

of the advancing front as I dare go, but I had warned my crew that I might have to fly north of the track to begin with, and this became clearly a must.

The lift was still only around 250 ft./min., but the game was on, and I struck off at 55 kt., for the shadowy hint of high white steam some five miles over the mesquite bush to the northeast, followed closely by three or four other aircraft. Within half an hour the sky had developed into the usual Texan elysium of dappled cu based at 5,000 ft. above the surface, their shadows below racing across the ground — alas, at right angles to my course. There was no hope of holding my track; furthermore, I was finding unexpected difficulty in striking the lift areas, coming in as I was from the side of each upcurrent, and suddenly I missed one altogether. Before I knew where I was I was down to 800 ft., one hour and 20 miles from base. In a sky looking like silent dynamite.

Only sailplane pilots will feel my agony — was this to be the end of my Big Day? No thoughts now of speed or holding my track. I struggled round and round in plus or minus 100 ft./min. over the inhospitable ground, not daring to go further afield. I knew that almost certainly in one direction or other I could find strong lift if I could reach the heart of the thermal in whose edge I was clearly confined, but if I took the wrong one I would be certainly swept in the strong surrounding down-current to an ignominious — and possibly expensive — landing.

In such a circumstance a sailplane pilot seems to run out of eyes. All one's attention is needed for the instruments, yet some has to be spared for the ground below and some for the sky above, and suddenly in the latter I saw my salvation. A soaring hawk on rigid outstretched wings came into my line of vision from the south. Clearly he had been in my thermal, and on seeing this Brobdignagian brother circling in the distance he had assumed that my wisdom was in proportion to my size, and had come over to see if I had found a better bit than he had. He did a couple of circles just over my head, and I could almost see his beak curl into a contemptuous sneer as he tasted the miserable rags of my lift; then he turned and glided straight back the way he had come.

No thought of saving the face of my theoretically superior species pre-

vailed on me to hesitate. I straightened up and followed my feathered friend and in two minutes was circling up at 500 ft./min. to cloudbase and competition again. I was once more in the running, but sadly off course and with perhaps half an hour of distance lost. Lamesa was just to the north of me, and since distance was the order of the day irrespective of direction, I must now clearly reduce my attack on the wind and alter course as far north as I dare. Poor crew, struggling away to the east? If I had had radio, I am not sure that at this moment I would not have called them and set off for New Mexico, but the prospect of my landing point finished up around 800 miles from them that evening was too daunting, so I carried on.

Twenty miles covered in the first hour was followed by 42 miles in the second, and southeast of Lubbock I came over a wide stretch of wet irrigated land, with large round muddy ponds in every field, which I had been warned might be a trap. But no, all went well, and soon I flew over a line of low hills, and for 50 miles or more a stretch of wild bush-covered country cut into by a series of jagged sandy dry river-beds, which the thermals alone made safe for me. Then we approached and crossed a larger river which (having clearly been discovered by some devotee of the TV Westerns, goes by the name of Prairie Dog Town Fork, and the country below became greener and kinder. We were in Oklahoma, the ground had imperceptibly receded to only 1,500 ft. a.s.l., the time was 1700 hr., our average speed was only 40 m.p.h. The wind had almost dropped and the day was starting to die. But there was still no sign of the dreaded front to the north.

Out of the haze to the northeast appeared a few high granite outcrops — the first sign of hills we had seen in three weeks, and south of them the last cumulus in the dying sky lured me over the town of Altus. There I climbed gently to 7,000 ft. and set off on my final glide. I was now off my original map, so the exact direction to fly away from Odessa as far as I could was rather a guess; but I set off northeast, scanning my map for suitable airfields, and at last it seemed as if one on the southeast of the small town of Hobart might just about come up and meet my skid. But as I got lower I entered a strong southerly wind, and this carried me further than my chart had led me to expect, so that I reached this airfield

at 1,500 ft. A comfortable and safe landing, or another nine miles to an uncertain one?

But this was exactly the advantage I had over the heavy boys, who needed much more in the way of large landing areas than I did; so, fatigue after nearly eight hours in the cockpit notwithstanding, I flew on along a main road running north, lower over fields of cotton, maize, corn and fallow, until the time had come. At 400 ft. I turned into wind and landed in a large soft ploughed field running up to the outbuildings of an improverished looking single-story wooden farmhouse standing amongst a few trees by the side of the main road.

It was after 7 p.m. and I had been over eight hours in the air; I climbed rather stiffly out of my cockpit onto the soft and sandy plough, with a few old maize stalks sticking out of it. A warm breeze from the south, and a smell of earth and green growing things, again brought back that feeling known to all sailplane pilots — that the workaday world had once more taken over, and that much organizing and sweat lay ahead before my team could arrive and bear me and the Skylark back to base. A couple of young men in jeans climbed over the fence ahead of me and came ploughing through the soft earth. There are not many sailplanes in Oklahoma and none had ever been seen in these parts, let alone one inhabited by an Englishman speaking a strange and nearly incomprehensible dialect; but in due course I got my needs across — a telephone, and then help in derigging the Skylark and carrying the parts out of the field to the borders of the road before the onset of darkness.

Farmhouse Welcome

Eventually, however, it was done. I had phoned Odessa and asked that Kitty, when she got my message, should ring me and say where the crew had got to; the wingtips and tailplane were stowed on the lawn in front of the farmhouse, on the very edge of the road. The heavier fuselage and centre-section, however, had us so exhausted by the time we had carried them over a quarter of a mile each through the soft earth and up a bank that, at the farmer's suggestion, we had left them in a small empty enclosed yard at the back of the farm, with a track to the road which the trailer, when it arrived, could easily negotiate. We went back indoors; and, with typical hospitality I was sat down with the family at a