

How many of you have given serious thought to why there is such limited participation in soaring in this country? Have you ever thought why a country as large as ours should have so few persons enjoying the thrills of soaring flight?

Those who have, probably have come up with some disturbing facts. You have undoubtedly discovered that the interest in gliding is at a high pitch and many people are saying, "How can I participate?" The answer usually is, "Join a club, or buy a glider." This presents our first problem — the shortage of gliders.

The 1954 inventory of gliders in the U. S. was reported as 428, of which 242 were listed as being active. Of this number, less than 200 carried CAA certificates of airworthiness, so we must assume that less than 200 gliders were actively being flown in the U. S., at least legally. There are 11 states in which no gliders are registered which limits the number of persons who can affiliate with groups owning gliders to about three-fourths of the U. S. geographic area.

The next problem is where to fly. When you are enthusiastically approached by someone who would like to participate in your activities, you invite them out to your soaring site to have an indoctrination ride to spark their enthusiasm. The distance to the soaring site may be only a few minutes, but more than likely it is an hour or two from home. Add an hour to get the equipment launched, a few hours of soaring, if conditions are good, another hour to stow the equipment, the long ride home and a whole day has been expended, less than half of it in actual flying.

The next problem comes when the interested person inquires as to the cost. If a club membership or partnership in a glider is available, the initial cost will be relatively low. But if a new glider is to be purchased, the cost can be discouragingly high. Indeed, we have been fortunate that there were so many war surplus gliders available to us. These, however, are fast disappearing and the production of new gliders has been extremely limited. There will be fewer than 20 new gliders constructed and flown this coming year. Those coming out of overhaul will only replace those ships which will go into the shop for renovation.

Are there solutions to these problems? I believe

there are. The answers to the first and last problems are interrelated. There will be no production of gliders unless there is a demand for gliders, and there will be no demand for gliders until the prices can be brought within the means of the many who would like to participate in soaring. The answer then is to create a demand for gliders through a nationwide program sponsored by one or several agencies, using the glider as a means of stimulating and retaining youth interest in aviation. Those who would profit most would be the aircraft industry, the Navy and the Air Force. The aircraft industry is alarmed by the shortage of applications for jobs as air crew members, mechanics, and ground service personnel. The Navy and Air Force have expressed an even greater concern over the shortage of applicants for their aviation cadet programs. The Air Force is particularly in need of applicants for the Air Force Academy.

What better means of creating interest than to make available glider pilot training to the teenagers and what better way to retain their interest than the competitive sport of soaring? The creation of the demand for gliders on a national scale would break the bottleneck and create a competitive market in sailplane production which would bring the price of good equipment well within reach of those who wish to soar.

This would give us the answer to our second problem, that of where to fly. If there are enough people with gliders who want to fly, they will band together and purchase or lease land convenient to their communities for the purpose of establishing glider ports.

There is no assurance that such sponsorship as mentioned above is immediately forthcoming, but there are encouraging signs. Meanwhile, let us protect the equipment we have, let us fly it safely and intelligently and get the maximum utilization out of the new sailplanes we have. There is little we can do about attrition, but we certainly can do a lot to reduce the accident and damage rate of our gliders.

A review of 1954 accidents indicates that most have been the result of poor judgment, lack of training and flying in violation of Civil Air Regulations. In this area we can certainly help ourselves.

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