

30th ANNUAL U.S. NATIONAL SOARING CHAMPIONSHIPS

Sanctioned by The Soaring Society of America, Inc.

by LLOYD M. LICHER

Photos by ALEX ALDOTT, SSA's Official Photographer for the Nationals

The 1963 Nationals were held from July 2-12 at Elmira, N.Y., the first return of the contest to this city since 1959 when Dick Johnson won the Championship flying an old, tired Weihe sailplane. Dick won the Championship again this year, flying a new Skylark 4. His total score for the seven contest days was 5824, only eight points ahead of runner-up Bernie Carris. Dick has now won six Nationals, one-fifth of all those held.

Host and sponsor of the Championships was the Elmira Area Soaring Corporation, a veteran organization in these affairs. For some contest personnel this was their first visit to the Mecca of American soaring and for many old-timers pleasant memories were stirred. Some even say that Harris Hill is soaring. Throughout the contest a line of flags along the road on the Hill greeted all visitors. The ensigns represented the states and countries of the contestants.

After final registrations were in, 48 entrants had brought a most impressive collection of high-performance sailplanes to Elmira. Through attrition due to a few landing accidents and storm damage, this number was reduced to 43 on the last contest day. Swiss, German, Polish, Danish and Canadian entries lent an international flavor to the com-

petition and all were made to feel at home.

Contest operations and most flying took place at the Harris Hill Gliderport; however, it was necessary for 16 radio-equipped sailplanes to fly from the nearby Chemung County Airport in the valley because of lack of space on the Hill. All releases were at a common altitude and location and everyone used the same start/finish lines for speed events. The valley pilots had a larger selection of take-off times, quicker "relights" (second tows) and 800 extra feet of altitude in which to search for lift but, as Paul Bikle pointed out, none of them (including himself) seemed able to use these supposed advantages to advance their standing.

Precontest activities saw numerous pilots on the Hill early for practice. Bikle's Prue Standard was extensively damaged in a freak accident on Sunday, June 30th, but several pilots and friends pitched in to work the 30 hours necessary to effect suitable repairs before the contest started. He had landed on the brow of the Hill in some rain and the ship slid down the hill backwards into a road and fence. This was but one example of the camaraderie that cements the soaring fraternity together. Other examples were overnight replacement of Bob

Little's HP-9 canopy, which was lost in flight early in the contest, and repair of Larry Gehrleim's 1-23H after being damaged by wires while landing.

A practice task was set for Monday, July 1st, a 47-mile triangle, and many pilots familiarized themselves with the terrain and soaring conditions in the area. That evening a champagne reception/dinner for all contest personnel was held in Elmira by the Mayor and City Council. Following this the briefing of pilots on rules, operating procedures, etc., required by the rules was conducted. It served to have most "what ifs" answered, thereby shortening subsequent pilots' meetings.

July 2 — No Contest Day

On the first scheduled day of the Championships the Competitions Committee, consisting of Marshall Claybourn, Competition Director, Bob Court and Dr. Francis Bundy, called for a 140.5-mile triangular course speed task. The air was oppressively hot and humid. Barney Wiggin, contest meteorologist, forecast widely scattered afternoon thunderstorms preceding a slowly advancing cold front. At each pilot's meeting Barney distributed a very informative dittoed soaring forecast. On one side there was a weather map of the NE U.S. and a pictorial cloud forecast for the day, showing size and altitudes of clouds at various times. Numerical and descriptive forecasts of weather factors, temperatures, clouds, winds and thermal speeds were on the reverse side. These printed forecasts saved much time during briefings.

Lift was plentiful although navigation was difficult in dense haze. The thunderstorms appeared but, instead of being scattered, were a solid frontal system across the course which no one could penetrate. Since the requirement for a contest day (ten pilots flying 35 miles each) was not met the day was declared no contest. Johnson and Carris interpreted the situation correctly and soared back to Harris Hill. Unfortunately, Kit Drew's Ka-6 was damaged beyond immediate repair upon landing so he had to withdraw from the contest before it really got started.

July 3 — 1st Contest Day

The front passed during the night and was followed by very cool air (down to 40 degrees F. one morn-

A bird's-eye view of Harris Hill during the Championships as flight line activities get under way.

