

Gamboling In Nevada

by VIC SAUDEK

For those to whom soaring flight is a trip to a glider site with tow-planes-at-the-ready and civilized drinks of lemonade available at a nearby lunch room, this attempt to make a Diamond goal flight will seem masochistic madness.

We started from the B&B Quick-silver Mine in the White Mountains. Once underway down the road with the sailplane hooked up and the station wagon full of tools, radio, chute, oxygen equipment, food, water, emergency gear, maps, barograph, etc., etc., one is *committed*. There is simply no place to turn around with a trailer until one has reached Fish Lake Valley, 3000 feet below the Mine, and 11 miles of tire-bruising rock away. As we descended from the 8000 foot level on this Monday in late August, the stunning display of dust devils at 100 foot intervals moved slowly to the east, followed by a whistling wind down the lee side of the mountains.

Bill Bowmar and I figured we may as well set up anyhow, so the *Rigid Midget* was erected over a period of an hour, during which time the dust devils moved further east and the west wind tuned up some more, at 90° to the only paved road in 10 miles.

We were beginning to be sand-blasted.

Next, 3500 feet of Bill's tow wire was found, fixed and dragged into the wind, up a dirt road that had not had much attention for some time, but which lay, for about a mile, into the teeth of the rapidly rising gale. The road then swerved somewhat northerly for about another mile to where it intersected the mine road. A nearby rancher was dragooned as

wingtip runner and everything was all set.

All set? Radio check.

Batteries are dying! Radio range is 1000 ft. at ground level.

Well, let's go anyhow, see if it works better at altitude.

Total elapsed time since starting this expedition is four hours. A lot of effort has been invested, no sense to quit now even if conditions stink. Wings level, tow wire tight and off we go! Almost instantly the wire loosened. The rancher did not know he was supposed to *let go* of the wing tip, so Bowmar swirling into the greasewood and the line released as the nose knifed through the road bank. The glider's tire went flat — and stayed that way, flapping and glubbing at every revolution. Ready again. The thermals are far, far off across the valley now and the wind is so full of airborne real estate . . . but, carry on.

As soon as I got rolling, the scene behind was solid, opaque dust. The scene in the cockpit of the glider was dust, roiling, sticking dust covered Bill's windshield. Clouds of dust filled the tow car. More dust, 30 or so feet high, advanced down the road obscuring the turn, but it was negotiated. Our only communication was the feeling of pull on the tow wire. This pull was strong and steady until the mine road approached, and I stopped the car. Bill released and the towline came down in convulsing snarls, drifting into the ancestor of boondocks.

"792 to 871, how are you doing? How high did you get?"

"871 to 792, 1700 feet; have a little lift. Now down, 500 up. Down. (Long pause.) I'm coming in."

I left the pretzelled heap of wire

with a shudder and drove down to the glider which stopped halfway between the highway and the turn. One has no idea how far a sailplane can go on a flat tire until one tries, does one?

Well, let's try again. So, while Bill and the rancher shoved the flapping beast back down the road I tackled the wire. Its wild convolutions gave the word "random" a new dimension.

Now, in this unrelieved emptiness prospectors are seldom seen, but over the years they have left cairns of basaltic rock as monuments to mark plots of ground. These are their claims to dreams of mining fortunes. The dreams end in rude awakenings, occasional nightmares, deaths and almost no chance of making a dime. But the cairns last for decades and generations. And there were many of them.

I gingerly tiptoed past imagined nests of rattlesnakes and found the towline's end, struggled it about 400 feet to the edge of the road, hooked it to the car's release and eased along. My progress was jerky as the line undermined one monument after another. Puffs of dust floated down wind as they crashed. The wire held up.

Solemn conclave about how and where to release towline followed.

Off again. The wind had settled into a roar, the dust obscured almost everything. Almost obscured, in fact, the huge rocks the towline had urged onto the road.

Release! Good boy! Towline fell on the road.

Radio useless. Sailplane made a couple of erratic darts, landed.

Time since start of expedition: 6 hours.

On his second flight, Bill's most encouraging reading on his variometer was 1200 feet per minute *down*.

The glider was trailered, left at a nearby ranch and we drove up the rock pile arriving almost late for supper. Bill's oxygen leaked slowly away as the valve was not closed.

At the Argentum Mine, about 12 miles away, a house trailer was blown over.

Diamonds, anybody?



Bill Bowmar and Ray Parker with the "Rigid Midget" sailplane.

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