

# SANDBAGGING THE ROSS RACER

by PAUL A. WILSON

According to Mickey Jensen, "That ship of Harland's goes like a slippery watermelon seed!"

The ship in question is the Ross R-6; and Mickey ought to know because he was the passenger on two of Harland's recent series of three world-record flights.

This is an account of what must surely be one of the most remarkable episodes in the whole history of soaring. In the middle part of August, this year, Harland Ross took the latest of the famous Ross line of sailplanes into the skies at Odessa, Texas, and on three successive days broke all three world two-place speed records. The fourth day of the series was something of an anti-climax. Since there are only three speed courses established by the F.A.I.—100, 200 and 300 kilometer triangles—and therefore no more speed marks to shoot at, it was decided that the fourth day's effort would be an attempt on the American two-place Goal and Return distance record. It is history now that this fourth day's effort was also crowned with success. The old mark of 217.038 miles, held by Harold Hutchinson of

California, was broken by a flight of 234 miles. All four of these records are subject to homologation by the F.A.I.

The Ross expedition, out of Wichita, Kansas, arrived in Odessa, Texas, Sunday afternoon, August 10th. The party consisted of Harland Ross and two volunteer crewmen, Mickey Jensen and myself, Operations Officer and President, respectively, of the Wichita Soaring Association. Both crewmen were C pilots and qualified by the SSA to act as Official Observers.

At Odessa, the party met Alvin Parker who acted as tow pilot and host extra-ordinary by making the hangar and living quarters at his field available for the week. Al is not only one of the most enthusiastic sailplane pilots anywhere, but he is also equipped with one of the ruggedest tow planes in existence—a modified BT-13 with a 600 horsepower Pratt & Whitney up front. With this monster on the other end of the rope, the launch is guaranteed not to be boring.

Sunday night, the R-6 was unloaded and rigged for solo, in order to

test the new radio antenna installation, oxygen system and other flight instruments. It should be explained here that the R-6 is, in effect, a convertible job. It was originally designed as a two-place, but installation of the aft cockpit was not completed until Monday night. When flown solo, the aft cockpit bubble is replaced by a flat sheet of aluminum and 30 pounds of ballast is secured in the tail to obtain the proper balance.

Monday afternoon, Harland took the ship up for a four hour shake-down, familiarizing himself with the local area and getting in some practice. Later the ship was rigged for two-place, oxygen topped, batteries charged and new skid installed so everything would be ready for the next day.

Tuesday was to be the first record attempt day. After listening to the hourly weather reports from Wink and taking a look at the sky, the 200 kilometer course was decided upon. Wink, Texas, airport and the Eunice, N.M., (Lea County) airport were picked for turning points. Start and finish were to be at Al Parker's private airport, which is located 11 miles west of Odessa. Mickey drew the honor of being the first passenger in the two-place configuration.

Take-off was in an enormous cloud of dust. Al's runway is scraped out of the red dirt and caliche of the semi-desert of the great plains country. When those 600 horses get the full throttle, the area back of the tow plane for several hundred feet looks like the tail-end of a Texas tornado. In all the launches made that week, nobody, including sailplane pilot Ross, ever saw the actual take-off. When the dust cloud began to settle, onlookers could spot the tow plane and sailplane about 100 feet in the air, going up like a pair of crop dusters in tandem.

The R-6 behaved perfectly as a two-place and in a few minutes Harland had gained altitude, released and was ready for the start of the speed run. The dive across the starting plane at 120 mph was clocked at 13:31. The first thermal was picked up almost immediately and, climbing at 800 fpm, soon reached 9,000 feet (6,000 above terrain). At the first turn, Wink airport, 38 miles out, Harland was not pleased with the ground speed of only 43 mph. He called out to Mickey; "We will have to go faster than that," as he headed north toward the second turn at Eunice, 47 miles away.

A portrait of the record breakers; Harland Ross at the nose of the R-6 and "sandbags" Mickey Jensen at the wingtip and Paul Wilson at the tail.

Photo: Alvin H. Parker

