Lewin Barringer

Armed Forces Glider Program

The legend of Daedalus, the father, and Icarus, the son, (whose name is perpetuated by the Icarian Sea) so graphically set forth in Ovid's poem seems to bear out the saying "history repeats." These two "pioneers," as the "specifications" in the poem relate, fashioned wings of wax in order to escape from a prison on the Island of Crete. As is often the case even today, the younger "pilot" shrugged off the suggestions and advice of the older "pilot" by flying high and too close to the sun with the result the wings of wax were melted and so was recorded the "first fatal aviation accident."

The next glider activity over the Island of Crete was reported by the late General Henry ("Hap") Arnold in 1941 who went on to state: "There came in gliders about five thousand . . . invaders with light machine guns and field pieces. Anyone who doubted that the glider had a military usefulness has had that doubt dispelled long since by the onslaught against Crete." Thus came the answer to the question propounded for years by those, who from their own experiences, knew the glider had a place in aviation. Under Ralph S. Barnaby, the U. S. Navy Department had conducted an experimental gliding program at the Naval Air Station at Pensacola, Florida. The U. S. Army Air Force had been pleaded, coaxed and cajoled with, but all to no avail.

Early in June, 1941, the Armed Forces began to act and again the Elmira, (New York) Area Soaring Corporation and the Frankfort Soaring School, at Joliet, Illinois, were called upon for help; to train officers in the art of gliding and soaring! Glider factories began to set up production activities; Bowlus Sailplanes, Inc., at San Fernando, California; Schweizer Aircraft at Elmira, New York; Briegleb Aircraft Company, Van Nuys, California; Frankfort Sailplane Company at Joliet, Illinois; and Laister-Kaufman at St. Louis, Mo. To bridge the gap until manufacturers could get their production lines moving the armed forces proceeded to cut off civilian gliding and soaring activity by purchasing all airworthy gliders. Lewin B. Barringer was ordered to duty and in his capacity as Major, having been long active in the Pennsylvania National Air Guard, assumed the responsibility of coordinating and developing the program. At the same time, Donald Hamilton, a Colonel in the U.S. Air Force, handled the Army Air Corps end of the program for the Flying Training Command. Civilian contractors for glider flight training were set up in business and one of them at Twenty Nine Palms, California, was commanded by Colonel Floyd Sweet of Elmira, New York.

To speed up the glider pilot output the airplane manufacturers were called upon for assistance. Charles Stanton, then Administrator for Civil Aeronautics, drew up a suggested design, used by Aeronca Aircraft, which consisted of removing the powerplant and substituting a pilot compartment; also involved were models by Piper Aircraft and Taylorcraft Company. By this time glider manufacturers had gotten into full swing and Schweizer, Laister-Kauffman, Briegleb, Frankfort and Pratt-Read makes were available.

Richard C. duPont

The last of the gliders listed above, namely Pratt-Read, was the Navy's contribution to the up-swing in glider training, manufactured by the Gould Aeronautical Division of Pratt-Read at Deep River, Connecticut. Also under the Navy Department was the U.S. Marine's glider training program conducted by Motorless Flight Institute, Inc., with the capable supervision of Joseph Steinhauser at Chicago, Illinois' Gliderport.

The foregoing program resulted, on the debit side, in the loss of Lewin Barringer, who was reported as missing while flying to the European Theatre of War in his capacity as described above. Also the loss of Richard C. du Pont, the second of the financial and technical sponsors of gliding and soaring, (the first being Warren E. Eaton) while carrying out his duties assumed upon the death of Barringer. The credit side of the ledger, at war's end, revealed that thirty-three training glider (TG) models had been in use; resulting in over a thousand craft listed as gliders. However, as the converted airplanes were only useful for cannibalising as replacement parts of airplanes, the number of gliders declared surplus and available was approximately three hundred fifty; Brieglebs, Frankforts, Laister-Kauffmans, Pratt-Reads, Schweizers and a few of the pre-war privately-owned gliders that had been purchased by the government.