

# GOLD C ALTITUDE

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Sweeping out of the southwest from the wide reaches of the Pacific comes a thin ribbon of high velocity winds—the jet stream. Across the coastal lowlands shrouded under a deck of stratus cloud, across the wrinkled, wind-polished face of the Cascades, across the upland prairies of the Columbia Basin it speeds, its presence revealed by only the faintest of clues — a thin, lens-shaped cloud floating stationary three miles above the mountain which lies in the wedge of land formed by the confluence of the Wenatchee River and the mighty Columbia. To the pilot of a sailplane restlessly cruising the eastern rim of the Columbia Gorge the lenticular clouds seemed austere and inaccessible, hanging tantalizing-

ly near in the cold sky above his humble position only two hundred feet above the rim rock.

Lazily, I traversed the rim from north to south for perhaps the tenth time that summer afternoon. Over the Badger Mountain lookout tower I turned easily to the right, wheeling out over the precipitous gorge. A broad area of lift with a strange bubbly feel to it had developed in the vicinity; and in order to learn the extent of it, I struck out across the Gorge toward the great gash in the side of Burch Mountain on the west side. The mildly turbulent lift held steady at about two hundred feet a minute, until I was well out over the center of the river. Then without warning the turbulence died suddenly, and I found myself climbing in that unearthly smoothness that can be found in only one place

on earth — where the geostrophic wind curves upward in the upstream edge of a mountain wave. As I sat holding my breath, hardly believing what I was feeling, the rate of climb indicator slowly swung up to a reading of five hundred feet per minute and held there steadily while I maintained my course, spanning the Columbia and soaring across the brown back of Burch Mountain.

After some impromptu acrobatics while I donned helmet and oxygen mask in the crowded quarters of the LK cockpit, I found myself at fifteen thousand feet and approaching the lowest lenticular cloud which looked considerably less aloof at this point. Passing close to the thin leading edge of the cloud, I climbed past it and looked down on its rounded, woolly top. There was a narrow slit of clear air between this cloud and the next one above it, and I could see the country around Waterville framed in the opening. Approaching the soft grey bottom of the next level of cloud, it became apparent that I would have to fight my way upwind for a few hundred yards in order to clear the edge of it. Accordingly, I pointed the nose of the LK into the wind and waited. Nothing happened; the speed of the wind was so closely matched with that of the sailplane that I was not moving. Nosing down until the rate of climb reached zero, I crawled forward with dreamlike slowness and at last climbed into the clear air past the edge of the second and highest lenticular, finally reaching a peak altitude of nineteen thousand three hundred feet. When it became apparent that I could go no higher, I adjusted my cruising speed to match that of the wind and looked out for the first time with appreciation at the magnificent scene in which I and my ship were a mere note suspended in space.

Ridge after jagged ridge of the Cascades swept from under my right

