

# FIRST FLIGHT

by JAMES R. ASHCOCK

"Ever fly one of these things?" Bob Brower asked.

I shook my head no, at the same time surveying the craft before me. To a private pilot accustomed to the spraddle-legged stance of powered airplanes, the sailplane appeared awkward, sprawled on the ground with one wing drooping like a crippled bird. Brower, a 44-year-old captain for Trans World Airlines, handed me a parachute.

"Well, it shouldn't give you too much trouble. I'll follow you through on the controls until you get the feel of it," he said.

I wondered what interest a chap like Bob, who spends hours between the throbbing engines of a big Constellation on the Paris run, could have in a powerless aircraft. But the attentive manner in which he checked the trim Schweizer TG-2 convinced me he was serious about what he was doing.

Several kibitzers ribbed me on my fumbling efforts with the straps on the parachute, which must have been worn by a midjet before I got it.

The jokesters were members of the Midwestern Soaring Association, of which Brower is president. It's a new organization, established in January, 1958. But already they've got one sailplane in the air and two more being assembled. For a tow plane they bought a surplus PT-23 for \$800. Almost any hot afternoon when the earth's heat is decorating the Kansas sky with fluffy clouds, you can find these guys at the Olathe, Kansas, municipal airport, a former military auxiliary field 20 miles southwest of Kansas City.

"This is excellent country for soaring," Brower said. "But this year hasn't been too good. Too much cooling moisture in the ground keeps us from getting good thermals."

Lothar Knauth, a young advertising executive, gave me a hand with the parachute. Lothar is a native German who began soaring in his homeland. Warming up the engine of the tow plane was Costas Choliassmenos. They call him Gus. In Greece, Gus's native land, he's a recognized figure in aviation circles. He's flown with the Greek air force, instructed soaring students and served with Greece's government air agency that

is like our C.A.A. In 1959 he'll receive his aeronautical engineering degree from the University of Kansas, where his government sent him for study.

Plenty of professional men belong to the club. Willard R. Beye, a Westinghouse engineer, flew gliders while a student at M.I.T. There are several lawyers, too, like Jim Harrington. Wayne Woods, who holds an A&E rating besides his commercial pilot's license, keeps the club craft in good mechanical shape.

I found, too, that the groundwork involved in soaring can be rugged. Weighted by the parachute, I got up a good sweat as I helped shove the ship into position. I'd decided that Hell itself was cooler than the middle of a runway on an August afternoon.

"You take the front seat where you can see better," Brower said.

I eased my 6-foot 8-inch frame into the coffin-like cockpit. My head was too high for the canopy. We threw out some cushions, I hunched over, and Brower crammed the lid on.

"Might be a little hot in there until we take off, but it'll get cooler when we're in the air," he said.

I peered at him through the glistening plastic cover, feeling the perspiration trickle around my ears. I knew then why soaring fans always had blistered, peeling noses.

Gus wagged the rudder on the bright yellow tow plane, asking if we were ready. I heard Brower snap the canopy shut on the rear cockpit and say "Let's go," so I kicked the rudder in reply to Gus.

The towline snaked to tautness through the grass and we began moving across the field. The nose skid ground loudly as we skimmed onto the asphalt runway. Brower spoke calmly from the rear, "Keep your nose down and stay low until the tow plane gets off. That'll decrease the drag on him. Just let the sailplane take itself off."

Suddenly the grinding hushed. With a bobbing motion like a boat on rolling water, the sailplane swished along atop the tow plane's slipstream. I had to push hard forward on the stick to stay level, and unconsciously my left hand searched

the left wall for a trim tab handle, which I finally remembered wasn't there as it was on powered ships.

I stared intently at the tow plane, which was still on the ground with the end of the runway not too far off.

"Get it up, Gus," I muttered. Then the plane and its clinging shadow parted and Gus hauled aloft. The sailplane's controls took on a feel similar to that of a light plane.

"Stay about five feet above him, out of the slipstream," Brower said. "If the line goes slack, nose down to ease the pull when it tightens again."

Gus was taking us up to 3,500. I watched the tow plane hypnotically, squinting as golden flashes of sunlight bounced off its bright wings. The sailplane's 55-foot, gull-like wing tugged to carry it up. This baby may have looked awkward on the ground, but in the air it was nothing but grace, ever eager to go higher.

Whoops! Gus is turning and I'm skidding off to the side. Just like water skis. The rope slakens and I feel the ship's speed drop off. Then the tow line snaps tight, making the tow plane wobble as the sailplane lunges upward.

"Don't overcontrol, just hold it in position," came Brower's words. "What's your altitude?" I read off 3,400 feet. "Okay, see that blue knob on the panel? Pull it and do a climbing turn to the right when we reach 3,500."

When the needle advanced another 100 feet I yanked the knob and glimpsed the tow line floating away as I stood the ship on its right wingtip. A pleasant calm settled on the cockpit, disturbed only by the gentle rustle of the breeze that crept through an air vent.

"Hold your airspeed at 37 miles an hour and just fly straight until you feel a bump. Whichever wing comes up, turn that direction," Brower said.

The ship bounced and the left wing came up. I pivoted to port and felt a nudge as if a big hand were boosting me upward. The rate-of-climb indicator showed a 5-feet-per-second ascension and I held my breath at the thrill of the silent climb.

At 3,600 feet the thermal played out. I leveled off as the climb indicator dipped into the minus decimals while I started a stalk of another

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