

T-BIRD TEST FLIGHT

by ROBERT FORKER

The opportunity to fly one of this country's most unusual sailplanes came my way recently when Ray Parker, designer and builder of the T-Bird, in a moment of madness, offered me a flight. The event was set for Saturday, March 16th at Elsinore. All the way there, I searched the sky for clues about soaring conditions. To say I was nervous would be the understatement of the month. I wasn't frightened about flying the T-Bird, only about the possibility of breaking it. By the time we reached Elsinore, the sky was about 50% covered with black-looking, small Cu's with a heavy overcast above. The sun didn't care to watch. As we began the very short process of assembling T-Bird, a 1-26 proved the conditions were indeed soarable. This gave me slight encouragement because with soarable conditions I could quite likely get high enough and stay up long enough to get a little of the feel of the ship before having to land it.

Assembly consists of installing the outer wing panels. The tail and the short wing center section are left in place on the fuselage for trailering. Each wing is held with two taper pins and a small tapered drag pin. Dive brakes and ailerons are connected with quick fittings. The flying pins are safetied with a walking beam fitting that holds all three pins secure. Assembly is as easy as

any sailplane I have seen. The Ka-6 is easy but no better.

T-Bird's cockpit is large enough for a 6-foot, 200-pound pilot to be comfortable with a chute. The seat is nicely formed and in an hour and a half produced no paralyzing effect on that portion of the anatomy in most intimate contact with it. The seat back is adjustable, as are the rudder pedals, and the back is formed with a small shelf at the bottom that supports the bottom of the parachute and keeps the straps from hanging on the pilot's shoulders while in flight. The stick isn't a stick—it's a wheel on a yoke. This feature has some good points, the best being that it solves the problem of what to do with your legs while trying to obtain full aileron deflections. I think that personally I slightly prefer the stick but the wheel is not hard to get used to (I have flown wheel-controlled light-planes quite a lot), and does make flying a finger-tip operation in this machine. A release knob and a combination dive brake and wheel brake lever complete the cockpit controls. When the dive brakes are fully opened, additional pulling of the lever pulls a band across the tire to produce wheel braking.

The large canopy is hinged on both sides and can be completely removed or jettisoned (a *w f u l* thought) by pulling both release knobs at the same time. This is an

excellent canopy, clear and without any distortion that I noticed. I understand it is from Bob Noble's ill-fated ship. Visibility is excellent, the wing leading edge being just about on a line with the pilot's eyes. You cannot see the tail from the cockpit but, as they say on television, "It's what's up front that counts." The seating position with the canopy in place is very slightly reclining, about the same as in most of the modern sailplanes. In flight, your right arm and wrist can rest on your leg and the wheel is comfortably in reach of your fingers. I'm lazy by nature and hate to fly a ship where I have to hold up my arm all the time.

After briefing the towpilot that this was to be my first flight in a strange ship and that I wanted a good fast tow, and also making a "scene" about wanting to take off into the wind, I had reached the point where I either had to get in and fly the thing or prove to everyone else that I was chicken. There was no doubt in my mind about this last point, I felt like I had a tummy full of feathers.

Ray had warned me that T-Bird might try to spank its left wing down on take-off and sure enough, he was right. Aileron control immediately caught the dropping wing before it touched and brought it back level. An instant later, down it went again, to be picked up once more by aileron, and by now I had the feathers up in my mouth. I managed to look foolish fanning the elevators up and down trying to feel something that would pass for control pressure. About then I learned the first thing about T-Bird. She has all the control feel of a good ball point pen. The thing that kept chaos from turning to disaster at this point was T-Bird's docile nature. Despite my frantic fumbling with the wheel, she went ahead and made what passed for a pretty normal take-off. Ray had suggested that 45 knots be used as a minimum flying speed until I got the feel of the ship, so as we passed the fence on take-off and I saw 48 on the air-speed I concealed my panic by favoring the tow pilot with a stream of descriptive language that I won't bother to repeat. Now the whole cockpit was full of feathers. T-Bird, as before, kept right on flying and by the time we passed through 1000 feet my feet would stay still in the rudder pedals and I was beginning to enjoy this wonderful sailplane.

Ray Parker's T-Bird sailplane soaring near Elsinore, Calif. Basic specifications for the ship are as follows: span, 50.67 ft.; wing area, 122 sq. ft.; aspect ratio, 21; empty wt., 510 lb.; gross wt., 675 lb.; wing loading, 5.6 lb./sq.ft.; and airfoil, Wortman FX 05 191. No accurate performance measurements have been taken as yet but it is definitely in the high-performance category. A detailed article on the T-Bird's construction and design philosophy was printed in the Feb., 1962, *Soaring*, and another account, of first test flights, with 3-view drawing, appeared in the Aug., 1962, issue.

Photo by Kirk Harris

