

A STRAIGHT LINE ISN'T...

by JOHN D. RYAN

A year ago, A. J. Smith started his tale of the 28th National Championships with the following sentence: "The map is justified because it can show sailplane pilots the extremes to which they can wander from and across a good straight flight path and still get enough contest points to win something or another." The 29th also saw a lot of wandering, and found the Sisu creating the crooked lines shown on these maps, often many miles farther from the course line than was necessary during the competitions at Wichita.



Photo by Ken Shake
John D. Ryan

For those not familiar with desert flying, El Mirage and environs must have come as quite a surprise. Some of the nearby terrain looks downright inhospitable to a sailplane pilot seeking a landing spot; and dust, heat and wind all combine to create a lot of wear and tear on pilot, crew and equipment. However, there is no argument about the fact that some of the strongest thermals in the world are to be found hiding along the shear line (I still haven't found out where the shear line hides!), but even the first practice flights indicated that the site was not always to be blessed by top soaring conditions—at times they were far from being super, and often the desert air became overheated and relatively stable, making certain portions of almost every task challenging and, on occasion, almost impossible.

The 29th was marked by the ab-

sence of many old friends—only 33 entries this year, and I think most of the regulars missed having their o'd pals around to provide additional humor and competition. It was good to see some new faces, however, and to realize that these will be the "regulars" in years to come. The Mojave Desert is a big place, and lack of organization found pilots and crews scattered at a dozen different motels in Victorville and Apple Valley, some 25 miles from the contest site. Harald Jensen, noted Danish competition pilot, gets the award for the best solution to the accommodation problem—he found a three-room apartment, complete with swimming pool, and it even had a refrigerator to keep the Tuborg cold!

With Skip Hartman as crew, I arrived a few days early for a bit of practice. A. J. Smith, Joe Emmons, Dick Schreder and Les Benis (with his Standard Austria) were there with the same thing in mind. Most of us became quite confused by our first introduction to the meteorological phenomenon known as the "El Mirage Shear Line." In fact, it later developed that not only were the contestants confused, but that the Task Committee was also having difficulty in assessing the comings and goings of this line of fantastic thermals. My first experience with the shear line came on the first day of practice. Smith, Schreder and I agreed that local flying would do little to sharpen us up for the coming meet, and we all decided on a short little out and return to Daggett. After releasing from tow, I rapidly climbed up to about 13,000 feet over El Mirage and made Daggett in a single glide. My mind evidently wasn't working (often the case) because I didn't even notice the lack of a single bump on the way! In fact, the first bump I hit was when the wheel touched the ground about halfway back to El Mirage. The stable air flowing northward through El Cajon Pass, and spreading out across the desert, was not conducive to anything in the way of lift. A. J. and Dick must have been more perceptive, because they realized what was happening, and rapidly scooted back to El Mirage and the safety of the

shear line, while I went blissfully gliding off to Daggett.

On the Friday before the contest four of us, Bikle, Schreder, Smith and I, decided to buzz up to Bishop (and possibly back—Ha!) in order to get a look at some of those famous White Mountain thermals. Jerry Robertson had appeared on the scene from Reno (where he is spending his time learning to fly helicopters with the USAF), and he and Skip followed with the car and trailer. We left El Mirage about noon and headed north over Four Corners, Johannesburg and Inyokern. Schreder, in the new HP-11, was the first to land at Bishop, and he radioed that a tow plane was there so we could land and make the flight back the following day. It was a treat to spend the evening in the cool mountain air and fresh breezes of the Sierras, and little did we realize that this would be the last opportunity for any relaxation until the 29th was history. We spent Saturday morning over a monstrous breakfast renewing acquaintance with Harold Klieforth. Coming out of the restaurant, we spotted Rudy Allemann driving by en route to the contest. A. J. took off in hot pursuit and soon two more sailplanes were assembled on the Bishop airport, as Paul Pallmer was also found to be in the area. Walt Lockhart of Bishop taxied out the J-3 and started towing. Only Schreder stayed aloft. After prematurely landing, the rest of us were soon driving down the Owens Valley toward El Mirage. Dick had no choice—he had to try to make it back—his crew was still at home base. After quite a long struggle, he landed at Boron, only 25 miles short, much to the surprise of the rest of us who had been making side bets that he wouldn't get nearly that far!

Sunday was primarily dedicated to an air show for the benefit of the nonsoaring types who had been lured from the smoggy side of the mountains to the dusty side. The highlight of the show, as far as soaring types were concerned, was the appearance of one of the largest dust devils anyone had ever seen. It blew right through the middle of the glider tie-down area. Afterward, little time was left for practice, but I did set out on a triangle—Apple Valley, Daggett and return—and found textbook soaring all the way, with no trouble from