numbering 3 or more entrants the U. S. was the poorest equipped—primarily in the ground support aspect. The non-American soaring fraternity in general and the Press in particular were very surprised to see—after so many years of superbly equipped military and civil units the world over—the deficiencies in the U. S. team.

The two weeks immediately preceding the Championships were quite unusual for an International in that virtual unlimited practice at the Contest site by all pilots was permitted. In fact, some pilots earned Golden C legs during this period. Although the U. S. was never advised of this concession it would have had no significance as the U. S. sailplanes could not reach Spain before June 30th in any case. However, it cannot be denied that advance cross-country flights from Cuatro Vientos were a definite advantage for those fortunate enough to make them. It should be added that the principal nations employed their own, as well as Spanish, tow-planes up to July 1st.

Impressive opening ceremonies were held on the airport on June 30th. Each team captain raised the colors of his nation as the pilots and crew members stood by. The U. S. delegation was sadly depleted as most of the men were occupied at that moment in unloading the sailplanes in Barcelona. The remainder

of that day, July 1st and 2nd were devoted to indoctrination in launching procedures, final aircraft "tune-up," etc.—measures quite unnecessary for those who had been operating out of Cuatro Vientos for the previous week or two. The U. S. equipment arrived in Madrid very late in the evening on July 1st after a most rigorous journey from Barcelona. By that time we knew that ground retrieving would be not only difficult but actually physically painful—not to mention extremely slow. The tow-cars supplied by Spain, literally the only available vehicles, were preeminently unsuited for contest retrieving. The only member of the U. S. team who could derive any satisfaction from the Unimogs (the Spanish tow-cars) at this point was our radio specialist, Dick Ball. They had 12-volt systems and were diesel powered.

On the afternoon of July 2nd the 2 1-23's each made a short practice flight. It should be mentioned that Bill Beuby, flying a Spanish Kranich II, made several short flights the week previous. He then completed a "clean-up" program to his sailplane that attracted considerable attention. The modified Kranich with Bill and Shelly Charles aboard was airborne on the 2nd. Stan Smith was totally occupied in repairing his trailer. Also on this day the Contest Organization demonstrated their "mass" take-off operation with tows going off every 10 to 15 seconds. It was very impressive but not to the liking of the team captains. Time was altered to space launchings at 30-second intervals. Throughout the Contest a compulsory rotational take-off system was employed for the first round of launchings each day. If 2nd or 3rd launchings were needed the demand system was applied after the first round was completed. The take-off positioning of sailplanes was quite confusing but the physical complexity of launching so many ships in so short a period of time left little choice.

The first Contest day, July 3rd, dawned bright and clear—standard central Spanish weather. The met. briefing was not too concise but in view of a Class I task (distance) no great concern was felt. Passage over Madrid of a front was predicted for the afternoon. The drawing for take-off positions was predicted for the afternoon. The drawing for take-off positions placed Philip Wills in the No. 1 spot. Not only was this most appropriate—Wills is the only pilot who has competed in all Internationals—but it turned out to be quite prophetic. Dick Johnson was scheduled for an early take off but his tow loop failed before he started rolling and he had to wait until all others were launched. Stan Smith did not fly this day as his trailer was still out of commission.

Not long after the last sailplane got away some landing reports started coming in. But of even more concern was the passing of an extremely violent front late in the afternoon that caused considerable alarm. This wind-shift, with substantial gusts, re-