

SOARING HOLIDAY IN THE SWISS ALPS

by TOM PAGE

Pictures of Swiss and Austrian sailplanes riding along sheer rock faces, over glaciers, and above human specks on jagged peaks are so strange to American soaring pilots that they are likely to dismiss them as the work of either madmen or photographic fakers. But the Alpine soaring bug has been gnawing at my dreams for nearly fifteen years. The summer of 1960 gave me a chance to try a cure. Now I am incurably bitten.

The 1948 World Soaring Championships were held in Samedan, Switzerland. A commemorative booklet on this dramatic contest was given to me by Rolf Brunner, a Swiss sailplane instructor who headed the Swiss air cadet exchange in 1952. I pored over the pictures until I knew what Samedan and the Upper Engadine looked like — or thought I did. Then, to make the infection worse, Pirat Gehrig, the Swissair executive and well known soaring pilot, visited our Illini Glider Club meeting in about 1955. He showed us a remarkable color movie taken in flight from one of two Moswey sailplanes on a team flight from Samedan across two major Alpine ridges to a field near Zurich in the north. Inevitably, then, when the Pages had their first free summer for a European trip, Samedan was on the itinerary.

First, a letter went off to the Swiss Aero Club: Who should I write in

Samedan? And how do I validate my U.S. pilot certificate for Swiss privileges? Back came the prompt reply: Write Herr August Risch, Direktor, Flugplatz ober Engadine, Samedan, Switzerland. And apply to the Swiss Federal Air Office in Berne. A letter to Herr Risch in my mediocre German brought a reply—in better English than my German had been. An S-18 Sperlinger, at least, would be available for the period of my visit and the Hotel Bernina would be the best hotel for convenient accommodations.

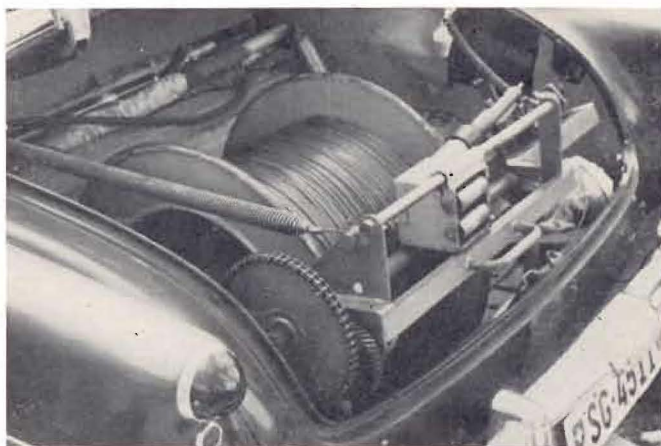
The Swiss Federal Air Office sent a one-page form (in English, naturally) requiring only photo copies of my pilot and medical certificates and a fee of \$2.40. Back came the Swiss validation by return air mail. (In contrast, at the same time I was attempting to obtain the same privi-

leges in Germany. Extensive correspondence; replies in German, quadruplicate two-page forms to complete—in German; and finally, after I was already in Cologne, some clerk decided that I should long ago have submitted four photographs. Result—I made no effort to test German-made sailplanes with a view to purchase.)

We arrived in Samedan in mid-July. It is a quiet little village four miles below St. Moritz in the Inn Valley. The valley floor is flat enough just there for an excellent airport with a mile-long hard-surfaced runway with good facilities and hangars. There is also a first-class golf course. "Bergbahns," "Seilbahns," and "Luftbahns" (cable and cog tramways and ski lifts) take the sweat out of mountain climbing in every direction. The Hotel Bernina is first-class by official Swiss standards (de luxe is top), but not at all expensive by American standards. The food is superb by any standards, and the service is pleasant and personal. We had a huge corner room with bath; its balcony overlooked the airport so that my wife

Level wind and electrically fired guillotine on compact Swiss-made winch built into Buick trunk.

Photo by Tom Page



Control Tower and ships at Samedan, Switzerland. At left is the Sperlinger S-18 flown by the author and behind it a Ka-7.

Photo by Tom Page

could see me about to land through the field glasses and drive over to the airport as I landed. The Swiss speak English well enough to make you ashamed of your German. Also, in the Engadine only they speak the fourth official Swiss language, Romansh, a forgotten derivative of Latin overlaid with some Italian and German and which is thus completely baffling to the foreign ear.

Herr Risch does not operate a soaring school, but merely supplies the winch and other operations equipment for sailplane owners using his soaring center. Consequently, he had arranged for my dual check-out on winch tow with a Ka-7 owner.