

WE BREAK 500 -- (KILOMETERS, THAT IS)!!

by ROBERT LEE MOORE

On July 2, 1959 I finally realized the culmination of a long standing personal ambition, namely completion of my Diamond C in my own "back yard." Thus it had seemed to me that earning all of my legs in the Northwest might help to draw attention to the excellent soaring possibilities here in Washington as well as to reassure others that such performances can probably be made almost anywhere in the United States. As it turned out, all three legs were won with flights starting from our favorite NW soaring center at Fancher Field, Wenatchee, Washington. The goal leg was won on July 1, 1956 with a 203 mile flight in the LK to Orofino, Idaho - across the Columbia Basin and up the Clearwater river east of Lewiston, Idaho. Diamond altitude was gained in July, 1958 with a flight to 22,760 feet in the Cascade wave, and distance was finally completed this year with a 318 mile flight across the Bitterroot Mountains to Elliot field, Clinton, Montana. All of these flights were made during Pacific Northwest International Soaring Contests, which are customarily held in July (after school is out) and do not imply that our best soaring necessarily occurs at that time of year. Actually the strongest conditions are usually somewhat earlier.

Excellent soaring conditions are among the many blessings of the Pacific Northwest - along with rolling wheat fields, Chinook salmon, mighty rivers, perpetually snow-capped mountains, and breath taking

scenery. These thermal conditions are probably not as strong or consistent as Texas and Southern California boast of, but they are still quite good. This is shown by the accomplishments of the early birds, Cloyd Artman, Charles McAllister, and the other pioneers back in the 30's who challenged the then existent duration and distance records in homemade primary and utility type gliders without benefit of variometers or other fancy instruments. The nine Gold C's and the numerous Diamond goal flights which have been made in Washington state since World War II further bear this out. Until now, Diamond distance has been another matter. The state of Washington is divided down its middle, from north to south, by the Cascade Mountains, and the excellent soaring is on the arid eastern side over the Midwest - like rolling wheat country of the Columbia Basin. The western side of the state, on the Pacific Ocean side of the Cascades (where Seattle, the Boeing Airplane plant, and most of the NW soaring pilots are unfortunately situated) has a high rainfall, lots of low clouds, and often stable marine air. The eastern side, the area drained by the Columbia River, is perhaps not strictly a desert (certainly we don't advertise it that way) but averages less than ten inches of annual rainfall. All agriculture here depends either on irrigation or on dry farming techniques. Our best soaring conditions come in the spring and early summer when cold fronts are frequent. After a front pushes

across the mountains into the Basin, there are "super" soaring conditions for several days with 1000 fpm thermals and lift-producing high cumulus clouds with bases often at 10,000 to 12,000 feet. Then the air mass warms up, there is no longer sufficient moisture to form clouds, everything becomes stable, and it is time for another front. Fortunately, these seem to come at weekly intervals during this part of the year (although all too often on Monday, of course!). By late summer, the fronts become infrequent, the air becomes very hot, and the soaring is usually poor.

The nearly flat land of the Columbia Basin is laid out in section lines, which makes navigation easy, and there are unlimited places to land. In the dry farming technique used for growing wheat without irrigation, half of the land is allowed to lie fallow each year and a crop is planted every other year. The result is that the countryside resembles a giant checker board with half of the squares green and the others plowed and harrowed dirt. This contrast, besides being pleasing to the eye, apparently helps thermals to form, and the fallow fields supply dust for giant "dust devils" which are sometimes 100 yards in diameter and may tower two miles high - all the way to cloud base. These serve both as a powerful source of lift, since each is the core of a thermal, and as a handy visual indication of where the thermal is.

The only fly in the ointment so far as this idyllic picture is concerned is that the Basin is limited in extent. If one goes something less than 200 miles in any direction, one encounters mountains. To the west are the Cascades, to the east the Bitterroots (a northern extension of the Rockies), to the north the Canadian border (and more mountains), and to the southeast the Blue Mountains. The Cascades, at least, are not the friendly Southwest type of mountains which are sure producers of lift but are, rather, cool, heavily forested, tractless, and forbidding. By backing up against the mountains on one side, it is just possible to eke out Gold C distance (or Diamond goal). Diamond distance is something else, however. To accomplish it requires flying a triangle (or other broken course) or else crossing one of the above mentioned mountain ranges. A route across the Blue Mountains was blazed this spring by Joe Robertson and Peter Riedel with their flights

Crew chief Elisabeth Moore prepares the Schweizer 1-21 for flight.

Photo: Donald F. Santee

