

THIRTY YEARS AGO

Reminiscences by W. B. KLEMPERER

Soaring commanded but sporadic interest in the USA during the first decade of its becoming a popular sport and a well recognized science in Europe. True, there were foci of activities of small groups and individuals, notably in California, Ohio, Michigan, and Massachusetts. Eventually, in the fall of 1929, two independent groups organized experimental Soaring Camps which produced tangible results and aroused more widespread interest. This started the ball rolling towards the establishment of the first National Soaring Contest a year later which then became an annually recurrent rally of the foremost exponents of our sport. One of these two camps was established on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, by a group of German sailplane pilots who had been brought over. There Ralph Barnaby, then Lt., USN, was the first graduate. The other activity was an exploratory expedition into the Allegheny Mountains organized for the purpose of demonstrating cross-country soaring in the slope wind of a mountain range. It is of this latter event that I have been asked to reminisce.

The first sailplane built in this country to attain what was then considered high performance had been designed by Frank Gross according to a high wing configuration developed by the Darmstadt (Germany) Institute of Technology group. Frank

had been a member of this group before he emigrated to America. After a stint at Bellanca he was hired by the Baker-McMillen Co., an established wood working firm of Akron, Ohio, whose energetic chief, John A. Sperry, I had interested in gliding and soaring.

The first effort of the newly created glider construction activity was the production of standard primary gliders according to a German design imported and advocated by the National Glider Association, precursor of the Soaring Society of America.

The second job which was more appealing to those intimately concerned was the performance sailplane. It was hand built with loving care, but only one ship was actually completed. It had a cantilever three-piece wing of rectangular midsection plan form with tapered outer panels. The aspect ratio was about 20 with a wing span of 53'. The fuselage was cleanly streamlined with a snug cockpit but without a canopy. A sprung skid served as landing gear. The tail was of conventional design. Glide ratio was computed to be 24:1 and sinking speed as 2 ft./sec., but the performance was never scientifically measured. The weight empty was a little over 300 pounds. The ship was registered under No. 527 M and named the Akron Condor. It was completed and first assembled at the old Akron Airport on September 2,

1929, and tried out in shock-cord and auto tow hops.

The first real test was a one-hour flight in tow behind a Goodyear blimp. The intention of reaching Cleveland Airport during the first Cleveland Air Races then in progress was unfortunately frustrated when the blimp was buffeted by gusts at low pressure altitude so that the sailplane found itself abreast the blimp and eventually the towline became unhooked. The sailplane had neither spoilers nor air brakes and its rudder size was marginal for maneuvering in tow. Thermal flying had not yet been perfected to an established technique and I had to land at Babbs fruit farm several miles short of the goal.

Therefore, we decided to give the Condor a chance to show what can be done by flying along an extended mountain range in a broadside wind. For this purpose, after quite a bit of scouting, I had chosen the region some 40 miles SSE of Pittsburgh, near Uniontown, Pa. There Chestnut Ridge, the westernmost of the several successive crests which make up the Allegheny mountain range, rises some 1200 feet from the slightly rolling landscape to the west and extends in a SW to NE direction for some 30 miles without major wind obstructions in the forefield. This we hoped would offer good soaring opportunities in westerly or northwesterly winds which could be expected to occur not too infrequently in the fall.

The "Allegheny Mountains Soaring Exploration Expedition" was composed of several members of the Baker-McMillen Co., notably John Sperry's father, the company's president, Henry Sperry (part time), Frank Gross, Bill Bodenlos with wife and young junior, plus several others; from the Goodyear Zeppelin Corporation, also of Akron, Ohio, Walter Mosebach and myself, Donald F. Walker, General Manager of the National Glider Association, acted as official timer and observer. He gave a vivid account of the activities in a report published in the November 1929 issue of AERO DIGEST.

The expedition was planned for about two weeks, beginning September 21, 1929. During part of this period we were joined by R. E. and Wally Franklin who were giving exhibitions of glider towing in Pennsylvania about that time with their utility glider, the "Old Veteran." Other glider enthusiasts and helpers from the Pittsburgh area and other



Dr. Klemperer in the cockpit of the Condor at the plant of the Baker McMillen Co.