

CREWING IN THE MOJAVE DESERT

by SHIRLEY EMONS

My friends who had been to the Southwest warned me about the unpleasant weather. Some who had been to El Mirage Field described it to me but I didn't listen.

I had to find out for myself and I did.

We started out on Saturday morning, July 14th, 1962, and Joe (my husband) was really excited anticipating the flying he would be doing in the Nationals. Janis Kirgan, our friend and other half of the crew, was also excited about seeing the sights. She didn't have any idea of the hard work ahead.

We talked Joe into seeing the Painted Desert, Petrified Forest and the Grand Canyon on the way out. Pulling the trailer (enclosing our HP-10) up Grand Canyon road through some rough road construction didn't make him too happy. When we stopped at a Lookout Point near the top of the Canyon, someone asked us what we had in the trailer. They had seen another trailer just like it pass them as they were turning onto the Canyon road. Well, that was the last good look Janis and I had of the Canyon. Away we went!

As we traveled along on Highway 66 from the Canyon, I looked at the rough terrain and it didn't look like there were many landing places. Lava beds, Joshua trees and mountains didn't impress me at all. Janis

was raving about the beauty surrounding us but I was looking at it much differently.

We found El Mirage and assembled the ship, then headed back to Apple Valley to find our motel. On the way, we passed extremely rough terrain and being so close to it, I became petrified. I said I was going home, bitterly, and it was the last National Contest I would ever attend. Joe seems to have a way of calming me down and did so.

I had worried about two women being sufficient crew for Joe. Janis didn't have crewing experience, but she came through with flying colors. I hope she will continue to help me crew at future contests. Things ran smoothly during practice—the radio worked fine, no car trouble and we witnessed Joe's landings.

The first task was a 236-mile triangle followed by free distance. The drive between Lucerne Valley and Yucca Valley was really desert and I think even Janis looked at it differently. The car radio worked fine that day, we heard everyone *but* Joe. We left the old batteries in his radio because it had been working fine and, being unfamiliar with the desert, we didn't realize the heat would have such immediate effect on them. But we continued hoping to hear from our pilot.

Joe gave us instructions for cooling the car engine before the con-

test, and we soon followed those instructions the first day. He also gave us instructions for changing a tire, not dreaming we would have to do it. But the desert heat was too much for one tire, and the tread separated from the tire with a frightening noise. We followed the instructions step by step and, in spite of the difficulty, we had to laugh. We did a nice job and had the spare on the car (feeling very proud of ourselves), but we couldn't release the jack. No one would stop to help us even for a flying white flag. Finally, a sympathetic man pulling a utility trailer stopped. We were far behind our pilot by then and didn't reach him until ten o'clock that night.

The second day was a 195-mile goal and return to Baker and *flat* tire this time. We had the damaged tire from the day before and, thanks to the Sisu crew, we didn't have to change that one. We left the trailer where it was (7 miles East of Yermo, California) and limped back into Yermo stopping at the first Shell station. The attendant was drunk, and I still believe that he couldn't understand English because it took forever to explain what kind of tire we wanted to buy. Having radio contact that day, we asked Joe's advice once. He wasn't much help. I was excited and crying by this time and Joe (who had gone 30 miles without lift) said, "You have your troubles and I have mine." He'll never live that down because all pilots having radio heard this and sympathized with his crew.

We finally made the man understand what we wanted and he disappeared leaving a young man to change the tire. The young man admitted that he had never changed a tire and, eventually, we could see that he would never get it changed. We called the service station across the highway and asked if they would change it for us. We had planned to buy the tire from the Shell station and have the other station change it, but the drunken attendant reappeared and wouldn't sell it to us.

We had to go across the street and pay expensively for an unknown brand. At that point, I didn't care. We finally found the HP-10 and pilot after dark in the wilderness with the aid of railroad flares, radio messages relayed via Cessna flying overhead and reports from other crews.



The author as seen through the vee tail of her pilot's HP-10 sailplane at El Mirage.

Photo by George Uveges