

MY MOST INTERESTING FLIGHT DURING THE 21st NATIONAL CONTEST

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Staff Photo

Dick Johnson (right) discusses Elsinore conditions with TSA members Del Reed and Othmar Schwarzenberger.

The second day of competition at the 21st National Contest was to be an open day and many pilots and their crews huddled excitedly about their maps secretly planning the day's flights. The first day of the contest had been a rather local task so not many of us knew what soaring conditions we could expect if we tried for a long distance flight to the east, over the mountains and into the deserts. I chose Blythe, California, 154 miles east, for a goal.

Takeoff was just before noon, Pacific Daylight Time, and I released in a thermal at 1,000 feet above Elsinore and slowly climbed to 4,000 feet. I expected the most difficult part of the flight would be the first 50 miles, after which I knew the deserts beyond should be easy sailing. I left Elsinore cautiously sacrificing speed to conserve altitude. I worked every weak thermal found for as long as possible and so managed to stay between 2,000 feet and 5,000 feet above the level ground.

After one and a half hours I arrived at the San Jacinto Mountains and surveyed the 10,831 foot peak from quite a distance below its summit. I now had either to fly north a few miles to San Geronimo Pass (2,538' ASL) or climb over the San Jacinto Mountains before I could reach the desert. I decided to attempt the latter so I flew R-J-5 into the high pine and granite covered country. By climbing on each thermal found I soon found myself at the 7,000 foot level which was not enough even to see over the lowest ridge in that vicinity. I flew considerably below a forest lookout station and carefully flew past the 1,000 foot sheer granite face of Lily Rock as I searched for lift in Tahquity Valley. At the east

end of this valley the ground rose abruptly and prevented me from gliding to Palm Springs in the desert beyond. However, by flying in close I found a combination of ridge and weak thermal lift. After ten minutes of inching my way up the slopes I noticed I was flying within 100 feet of a pack train of campers on the trail to San Jacinto Peak. They seemed rather unimpressed so I slowly climbed on above them. Finally I had 8,700 feet and since the ground dropped away rapidly beyond the ridge I turned my ship toward the east and was on my way toward Blythe.

It was now 2:00 P.M. and only 50 miles traveled but the desert beyond looked better than I had expected. A fair coverage of modest cumuli lay over Indio and the mountains beyond. I was happy to see these clouds high and not large because this meant there was little chance that thunderstorms would form.

Near Indio I climbed to 12,500 feet in 21½ meters/sec. lift. By going from cloud to cloud rapid progress was made and I arrived at Blythe at 4:30 P.M. Under such conditions I obviously had to abandon my goal and strike out for Phoenix, Arizona.

There were no cumuli over the flat green valley along which the Colorado River flows but 10 miles beyond to the east there were more. I had purposely arrived at Blythe high and could easily negotiate a glide such as this. The lift was not strong but averaged 1½ meter/sec. up to 13,500 feet. For the first time in several days I was uncomfortably cold even though the ventilator was closed.

There were only a few small cumuli in the sky and they did not follow along the highway but instead they

strung themselves out over an arid and extremely desolate path south of Blythe and north of Yuma. They did point almost directly to Phoenix (145 miles beyond) and since I could maintain over 10,000 feet of altitude at all times, I elected to follow on. If the thermals failed I could always negotiate the 20-40 miles to either the highway to the north of the nearly parallel one to the south.

By 6:40 I was still near 13,000 feet and only about 65 miles west of Phoenix. I knew it would be dark by 8:00 P.M. and it would take me more than an hour to make a maximum glide ratio descent from this altitude. I flew through another thermal at 6:50 P.M. but decided to keep going so as to be on the ground by the time darkness would set in.

I kept the airspeed on 50 MPH and arrived over Phoenix at about 7:35 P.M. with 3,000 feet. The sun had set some time ago and the bright neon lights of the city sparkled below. When I flew by the municipal airport I decided it was a little dark to land there with the moderately heavy commercial air traffic. Eight miles farther I came to Tempe Airport and there I should have landed. However, better judgment was displaced by foolishness so I went on with my 2,000 feet of altitude.

The next airport was Falcon Field 14 miles to the east and I calculated that my best glide ratio should see me there. Visibility was now rather poor and there was no chance of seeing Falcon Field unless it had lights, so I took up a compass course. When I got down to 1,500 feet I realized that darkness was fast overtaking me and

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