

557 MILES! SUN VALLEY TO SWIFT CURRENT

by PAUL F. BIKLE

You all know how the hangar flying stories go: "There I was at 17,000 feet, about a mile back under this big squall line, flying through sleet, rain and lightning at 100 mph to keep from being lifted into the base of the storm; turn needle inoperative, oxygen gone, out of maps, and so on." For more than an hour, this soaring pilot's dream of how to fly cross-country had persisted and the squall line still extended ahead to the north as far as one could see.

But this was no dream. On the only free distance day of the 1963 Pacific Northwest Regional Soaring Championships, I had been some 300 miles out of Sun Valley, Idaho, when I first climbed to cloud base along the edge of this storm. Thoughts began to creep into the back of my mind that the 550 miles required to exceed the world distance record for sailplanes and, perhaps, the 622 miles for the magic 1000-km. distance might be

in the cards. These brought forth mixed emotions of elation and frustration as I reminded myself that I had no barograph.

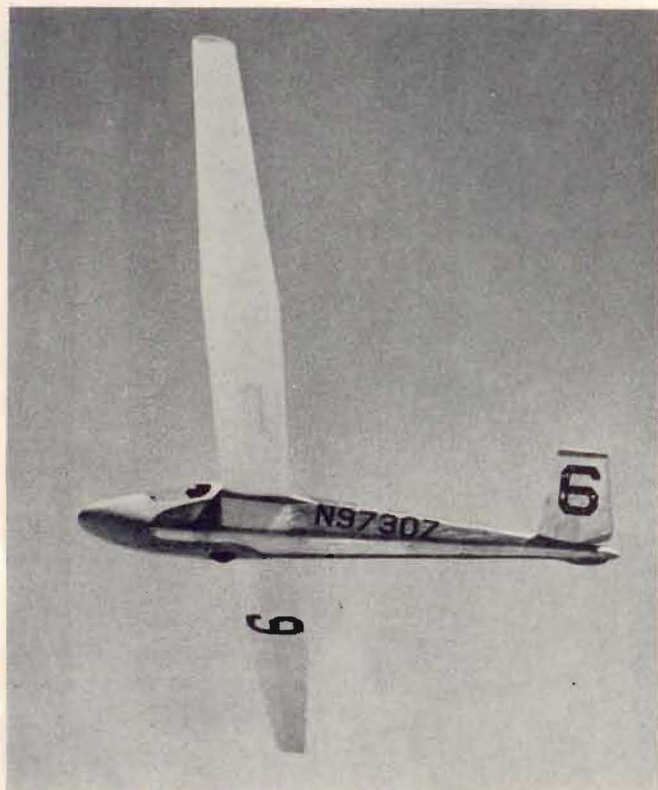
Flying on and on for almost another hour in this dream-like situation it was obvious that the border had been crossed and that the flight must have extended many miles into Canada. I was in no mood to press on when the terrain below changed from open fields to low, wooded hills. Although it was only 6:00 P.M., the light was fading rapidly and the visibility was quite restricted. Never having flown over this country before, it was my rather provincial impression that all civilization in Canada lay in a relatively narrow band just north of the border. Still at 15,000 feet, the sailplane was turned away from the storm and headed northeast along the most northerly fields in sight. Fifty minutes later, a landing was made in a plowed field beside a highway and a railroad. This last

glide added only a minimum distance as the wind was blowing out of the east into the storm at 35 to 40 knots.

The high surface wind caused immediate concern for the safety of the sailplane after landing. The storm was an awesome sight stretching from the southern horizon to the northern horizon as it moved slowly east. Sharply defined lips or rolls extended ahead of the base and the whole mass of clouds rose to great heights. Leaving the sailplane, I ran out to the highway and tried to flag down a passing motorist. After seven cars drove by at high speed, the eighth stopped only because I stood in the middle of Trans-Canada Highway No. 1. I tried to explain that I had landed a sailplane in a field just over the hill by the road and needed help in making it secure before the storm struck. This most helpful gentleman, Mr. R. Short of Swift Current, Saskatchewan, Canada, I am certain did not fully understand my hurried explanation but he did drive his car back to the field and helped me remove the right wing after we could find no secure place to tie down the sailplane.

Just as the rain started, we returned to the car and I explained that I was not exactly lost as I knew I was about 200 miles northeast of the last check point on my maps but that I didn't know just where this field was located on the map. He unfolded his car map and we pinpointed the location as 2 miles northeast of the small town of Webb and 18 miles west of Swift Current. He explained that Swift Current was between Moose Jaw and Medicine Hat. He recommended that he drive me to Smith Airport at Swift Current where we could call the Mounted Police, Canadian Customs, Contest Headquarters and arrange for a hotel room.

Leaving the sailplane to the mercy of the storm, we drove ahead of it to the east and soon reached Smith Airport. Quickly checking the wall map, we determined the landing coordinates to be $50^{\circ} 12' 00''$ and $108^{\circ} 10' 00''$ and the distance from take-off in the order of 550 miles. A call was then placed to Maj. Ed Butts at contest headquarters. While giving him the required landing information, the storm struck in full force.



The author flying his Prue Standard sailplane with which the 557-mile flight described in this story was made.

Photo by
George Uveges