

SILVER DISTANCE

by MICHAEL LITTLE

(Editor's note: Michael Little is a young pilot whose father was stationed in Paris, France, for duty with the U. S. Army. This flight was an attempt at his remaining Silver badge requirement, the fifty-kilometer (31.1-mi.) distance flight. Chavenay is the French Airport near Paris from which the flight was made.)

The day was late in building. Cumulus didn't appear until 1:30, but it was optimistically expressed by just about anyone whom you could choose to ask that the day would be good; that is, good for early spring. A wind of fifteen kmph from the southeast suggested a try for Vernon-sur-Seine, a small town 65 k's WNW of Paris. I was allotted an Emouchet. This ship is an open-cockpit, strutted sailplane with a name that translates sparrow-hawk; a misnomer, I think, as the plane resembles the bird only in that it flies and is small.

Nevertheless, I took off from Chavenay gaily sure of success on this, my third attempt at the Silver badge distance. As I bounced at the end of my tie with the towplane, I was busily striving to keep my map from blowing out the cockpit, hold a reasonable flight attitude, and clutch my cap, which threatened to be carried away with every gust. With the release and the first spiral I was able to regain some sort of composure and concentrate on climbing. After a few minutes of badly centered circling, I began to climb noticeably at one meter per second. This thermal had no surmounting cloud but it did boast several ships lazily turning above my position. The lift faded out around 800 meters (2600 ft.) so I struck off in a westerly direction in order to clear the interdicted zone north of the field. Nervous minutes passed until I spotted some thermal markers—gliders from another field. I entered the thermal with 300 meters (1000 ft.) of altitude and a fervent thanks. When the vario began to swing pleasantly, I banked the yellow craft into a fairly tight spiral. The lift, coming off a village, was good so I stayed with it and drifted with the breeze until, I hoped, better things would happen. Unfortu-

nately, the wind brought me too close to the forbidden zone so I parted with the thermal at 1600 meters (5200 ft.), 300 under cloud base. Reassuring clouds were forming along the projected route so I pressed on until the city of Mantes and the Seine River were in sight. Occasional lift along the shallow valley I was following enabled me to maintain 1200 meters (4000 ft.) until I reached the Seine.

The sinuously curving river below fascinated me. As I watched, the barges' infinitesimal movement between the wooded banks could only be detected by their faint wakes. Small roads laced the frequent fields. Villages dotted the countryside in a simple, straightforward manner; seemed to belong there—not at all foreign but as if they were part of the natural growth. A perfect, leisurely flight seemed to await me.

I decided to change my destination from the airport at Vernon to one in a direction more in accord with the southerly wind. A nicely foaming "cu" was before me but as I passed under it I only found a slightly less negative reading than normal. I cast about on the sunny side, then on the downwind side, then under the darkest areas—with no success. At 700 meters (2300 ft.) my idyl ended when I began to concentrate on simply remaining in the air. I tensed and leaned forward and no longer noticed the pastoral scene below me. After a slightly delayed descent under this particularly

deceptive cloud, I could see nothing promising either in the form of cumulus or likely thermal sources ahead so I turned and headed for the excellent looking cloud behind me, which had just formed. That malevolent, deceiving representation of moisture and temperature layers gave no lift but abundant sink. At 200 meters (660 ft.) I circled in zero sink over a village between the low wooded hills—only succeeding in delaying my inevitable descent. Approaching the chosen landing field, I saw that it was slightly rolling, so I left the air brakes seated in order to drift near the end of the pasture before touching down. I rolled to a stop 20 yards before the farm road cut the green cultivation with a band of brown-yellow dirt. Angry with myself, I struggled out of the cockpit. No sooner had I removed my parachute and put it on the wing, than an ancient French woman who had been working the fields greeted me. I braced myself for the question and, sure as no lift when you need it, she said, "Where's the engine?" Suitably prepared, I explained that this is a "planeur" and that it flies using the air currents to keep it aloft. It is helpless to do more than this in explanation. She then told me the way to the nearest telephone and I set out for it, having a hard time staying irate; the road soon was lined with an orchard on one side and sloping fields on the other. The sun was only occasionally disturbed by a drifting cloud and the air was pleasantly warm. After calling for a trailer, I bought a sausage and a loaf of French bread and returned to the ship. I pulled Mark Twain out of the cockpit, laid under the wing and read until the crew came.

The Polish SZD-24C "Foka" Standard Class sailplane, designed for competition in the World Championships. The wing features foam plastic sandwich shell construction formed by a simple vacuum method. Basic specifications are as follows: span, 49.2 ft.; wing area, 130 sq. ft.; aspect ratio, 18.5; airfoil, 63(3)-618; empty wt., 550 lb.; gross wt., 790 lb.; wing loading, 6.1 lb./sq.ft.; stall speed, 40 mph; min. sink, 2.17 ft./sec. at 47 mph; max. glide ratio, 34 to 1 at 53 mph; and design load factors, plus 6, minus 3.

