

THE FLIGHT OF THE TURTLE

by STERLING V. STARR

The thing that makes soaring habit-forming, I believe, is that once in a while, after months of ship maintenance, short flights, radio difficulties, miserable weekend weather, and building patio covers, the time comes when all falls into place and the result is a flight which greatly dims the memory of past tribulations. Such, for the Starrs, was July 15th.

We had formed plans for some time on methods to exceed various existing sailplane performance records, using as basic equipment our Schweizer 1-23D. To accomplish such a goal requires a rather unique set of weather and topographical features for each record. Hence it is rather difficult to be at the right place at the right time. This time we were fortunate.

The weather the previous week had been moist aloft, giving towering cumulus and thundershowers over the mountains to the east of San Diego. By Friday it had dried out somewhat, and no cumulonimbus were predicted for the mountains outlining the Owens Valley north of the Mojave Desert. Freezing level had pushed up to 15,500 ft., indicating a stabilizing trend which looked to be too severe for excellent soaring. However, the patio cover was up, and the weather fitted one of our requirements fairly well because of very light winds aloft, so the operation was on.

Departure from San Diego at 4:45 A.M. brought us to Inyokern Airport by 9:30 PDST. Inyokern was the scene of Duke Mancuso's wave flying operations last winter, and hence airport manager Joe Kilgore had a Cessna 180 equipped with towhook and waiting for us. Willing and friendly hands assembled the ship in record time.

The weather became hot and still, and power pilots coming in reported only mild thermal activity. Preparations were made for a minimum attempt at a U.S. National goal and return record. Lee Vining Airport to the north was declared as turn point and the panel duly photographed. Official procedures were executed mostly for the practice. Lee Vining was chosen as the closest possible turn point which would exceed the existing record by the required 10 km. (In fact, after the flight it seemed to measure as being too close.)

Take-off was at 11:15 A.M. just as the first puff of white showed at 15,000 ft. over the Sierras. Release over the field at 11:25 was the start of a long glide to the foot hills of the Sierras, where a thermal went to 7,000 ft. ASL. The puffs on the Sierras became more numerous and inviting, so the lower eastern ridges were explored for elevators. However, steady sink forced me low over the valley only 15 miles out, Joan, underneath me with the car, and I

both were thinking black thoughts.

However, a bubble lifted me high enough to pass over Little Lake, and a stronger thermal as I turned onto base leg for an approach to a mining road just south of Gill, took me back to 9,000 ft. I was still stubborn, however, and ventured once again to the Sierra foothills, which once more forced me rapidly downward to the center of the valley, where at 1:00 in the afternoon I found myself 40 miles out near Olancha, working a bubble to stay aloft.

The decision was made to abandon the bubble and drive to the east over the high ground in a desperate attempt to get going. It worked; I was soon climbing at 500-1000 f.p.m. to 12,000 ft., and we were off. Joan got the Ford out of second gear on the highway to keep up. The Owens Dry Lake was passed on the east side, climbing steadily, and clouds with bases at 14,000 ft. were contacted above the Inyo Mountains northeast of Lone Pine. The Inyos were departed from at Bishop and a long glide made to a building cumulus near Crowley Lake, where 18,000 ft. was reached at 3:30, averaging 55 mph since Lone Pine.

The 35-mile glide into the turn point was made without much help from lift, and after the turn point was photographed, several floundering attempts were made to contact lift into ragged small cumulus now high above me. The tries were unsuccessful, and at 4:45 I found myself ridge soaring at 11,000 ft. on Glass Mountain, in the center of Owens Valley, to the north of Crowley Lake. Off the mountain, small, tremendously rough thermals were ejected continuously, and I was hurled aloft by these puffs until I had enough altitude to reach Bishop. A long slide into the valley just northwest of Bishop brought me into 1000 f.p.m. lift, going to cloud base at 16,000 ft. over the Sierras at 5:30 in the afternoon, 125 miles from home plate. Joan, meanwhile, was meeting many of the wonderful people of Bishop in the process of getting a new generator on the car, on a Saturday afternoon.

From Bishop south to Big Pine was a beautiful cloud street, and I got a look at the fabulous view of the Sierras, with snow, lakes, and mountain crags below and fabulous lift above. And then, between Big Pine and Independence, smoke from the disastrous Kings Canyon forest fires to the west rapidly obscured

The author in his Schweizer 1-23D sailplane.

Photo by Joan Starr

