

THE STORY OF THE 20th U. S. NATIONAL SOARING CONTEST

Day by Day, flight by flight, you are at the 20th National in this story. And what's more — the reason for a soaring contest.

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by ROBERT G. DISTIN

Dr. Paul MacCready Jr. has recaptured the National U. S. Soaring Championship. Emil Lehecka has the Class B Sailplane Championship. W. O. (Bill) Hoverman has the Class C crown.

Betsy Woodward is U. S. National Woman Soaring Champion. A number of other skilled soaring pilots won awards at the 20th National Soaring Contest.

The Contest used Harris Hill at Elmira, New York for base of operations. The competition opened Tuesday, July 7, 1953 and ended Thursday, July 16. The true contest, stripped of all subordinate matters, took place in the long reaches of cloud-studded sky of New York, New England, and Pennsylvania, hidden in the hazy distances, beyond the visual horizons of Harris Hill.

The basic meaning of the contest lies in the "why" of it. To many different people, the contest means many different things. You may be reading this story out of idle curiosity in a friend's living room, skeptical of the practical value of the affair. Or at the other extreme, you may be reading it because you were intensely involved in the entire undertaking, so deeply aware of the contest's value, that any skepticism would seem irrational.

The whole truth of the matter is, as a matter of fact, more than writing can convey. The immediate point of the affair is simply this: — Soaring is complete conquest of the sky, and the U. S. National contests consolidate and milestone this creeping conquest. Man is on earth partly to lick his environment before it licks him. Before he can navigate any aircraft among the storms, whirlpools, roaring rapids of the sky — and not be smashed by them — he must master its secrets. A calm and submissive sky will allow a 100,000 horsepower rocket ship to pass smoothly and safely, well beyond the speed of sound. An angry sky can trap the blind, unreasoning, head-on, charge of any powered aircraft, and strip its wings. Yet that same boiling air mass will accommodate the skilled

sensitive soarer, letting him penetrate its churning depths at will, provided that his behavior remains perceptive and intelligent.

Thus a distillation of the meaning of this thing resolves into this: — the national contests are simply an active report to the world, citing man's status as to aerological intelligence, and air navigational progress.

So MacCready did not win the contest through the layman's concept of luck which chanced to carry him and his ship into the sky and in the right directions. He also did not win by means of some magic handling of the controls, or through straining harder physically than his competitors. It was reflective thought, intelligence, application of aerological information, that resulted in the winning edge of distances flown, and of altitudes climbed in producing those distances. What about his machine? Perhaps it was better, more efficient than the rest of the fleet, and the credit should go largely to this factor. It was a good ship, the latest U. S. production model. But several sister ships flew the contest, too. Paul had next to no practice with that particular ship before the competition began. He is, however, and significantly, a research

meteorologist as well as being a skilled and aggressive soaring pilot.

A flashback to one of the morning pilot meetings and the weather briefing will illustrate further. The U. S. Weather Bureau appreciates the gist of what we are saying here. They arrange for the attendance of meteorologists at the contest, and the met men spend from 5:00 to 9:00 each morning on a thorough analysis and prognostication, with characteristics of the ambient air mass in the region charted out for the information and guidance of the contestants. This data is presented to the pilots in general terms of soaring opportunities for the day. The point here is that the data is presented as raw material, which the individual contestant must digest and utilize in terms of his own peculiar variables. He alone can analyze the situation to his own best profit. The weather man can not advise some 30 to 40 soaring pilots, flying perhaps 10 different types of ship, as to a certain precise flight pattern and behavior that will be commonly attractive and beneficial to all.

At the meeting we have in mind, Bernard (Barney) Wiggin, who is chief of the Buffalo USWB station and, further, a seasoned observer of



Earl C. Bryan photo

Martin-Jensen Sailplane under the type of beautiful sky that prevailed during the contest.