

THE EPILOGUE OF THE OKLAHOMA COW

by PHILIP WILLS

(Editor's note: This article is reprinted with the kind permission of "Flight" magazine, from their issue for Nov. 11, 1960. It is in effect also an epilogue to the author's "The Thermals of Texas," published in "Flight" for Sept. 16, 1960, recounting his experiences in the U.S. Nationals.)

It was really a calf which produced the epilogue to this flight, possibly assisted by a pony, but I don't want my title to be ambiguous. Although a lot of people try to hide it, the fact is that most sailplane pilots (myself among them) really adore nothing so much as a good old vulgar down-wind dash on a corking day. This gives the maximum amount of trouble to everyone, including the pilot, but particularly the retrieving crews, and the organizers don't like it much because it means Operations has to stay up all night waiting for landing reports, and a blank rest day the next day whilst everyone struggles back. So, as I say, a lot of people pretend they are superior to the siren call of Free Distance, but I suspect that few are without the hunger.

Certainly at every morning briefing in the 1960 U.S. Nationals at Odessa, Texas, we eagerly awaited the announcement of this task, and there was mounting disappointment as it was delayed. For the weather situation meant that time was not on our side. The weather at Odessa itself, and for 200 miles around, never altered—strong thermal and cumulus streets building up each morning from 11 a.m. onwards, dying between 6 and 7 p.m.; but farther north a giant front looped across the United States like a 2,000-mile girdle across the stomach of a wide woman, and this moved slowly south, eventually reaching Odessa and blanking out the thermals with clouds and thunderstorms on the ninth day.

Now our winds every day blew at the surface from the southeast at 20-24 knots, and above 5,000 ft. (8,000 ft. a.s.l.) from the southwest at 10-15 kt; thus a down-wind dash took one up to the approaching front, as one got nearer the winds veered or backed so one could turn and parallel the front either way.

In these circumstances either Friday, August 5th, or Saturday, the 6th would have been good days for Free Distance, but our task-setters were overburdened by a promise to our sponsors, who had required an air display on the 7th, so finally the big day was announced at briefing on Monday, the 8th. By this time the front was barely 200 miles north, and the decision to be made was whether to attempt a cross-wind flight into the lee of the mountains to the northwest in New Mexico (where the upper winds were westerly), into a region of subsiding air and dry thermals, or towards Oklahoma in the northeast, where conditions looked better but the cross-wind component on the way was much worse. After much agonizing thought I and most of the leaders chose northeast, but in the event it made little difference, as both contingents made almost the same distance.

By now the days already flown had made it clear that on short tasks simply involving three hours or so flying across the best of the day, the Skylark could not be expected to keep up with the leading flying bombs, designed exactly for this comparatively narrow spectrum of conditions; whereas on long tasks, using everything the day had to offer, my ability to start earlier and finish later than them gave her a better chance, so this was in another sense a Big Day for me. By now Dick Schreder in his HP-8 had piled up a maximum score of 5,000 points in the five tasks we had flown, and I was lying fifth, with an annoying Ka-6 (slightly cleaned up) piloted by Kit Drew just on my toes at fourth place.

The first small cu could be expected exactly at 1100 hr., the heavy stuff to take off about 1130, so I put myself down for 1045, planning

to hold the air on dry thermals for the first quarter of an hour. In the blinding hot blue heat we dragged our way to the head of the line. I was packed in in my shirt and shorts, my hat on my head over a small wet towel (a very useful and refreshing way to keep one's senses in these conditions); another wet towel (whipped off at the last minute) over the Perspex cockpit canopy; a bottle of drink, also wrapped in a wet towel; my maps, food, pen and ruler in the canopy pocket; both barographs installed, sealed and ticking; oxygen on; my devoted and perspiring crew buzzing around, running out the tow-rope, last-minute polishing of wings and canopy, holding the wing-tip, flagging the tow-plane, running, letting go — we were off.

Wheels dropped, we left the runway and the flat and chequered brown landscape of Texas opened up and widened to the ever-expanding dusty horizon all around. We climbed in a wide left-handed circle which brought us round over the runway again at 2,000 ft., the tug wagged its wings, and I released and turned right. Looking round, I saw that a few of the earlier starters had struggled off downwind in a northerly direction and were now circling in a small bunch low down about three miles away. I wanted neither their direction nor their altitude, so forged ahead towards the town of Odessa itself to try for lift off its roofs, which I duly found. I had this without much difficulty for a quarter of an hour, being joined by a contingent who were also clearly destined for Oklahoma, when dead on time the first barely visible puffs of cu started to form in the sky around and above.

With Sinking Heart

The upper wind was much stronger than forecast, and retained the southeasterly direction of the surface, so it was with a sinking heart that I set off across and slightly into it to the northeast. In a wild way I had declared a goal at McAlester, 425 miles to the ENE, as near the line

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Photo: E. J. Reeves

