

1957 FRENCH SOARING SEASON

by WALT H. PRATT

With the advent of winter weather, the soaring season here in France is now over. This is a good time to look back and summarize the soaring events of 1957.

To start off, let me tell you of an as yet unheard of incident in soaring history — a soaring pilot's strike. That's how the soaring season in the Paris area started — or rather — did not start.

You will probably ask yourself what those few characters that cruise around in the air on those singular contraptions called gliders wanted to achieve with a strike, especially in France where soaring receives so many blessings unheard of in other countries.

Well, when the leaders of the Parisian clubs called a meeting early in March at the former National Soaring Center of Beynes, near Versailles, it was in protest against a decision by the Public Transport Ministry to reorganize the commercial airline traffic lanes and radio ranges to and from the airports of Le Bourget and Orly. This unilateral action, for which nobody in the soaring movement had been consulted, had the effect of completely closing three or four of the soaring centers and limiting the other seven or eight fields in such a fashion that no real performances could be accomplished anymore.

Now, when you consider that there are some 2,000 soaring pilots in or near Paris, that the Paris area has probably the greatest sailplane concentration anywhere in the world (some 200 sailplanes are stationed on the twelve soaring centers), that the Parisian soaring clubs fly 30 to 40% of all French soaring hours and distances, and that, after all, soaring is supposed to be a government supported sport, the decision taken by the some 600 pilots and all club Presidents who attended the meeting at Beynes was in effect no slight threat. They refused to open the soaring centers until the restrictive measures had been lifted or discussed with the responsible leaders of the soaring movement in order to find some way to arrange a peaceful co-existence between commercial air-

transport necessities and the existence of the soaring movement in the Paris area. In support of this action, the light aircraft pilots joined the strike on one day, as they felt that this blow against soaring might well be a first step to also eliminating light aircraft, not equipped with radio, from the skies of Paris. Some soaring clubs near big towns in the Province also joined the strike, hoping to avert a similar fate in the future.

The strike was a success. Negotiations between the Public Transport Ministry and the leaders of the soaring clubs had the effect of lifting some of the restrictive measures and to give back some liberty to soaring pilots. In the middle of April, the fields were opened again. Some are still limited in altitude, others in direction, but there is hope for yet a better arrangement.

none of the leaders of the soaring movement had been consulted and, as a similar decision had been taken a couple of years earlier for all light aircraft owned by the state and the clubs had measured the folly of accepting this latter decision when repair bills started to ruin their club budgets, they were not going to accept a decision of the same order without a shrill protest.

However, only a formal protest and a tacit understanding not to accept any offers made was possible since the budget decision had the force of a law, being voted. In an extraordinary assembly of the French Aeronautical Federation, the decision not to buy any sailplanes was unanimously taken and, as the law could then not be enforced, it would be void at the expiration of the delay set in the budget.

This meeting also proclaimed a break between the clubs and the Sport Aviation Department of the Air Ministry. The main reason for the break was the refusal of this department to defend the interest of the soaring movement, refusal clearly shown by the failing to inform the clubs of the government's intention and to arrange for some sort of ne-



Photo: Dr. Paul B. MacCready, Sr.

A French Breguet 901.

Another bombshell, this time aimed against all French soaring and which threatens yet all existence of a government supported soaring movement, also exploded in March. This bomb consisted of a few lines in the government budget, authorizing the Public Property Department to sell, until July, 1958, all sailplanes to the clubs for a nominal sum. Again,

negotiations, indeed, this department was only too willing to get rid of the sailplanes, and special delegates were sent by plane to the different clubs, ordering them to send in their requests for the sailplanes desired before the end of March, 1957. However, only a few complied and these cancelled their orders after the Assembly. (By the way, the Breguet