



Photo: Dr. Joe Battle

THE AUTHOR

I was determined to get my Silver C altitude the only way possible around Memphis, Tennessee—a cloud flight. So, on August 29th, 1953, I began a flight which turned into a thunderstorm flight, although originally intended to be only a spiral up through a moderate sized cumulus to Silver C altitude.

It was about 2 P.M. on a hot, sultry summer afternoon. Temperature was in the ninety's, wind light and variable, with cumulus considerably developed vertically, visible in all quadrants. The clouds marched over from the south, and I climbed into the L-K expecting big things. My barograph was sealed and secured in the rear cockpit, and I hoped to get not only the altitude leg, but the distance leg of my Silver C as well.

The tow-plane took me to 2000' under a cumulus five miles south of the airport. No lift was found, although the cumulus was built up about 3000', with its base at 3700'. I landed and immediately made ready for another tow. The second time we went to 3800' and released in sling-shot range of the cloud, determined to catch this one. By now it had grown from its original size, and towered above me. I flew directly into the side of it, and went on instruments. After a few seconds I broke out under the cloud base. It was slightly concave, and reminded me of a shallow inverted saucer, of a dark gray color, darkest in the center. Lift of about 200' per minute was found under the darkest area, and in a few seconds I was sucked into the cloud and again went on instruments. Lift steadily increased, with no precipitation and only slight turbulence. I centered the lift by steepening the

A MOUNTAIN IN THE SKY

by

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bank on the side of the weakest lift and shallowing the bank on the side of the greatest lift, thus always working toward the center of the rising air. There was no other way to center the lift, since I had no directional gyro, and the compass was useless and swinging wildly.

At 8,000' we are in moderate rain and light to moderate turbulence. Rate of climb is now 800 to 1,000 feet per minute. As the turbulence increases, I have to increase the air-speed about 10 miles per hour, because vertical gusts from below are causing momentary high speed stalls by increasing the angle of attack. A gust hits, the ship shudders, and the nose pitches down. When this happens I release the back pressure, then start my spiral again at a slightly higher airspeed when full control is regained.

At 10,000' we are in heavy rain, moderate to heavy turbulence, lighting and thunder cracking. The air-speed indicator wavers, flutters and then dies, because of the water in the pitot tube. I have been flying basic instruments, which consist of needle, ball and airspeed, but after losing the airspeed indicator I resort to a modified version of instrument flying which is needle and ball and sound. (About this time I remember that I had originally intended taking a nap on this afternoon, and wished heartily that I had stuck to this plan.)

At 12,000 feet the ship is almost uncontrollable. Turbulence is very heavy, and I encounter frozen precipitation mixed with rain. The frozen precip consists of small hail pellets or sleet, about 1/4 inch in diameter. This makes so much noise on the fabric that my abbreviated instrument panel now loses its speed indicator. A flash of panic sweeps over me as I visualize hailstones as big as baseballs, or break-up due to high speed in turbu-

lence, because of loss of control. It is so dark I can hardly see the instruments. I begin to wonder if I am flying the ship or if it is flying me. The green pellet of the Robinson variometer is full up, and the 0-2000 foot rate-of-climb meter is pegged. It occurs to me that my Ford should fly in this stuff. The thunder claps are very loud, and the lightning flashes all around keep reminding me that I am in a wooden aircraft. I feel very small and helpless as I realize I have no oxygen, no airspeed meter, and the batteries that power my electric turn and bank have become unfastened from the floor-board and at times are flying around the cockpit. I expect the electrical connections to break momentarily, but am powerless to do anything about it, as all my energies and wits are needed to control the ship. At over 2000 feet per minute rate of climb, it will only be a matter of minutes until icing level will be reached and I will be in need of oxygen. At this time I notice a light area and roll out of the spiral and head toward it.

I broke out the south side of the cloud at 12,000 feet. The joy of being in the clear as well as the beauty of the cloud scene gave me a feeling of exaltation and relief I have never experienced before or since. I guess it must be similar to the feeling that a mountaineer gets as he gains the summit of a mountain and surveys the valleys thousands of feet below. I have never climbed a mountain of earth and stone, but as I sailed around the wall of boiling condensation and looked 12,000 feet down its side and twice that distance to its top, a thought came to me that I will never forget. I had climbed a mountain in an ocean of air. My mountain had strong winds and currents. It had rain and hail, and its peak was snow and ice. Fire illuminated its