

TOUCH AND GO OVER THE PAMPAS

by RICHARD H. JOHNSON

February 20, 1963, dawned cool, clear and windy. It was to be the 6th and most memorable contest day of the 9th World Soaring Championships, which were being conducted at Junín, Argentina. The previous five contest days had all been close-course speed tasks, and since the contest rules required that at least one free distance contest day be flown, we were all quite certain that this was to be that day.

February in Argentina is equivalent, meteorologically, to August in the central United States, except that their cold fronts come from the south instead of the north. The weather for the previous day's task was forecast to be just mediocre with weak to tolerable thermal strengths and a moderately brisk wind from the south. Contrary to forecast, that day's weather became much stronger than expected as dry, cooler air rushed northward and the depth of the unstable air deepened. The thermals permitted climbs at 500 to 800 fpm to near 10,000 feet during the latter half of that afternoon, and the south wind blew harder, reaching approximately 30 mph while I flew that day's 323-km. task triangle.

The pilots' meeting was held early and the free distance task was announced as anticipated. The task assignment was received by most of us with a mixture of emotions; eag-

erness to soar and adventure in what promised to be an excellent cross-country day, and apprehension as to when and how we might all be found and retrieved after landing hundreds of miles away in sparsely populated northern Argentina. The roads were poor and far between to the north where we intended to fly and communications probably would leave something to be desired.

The take-off line was scheduled to open at 10:00 A.M. local time and because the day appeared to be capable of early convection, most pilots chose to take off before 10:30 A.M. Since the organizers were well equipped with towplanes and proficient at field operations, they could launch the sailplanes at an amazing four per minute. These same airplanes were also used each day for aerotow retrieving of the contestants after the contest launches were completed. Only aerotow retrieving was permitted because many of the contestants had neither automobiles nor trailers available to them. The rule for this day was that contestants would be permitted the usual three tows to 2200 feet altitude, but that his first landing outside of the local Laguna de Gomez airfield, no matter how close it was to the airfield, would count as his only contest flight. In other words, a pilot would be completely out of luck if he started cross-country and landed a

short distance out because he would not be permitted a second contest flight that day. This was fair to all, but made it doubly important for a pilot to remain airborne after he left the contest site.

For this reason I chose 10:40 for my take-off time, and that was optimistic because Argentina was on daylight savings time which meant it was only 9:40 sun time. The clear morning sky looked good, but those who took off early were unable to find thermals and were soon back on the airfield. I changed my take-off time to 11:00 and took off just behind the German open class pilots Kuntz and Spanig, who had returned from earlier, unsuccessful flights. Sailplanes were still landing and it was becoming apparent that perhaps the day would not be a boomer, at least not early in the day.

At 500 feet, I retracted Sisu's landing wheel. The tow to the release area was uneventful with little turbulence encountered. The south wind was still blowing at some 25 mph, but the air was considerably more stable than that which we had enjoyed the previous afternoon. After release, I worked hard in an attempt to maintain altitude and still stay within gliding range of the take-off site. In 14 minutes I was down to 1500 feet, then encountered a relatively good 200-fpm thermal that carried me to 2500 feet, then quit. By now there were 6 or 7 other sailplanes sharing my little thermal. Of the some 50 or 60 sailplanes in the area, almost all were in the air in the vicinity of the airfield and none was significantly higher than 2500 feet. A few bold pilots turned downwind and headed for their day's adventure, but most of us decided the risk of an early landing was too great and, therefore, headed upwind toward the airfield to await better conditions.

The next thermal encountered was weaker, only 80-fpm average, but did carry me and many others slowly to an altitude of 2650 feet. It was now 41 minutes after release and I knew that for every minute I delayed striking out I was losing almost one mile of distance. On the other hand, if I was unsuccessful and landed early, I would receive few or no contest points to help my 9th place standing. Had I known that this was to be the unfortunate fate of a number of top pilots including Henry, who was in 1st place,

The author flying the Sisu 1A with which he made the 441-mile flight described in this story. He has held the world soaring distance record of 535 miles since August of 1951 and has been U.S. National Champion five times.

Photo by S. A. Aldott

