

# THE THERMAL G — A NEW SOARING CENTER

by ROBERT D. BARBOUR

The towline tightened. A split second later the Schweizer 2-22 wing tip was snatched out of Grayce Gehrlein's hand. After a run of about 50 feet we were airborne and I pulled the stick back in one easy motion. When it bottomed we were 100 feet up in a 45 degree climb indicating 65 miles per hour. At 800 feet I leveled off, released the towline, and converted our excess speed into another 50 feet of altitude.

From our vantage point Larry Gehrlein and I could see the city of Erie and the bay 10 miles to the north and beyond that the peninsula and Lake Erie. Below was the Thermal G Ranch Gliderport. Our 850 foot altitude did not allow much time for sight seeing so I made a leisurely circle back over the winch and after a couple of turns entered the downwind leg at 500 feet. We landed about 800 feet from the launching area. I got out first and held the nose down for Larry who was checking me out in his 2-22. Larry's sons, Jay and Rodney, drove up in the truck to tow the glider back and within 15 minutes of our take-off we were watching the towline, ready for the next flight.

This flight was typical of the 419 instruction flights logged at the Thermal G last summer, all in the 2-22. A lot of these were check out flights for power pilots new to soaring, as were mine, and some were check flights for glider pilots not familiar with winch operation, but the ma-

jority were instruction flights for new students. This instruction has generated a lot of new interest in soaring in the Erie area and has resulted in the sale of two Schweizer 1-26 kits and one complete 1-26 through Larry's dealership with the Schweizer Aircraft Corp. These ships, all of which expect to fly at the Thermal G this summer, plus an L-K flat-top owned by Art Thompson and myself, Larry's 1-23 and 2-22, form the nucleus of a growing soaring center.

The Thermal G started two years ago when the Gehrleins bought a 50 acre farm so they could fly from their back yard. The plan was to have a family-sized operation with the welcome mat out for friends. The project apparently got out of hand. This summer will see the completion of 5 sleeping cabins, a camping area, an all-steel four ship hangar, a swimming pool, a link trainer room, and possibly a tennis court, all to accommodate the overflow of pilots and their families. The snack bar will be operated by Grayce and Cindy as it was last year.

All flying this summer will be from winch tows. The winch is a Gehrlein design which Larry first built for the Air Force Academy in Denver. It is powered by a 1957 220 hp Corvette engine with a turboglide transmission and includes a tachometer and cable tension indicator. These instruments plus the smooth flow of adequate power permit uniform tows at the optimum speed and line tension for each type of ship. The 1-23 consistently reached 1000



Photo: Rose Marie Licher

The south end of the Thermal-G runway being sized up by the pilot on base leg.

feet with 2800 feet of cable last summer. The runway will be extended to 3500 feet this spring and should add 200 feet to this altitude. Larry was successful in making soaring flights last summer from the winch every day he tried. The additional altitude available this summer will permit a wider search for that essential thermal. He reports that on all of these flights he found his thermal in 4 tries or less and discovered that the lift area at 900-1000 feet was large enough for easy centering. This is probably the result of the thermals originating off the west end of the runway where the land drops off 300 feet in half a mile. There will be some days when soaring is not possible from 1200 feet but would be from 3000. It is not expected that this will happen frequently enough to offset the advantages of the winch for student training or the 50c per tow economy. However, Larry will review this at the end of the season with the active local pilots and then decide whether the winch will be permanent or be replaced by a towplane.

The Thermal G Ranch Gliderport is commercially licensed for glider operations and is run as a business. The official season is from Decoration Day to Labor Day to coincide with the field crew's summer vacation. During this season it will be possible for a glider pilot to fly his own ship locally without a crew and without advance notice any day of the week from noon until dark. The same service will be available for morning and off season flying by calling ahead to "Larry's Welding" in Erie or to the Thermal G in Waterford, Pa.

Soaring pilots within reach of Erie can now look forward to an active, satisfying summer looking for that green air.

The Thermal-G buildings and north end of runway as seen just after release from a 700 foot winch tow.

Photo: Rose Marie Licher

