

MY FIRST THERMAL

By FRANK SLAVENS

It all happened one Sunday at Mirage Dry Lake. This experience may not compare with the many wonderful stories I have read in *Soaring* magazine, but to me it was as wonderful as a diamond flight.

Do you remember your first thermal? Norman Cargill and I, both charter members of SCSA's flight group, left from Glide-Aero in Bellflower at 4:30 A.M. Saturday, August 5th, after helping Max Dreher hitch up his beautiful new Schweizer 1-26 to go to Tehacapi. We arrived at Gus Briegleb's El Mirage Field about 7:30 A.M., picked up the winch and the 2-22 and proceeded to the dry lake a few miles away. After we rewound the wire on the winch some more loyal members of the flight group arrived. Present for the day were Bob Aronson, Scott Cooper, Frank Mullen, Norm Cargill and myself.

Had trouble with the level wind again so while Norm Cargill took it back to Briegleb's to weld, the rest of us decided to try some auto tows. I had done some with Lloyd Licher at San Bernardino so I was elected to drive the tow car. We had a very fine day of pattern flying and got off 37 flights. A prospective member, Robert Clark, liked what he saw, joined the flight group on the spot and received 5 flights that day. Norm and I tied the 2-22 down on the lake and hit the sack for the night.

About 9:30 A.M. Sunday morning some more of the flight group arrived. Bob and Mary Archer, Paul and Carlos Sepulveda, Don Gaede and friends were on hand. Mary Archer started the day with four nice dual

flights with Don Gaede instructing. Next Norm Cargill flew solo and made a beautiful half hour flight for his C badge. As we all ran out to congratulate him he said, "Lift is everywhere, you can't miss, Frank!"

As the canopy was closed and I sat in the cooker, my thoughts ran back two weeks when Jack Lambie had soloed me in nice smooth air. What would it be like today with lift about? Remembering what Don Gaede had said, "don't turn in a thermal under 500 feet and you'll be O.K.," off I went. Boy, this was a little rougher than ever before. I released 800 feet above the lake, made a left turn and hung on. The airspeed wasn't working but those little red and green balls were sure jumping up and down. Another turn and the altimeter said 400 feet so down I went for a landing. "I'll make it this time," I thought as I towed off again.

Maybe I released too low before so this time I'll hang on till 1000 feet (we were using about 2000 feet of wire)—700, 800, 900 feet, Gee, can I get 1000 feet?" Back I went on the stick—950, 975, 1000 feet and bang, the wire broke. Down a little on the stick and everything was all right. I made a turn and headed for the same place where Norm had stayed up so long. Those little red and green balls started going up and down again but this time I synchronized my right eyeball to go up and down with the green one and my left eyeball with the red one. Now all I had to do was circle when my right eyeball was up. Right eyeball up and circle I did. After a few times around I looked down at the altimeter and it had moved up,

not down, and a most wonderful feeling ran through me. I looked around at the back seat just to make sure it was me alone in the ship.

The lift got better the higher I got, and this seemed to be where the excellent training I had received from SCSA's group of instructors stopped, and the seat of my jockey shorts took over. Around and around I went — nose up, nose down—wing up, wing down. Like Frank Buck I felt I had a tiger by the tail.

Now I realized that all the wonderful stories I had ever heard about flying without an engine were true. Here I was being carried up by a power greater than man's ingenious devices. Truly my cup runneth over.

At 5000 feet a.s.l. (2000 feet above the ground), I straightened out and left "my first thermal" with the feeling that if this is only the beginning of the wonderful adventures of soaring then I'm sold, man, sold!

I became interested in soaring by attending one of the annual Torrey Pines meets. It was there that I bought a copy of "Soaring in America" and sent to SSA for a list of clubs. The Elsinore Valley Soaring Club was listed as being near me so I called the president about a ride and got one. The place was near Lake Elsinore, Calif., the pilot, Frank Mullen, the ship a Pratt-Read. And what a ride it was! We released from aero tow at 1250 feet and followed a paper sack up to 6,500 ft. A.G. At the top we looked around and could see the Pacific Ocean some 35 miles away and a huge hawk soaring above us. I joined this club which disbanded soon after and am now a member of SCSA's recently formed Flight Group. We use winch and auto towing equipment, rated flight instructors and operate from various sites around Los Angeles. Most of the student pilots are just average type guys with no previous flying experience. However, this is not an exclusive group for people with no flying background but is open to all. It is my firsthand opinion that this group (and any other like it) can open the door to anyone interested in soaring.

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