

The COST of OPERATING SAILPLANES

by EDWIN DE S. SNEAD

Soaring often impresses the layman as an inexpensive way to fly. It's a reasonable impression, and it's true up to a point. Once you are airborne and "stuck" on a good day, it doesn't cost anything to fly all the rest of the afternoon. But anyone who has owned a sailplane or an airplane will tell you that fuel and oil are not the only expenses of flying, and in many cases fuel and oil are not even a significant part of the total cost.

Now the point of this article is not to complain about the cost of soaring or to try to discourage others from getting into the sport. It is to show the newcomer roughly what it will cost him to participate in the sport and to outline a method, based on good accounting practice, for clubs to predict what their operating costs will be and to collect enough from their members to keep solvent and keep flying.

To begin, costs can be divided into three main groups; *First* cost, *Fixed* costs and *Operating* costs. First cost is the purchase price of the equipment. Fixed costs are those which go on regardless of whether the equipment is operated or not . . . hangar rent is a good example. Operating costs are such things as fuel and oil, which vary more or less directly with the amount of flying done. To be more specific, let's examine a hypothetical case of a typical glider-guider and his bird.

First Cost

Sailplane and trailer	\$1,500
2 used parachutes	100
Barograph	50
Tow hooks, rope, etc.	50
Total First Cost	\$1,700

Fixed Costs (Per Year)

Liability Insurance (including passenger)	\$ 63
Hull Insurance (complete ground & flight)	105
Hangar Rent (\$17.50 per month)	210
Periodic Inspection (once a year)	15
Parachute Repacking (2 chutes every 60 days)	60
Reserve for Recovering (\$1,000 for 15 years)	67
S. S. A. membership	10
Total Fixed Cost per year	\$ 530

Operating Costs

Minor maintenance, tow fees, crew expenses, etc., vary widely with the kind of flying done, and no attempt will be made to itemize them now.

Of course, many of these expenses can be reduced substantially. For instance, the plane can be tied down outside, and the fabric will still last for about ten years for a net saving in hangar rent of \$177 per year. Or it can be disassembled and stored at home. Parachutes can be kept current only during the soaring season to save \$40 per year. Insurance premiums can be put in a savings bank for a half-way system of self insurance. The main thing is to recognize all the costs and to provide for them one way or another. Incidentally, depreciation does not seem to be important, because the U. S. Dollar depreciates faster than sailplanes do.

Now comes the sad thing about sailplane ownership. Most people who can afford to own sailplanes can do so only because they are too busy making a living to fly their birds more than 50 or 100 times a year. Suppose in the above case, the owner made 100 flights a year. His fixed costs amount to \$5.36 per flight. Suppose tow fees are about three dollars a flight and flights averaged one hour. He pays over eight dollars an hour for his flying time. "Money well spent," you say. So do I. But the guy can rent a 65 HP Vibrator for less money and a *whole lot* less trouble.

So here is where joint ownership or club membership comes in. As I see it, all kinds of joint ownership have one main purpose . . . to split the First and Fixed costs among as many people as practical. There is a limit, of course, to the number of people who can be satisfactorily accommodated by one sailplane. Another important purpose of partnerships and clubs is to provide a crew for the fellow whose turn it is to fly. Clubs go even further to provide towing facilities, flying sites, competition, social life, and all the other little things that make the sport more enjoyable.

Let's look into the operation of soaring clubs a little further. If I lived in a large metropolis where there were several soaring clubs that I might join, I would want to know a

number of things about each club before I made my choice . . . such things as what kind of people are members, what kind of equipment do they have, what condition is it in, what activities do they have, how much will I get to fly, how much will it cost me? But one of the most important things I would want to know is this: Are they charging their members enough to cover operating costs, keep the equipment in good condition, and provide for a steady growth, or will they be coming to me again and again for a loan, assessment, work at night (or worse, during the soaring season) on a recovering job, or help on a hair-brained money-raising scheme?

I feel that a soaring club should be self-sustaining financially. We envy the government-supported foreign clubs, but we don't want Uncle Sam's dollars with the inevitable strings attached. Besides, in this country where fuel is cheap and manpower is expensive, Uncle Sam can teach his "Tigers" to fly in T-6's and jets at reasonable cost. If the public wanted to subsidize us, they would have done so by now. Let's plan to pay our own way.

Since a club is essentially a joint ownership, it should be set up financially like a club and not like a commercial operation. In other words, initiation fees, dues, and flight charges should be set up specifically to cover first, fixed, and operating costs, respectively, as these costs are incurred by the club. A club should not charge so much per hour for flying time and plan to cover all costs out of operating revenue the way a commercial operation must do.

So much for the generalities. Let's see how the above principles would work in an actual club. We'll begin with what could be called a minimum soaring club.

First Cost

1 used Schweizer 1-19	\$ 500
200 feet of 1/2" manila rope	5
1,500 feet of surplus tow target cable	25
1 Schweizer quick- release hook	5
1 surplus 6-foot cargo parachute	5
Miscellaneous hardware	5
Total First Cost	\$ 545