



The morning after as the retrieve operation begins, neighbors of Mr. Roybal observe from their Spanish speaking horses.

Photo: Joe Lincoln

hours which covered over seventy miles each. We turned SSE, away from our course and flew toward a black cell at maximum glide speed. Down a thousand feet. We spent ten minutes in circling to gain it back. Then westward, losing ground. Another weak thermal. Northwest, a promising thermal which seemed to be tattered and broken up. Four hundred feet gained, then lost immediately on the way to another cloud. A new lift: 60 fpm this time.

After an interminable period we made it back up to four thousand feet above terrain. Then another search. Another sink on the way. Another thermal of 100 fpm. After forty minutes of this the sky gradually opened to the ESE. We were back up to safe cruising altitude and moved out over the intersection of the road and railroad. It was all on tiptoe - 50 mph indicated in straight flight and squeezing every foot of altitude from each tiny lift we encountered. Gradually we approached Albuquerque, losing altitude very slowly as each thermal weakened and then disappeared a bit lower than the previous one. For a long time I had been watching a gigantic mass of powerful cumulus ahead. Now it melted as we came nearly into range, first at the north end, twenty miles up from the city; then in the center, at last the south end, only a few miles away. We were down to 9500 feet, 4400 above terrain and off oxygen for the first time in hours. West Mesa airport was five miles to the NE. My longest flight so far had ended there and only six days before Marcel had tied it with a flight to the same airport, 4400 feet. We can beat that a few miles anyway.

It was midafternoon. The sun was half way down the sky. It seemed

forever we had been in weak lift or gliding at Max. L/D. Then from nowhere came the unmistakable surge of a gigantic thermal. The Memphis needle made a slow and steady sweep from 150 fpm down to 1100 fpm up. In half a turn we were centered and it settled on 1000 fpm. Well, *Cirro-Q*, maybe somebody will hear about this flight after all. Eight minutes later, 8100 feet higher, the thermal weakened and we turned east.

Toward Santa Fe the sky was dying. We flew through a heavy snow-storm just under the base of the cloud over Albuquerque, down very little from our high point of 17,600 feet. On the other side of the storm the sky looked good. The goal would have taken us through Santa Fe. Now I planned to fly eastward and try for Tucumcari. I asked Albuquerque Radio to inform Dwayne Spain.

Twenty-five miles east of Albuquerque the clouds disappeared. There were a few unimpressive stepping stones leading NE, and beyond them began a long cloudstreet which curved from ENE around to straight E into the Texas Panhandle. If we can reach that we can really go, I thought. We flew NE, parallel to the original course from Albuquerque to Santa Fe but twenty-five miles east. Both lift and sink between thermals weakened steadily as we approached the beginning of the cloudstreet. We made it!

It was very weak. To have been here three quarters of an hour sooner! We circled up two thousand feet and headed on course with strong sink in between the individual cells. A series of climbs and glides brought us up south of Las Vegas, New Mexico. The sun was now almost down behind a very high cumulonimbus mass off to the west of the Sangre de Cristo Range.

Eastward, still eastward in a dying sky. Thermals became choppy and very difficult to work. Las Vegas dropped out of sight behind and with it the lonely railroad passing north-east from that village. Eastward, getting steadily lower above the well-kept fields. How far? Tucumcari? I don't think so. How about Wagoner Ranch with its little strip. Maybe. Hey! Pay attention here, you're in 1000 fpm sink. Speed up to 100. Now in lift - speed down to 45 again. Conchas Reservoir? A good airport there. Think so. Let's get off this high shelf.

There was an escarpment a little southward beyond which the terrain was four hundred feet lower. We angled ESE and began to notice the strong southerly components in the tail wind. Conchas Reservoir which had seemed in easy range a while back was looking like a very flat glide now. The short periods of 1000 fpm sink were not compensated by the weak lift and altitude was running out. I turned on the navigation lights and changed to my white spectacles.

A small error had occurred. I had mistaken the escarpment for a contour line. We were still a good way from the Reservoir and I did not think even the RJ-5 could make it from this altitude. What is that little village? It should not be here. I looked closely at the chart: Variadero. Are we way back there? Yes. It all checked out.

We came over the town with perhaps eight hundred feet of altitude. The fields were surveyed; then a look at a tiny ranch a mile and a half north east. It had a good field, plowed, and headed almost directly into the wind. Few obstacles. Just the wires and the tractor at the downwind end. This is it. An electric light burned brightly on top of a pole at the ranch house like a beacon and invitation. Three turns were made - wide circles to extend the flight to a full nine hours. We were still in sink, even at this low altitude. Finally the downwind leg, base leg, and final. Carefully; over the wires, over the tractor, spoilers, flareout and touchdown.

My knees were so stiff I had real difficulty getting out. We had been aloft eight hours and fifty eight minutes, and landed four hundred and fifty-five miles away from the Prescott Airport. Mr. Reducindo Roybal who owned the ranch came up to help me before I was completely out of my sailplane.