PHOTOGRAPHING GLIDERS

by PETER M. BOWERS

One of the most popular sideline activities at the gliderport is snapping pictures of the gliders. This is done by soaring expert and uninitiated spectator alike, but all too frequently the results are somewhat short of expectations. There are two reasons for this. First, there is the photographic side of the problem, with the usual variables of lighting, exposure, focus, jiggling the camera, leaving the lens cap on, and all the other items that can spoil an otherwise good picture. These are usually covered in the book of instructions that comes with the camera and will not be dealt with here. Next, and most important to this discussion, are the problems resulting from the specialized nature of the subject. An understanding of them is essential if the photographer is to turn out good photos consistently.

Pictures of gliders on the ground fall into two general categories — "Atmosphere" scenes that reflect the general activity or specific functions at the field, and "technical studies" that are intended to display the various details of an individual glider or sailplane to the best advantage. The first is by far the easiest to take, and is largely a matter of carefully surveying the scene to pick the best view and then snapping it as it exists.

For personal and family-album purposes this procedure is usually quite adequate, but if the pictures are to be used to "sell" the activity in the form of newspaper or magazine publicity, or are expected to stand as good examples of photographic art in their own right, a considerable amount of thought must go into the composition. Frequently, this means moving the ships around, posing the people, and sometimes turning the whole operation around to take advantage of the prevailing light or to add or delete a particular background. The most common picture of this type is the shot of a "typical" glider operation with all the ships parked at the end of the runway ready to take off. Don't you believe it! Very seldom are they all close enough together to get in the picture. This means bunching them closer together, getting some of the cars and trailers out of the way, and generally sharpening up the appearance of the operation.

Getting all the ships into the picture, especially when the photographer is standing on the ground, is difficult because of an outstanding glider characteristic. They are very wide — averaging between forty and sixty feet across the wings. The nearest may stand out in fine detail while the next one in line may be quite far away. A way to overcome this is to "nest" the gliders, with their wings overlapping as shown in Figure 1. Another characteristic that tends to produce poor pictures is the low configuration of the gliders. Shot from ground level, the gliders in a group make a thin line across the middle of the picture. This can be overcome to a great extent by getting on top of a car or on the hangar roof and shooting down, as done in Figure 2. Shooting down also permits the use of a double line of gliders since the back row can be seen over the front instead of being hidden behind it. This technique not only fills up the picture more but gives a better view of the shapes of the gliders. Another artistic trick is to shoot a general scene from under the wing of one of the gliders, using the wing and nose to frame the rest of the picture as shown in Figure 3. Closeups of personal activity, such as pilots getting into cockpits or working on the ships, present little difficulty for vertical composition because the long wingspans are eliminated.

Closeups of this type are the most popular with newspapers and the editors of basically non-aeronautical publications. Their primary interest is in the person, and the glider is very secondary. The favorite shot for newspaper publicity, although pure fiction from an operating standpoint, is the pretty girl in shorts or a bathing suit standing in or by the cockpit or smiling through the windshield.

The technical shots make no attempt at artistic composition or fancy angles. Usually, several views are taken of a particular ship for this purpose, at least a three-quarter front, a direct side as shown in Figure 4, or a three-quarter rear, shown from above in Figure 5. Full-span front and rear views are usually a waste of film because of the distance that the photographer must back off to get it all in. He wants to get as close as possible to fill the view finder and bring out detail, but not so close that the exaggerated perspective of the wing distorts the outline. This can be quite a problem on near-side views, with the wingtip some 25 or 30 feet from the fuselage and only 10 from the camera. Note the wing distortion in Figure 3. To reduce distortion, the camera was not close enough for the glider to fill the finder completely and the picture was cropped in the printing.

In general, three-quarter front views show the most detail when the near wingtip is high while three-quarter rears are best with the near wingtip low unless there is no ob-

Fig. 1. A "typical" lineup of gliders photographed for publicity purposes. The actual scene was composed by bringing the ships close together with the wingtip of one on the ground by the nose of the next. The people were deliberately posed.

Fig. 2. A variation of the grouping of Fig. 1 achieved by shooting the picture from the top of a car. It was still necessary to bring the ships closer together than their natural positions at the takeoff point of a contest.