

IN MEMORIAM

by WILLIAM S. IVANS, JR.

The soaring world lost one of its most distinguished and best loved citizens with the death of Bob Symons at El Mirage.

We shall sorely miss the warmth and candor of his counsel, his infectious enthusiasm, his willingness to share with all of us the mysteries of wind and cloud which were opened to him in his career as mountain pilot.

The full measure of this loss must be expressed in terms of the personal bereavement of family and close friends, and of the reaction of the townspeople of Bishop and of the entire state of California. The largest memorial services in Bishop history were held in his honor. All business firms were closed. The California legislature passed a unanimous resolution of tribute to this remarkable man; the State Senate adjourned its session "out of respect to the memory of Bob Symons."

Robert Francis Symons was born on April 2, 1910, on the family ranch near Bishop. Much of his life was spent outdoors, on the ranch and in the majestic Sierra Nevada range which lay just a few miles to the West. Hunting and fishing trips, prospecting and exploring in these rugged mountains, both on foot and from the air, gave him a detailed knowledge of the Sierra which perhaps no other man has attained.

He attended grade school and high school in Bishop. His introduction to gliding took place while he was a student at the Riverside (California) Junior College.

Bob was married 1935 to Mildred Wells, who survives him with their two daughters, Emily and Patricia.

In 1936, while operating the Symons' ranch with his brother Bill, Bob lost a leg in a hay chopper accident. He had worn a wooden leg for 22 years. He appeared to consider this handicap as without consequence, almost beneath mention unless it were to underscore a point with wry humor ("I need only one electric sock to keep my feet warm at altitude - saves the battery"). He would jump to the hard concrete apron from the 7 foot high wing of his P-38 aircraft, without hesitation or concern.

During World War II, he served as a glider instructor in the U.S. Air Force school at Wickenburg, Arizona. In the latter part of the war, he was assigned to the Bowlus Glider Corporation in San Fernando, to help construct large military gliders.

Shortly after World War II Bob started the Bishop Flying Service, which was largely engaged in special air charter operations, and at the same time began to more actively explore the soaring potentialities of the region, including the then mysterious Mountain Wave.



Bob Symons

A growing awareness of mountain lee waves based upon flight experiences and weather observation could now be coupled with sturdy war surplus gliders and powerful war surplus aircraft capable of towing to the altitudes required to explore the wave. In the immediate post war years, Bob Symons made enormous contributions to the meager fund of information and speculation about the mountain wave, with its powerful vertical currents and regions of the most violent turbulence. He made hundreds of flights, in wave conditions of many forms, in powered aircraft and gliders. His meticulous observations of air movement and cloud development, coupled with surface observations and time-lapse motion pictures of cloud forms, commanded world wide attention. His pioneering in this field excited interest which culminated in the Mountain Wave Project, in which

well instrumented gliders and powered aircraft were sent aloft in a coordinated effort by military, weather bureau and university specialists, together with skilled soaring pilots, to chart the flow patterns and correlate them with other weather data.

As glider pilots began to hear of this tremendous updraft and to outfit their ships to explore it for sport or altitude record attempts, it was natural for them to travel to Bishop and ask Bob's advice. Many awed and fascinated neophytes have stood with Bob next to his hangar and office at the south end of Bishop airport, listening to his animated description of the flight problems and beginning to share his enthusiasm for wave flying. He was at all times considerate and helpful, even though time was always precious to him, with a full home life and a busy work schedule. Many an otherwise quiet evening in Bishop has been enlivened by wave talk and wave pictures at the Symons' home in Bishop; visitors from all over the world have been guests there.

Bob held the Gold C soaring badge, U.S. no. 7, with altitude and goal diamonds, and established a new World Class record for absolute altitude of 38,305 feet, in the two-place category during 1951.

In the early days of cloud seeding, Bob was awarded a contract by the California Electric Power Company to attempt to increase the snowfall in a specific snowshed area. The vehicle was the now famous red and white P-38, in which he made flights into some of the most severe weather situations imaginable, plunging into massive snowclouds which completely blanketed the mighty Sierra Nevada. Many of the flights were carried out largely on instruments, and at times the end of the mission would find the Owens Valley and Bishop completely blanketed by cloud, forcing a long detour to an alternate airfield. On one memorable flight Bob encountered wave updrafts so intense that he was able to completely shut down both engines of this 8 ton aircraft and soar at will between 16 and 30 thousand feet, conserving fuel until a fierce surface dust storm had abated and he could return safely to the airport. Photographs which he took on that flight were printed in national magazines and abroad.

Bob's air charter activities took him routinely into territory which