

THE NIGHT OF THE IGNORANTS

by JOHN J. RANDALL

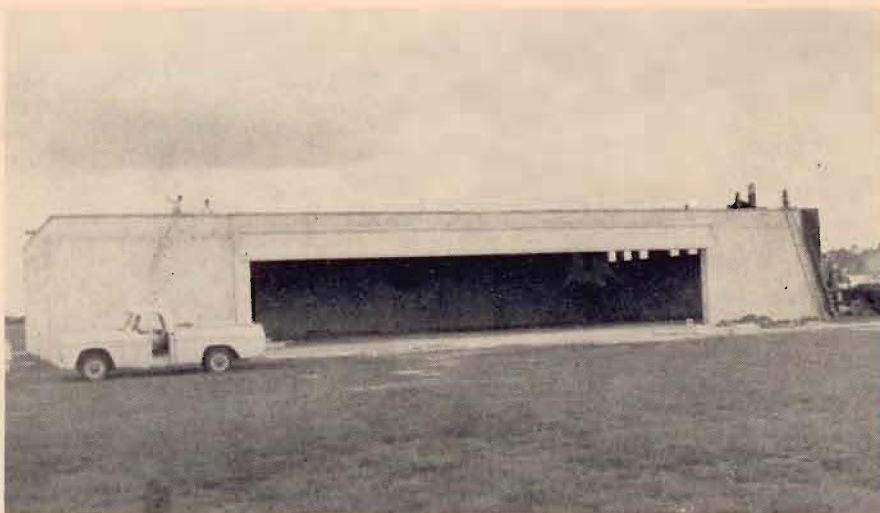
Miami is situated on a narrow strip of coral with the blue Gulf Stream to the East and the forbidding swamps of the Everglades to the West. Surprisingly enough, the winter soaring is excellent, at least from the viewpoint of the easterner.

Our pitifully small group had survived at North Perry Airport through a long succession of governmental commissions and unfriendly operators. In retrospect, our survival was contingent on staying small. We welcomed Jim Parrott and his Miami Soaring School in the fall of 1961; within a few months Jim attracted hundreds of pilots to his school and by spring the whole South Florida group had been summarily evicted from the airport.

The spring of 1962 was spent searching for a landowner who would give our group a lease option on a long twenty acres in South Dade. By early summer, I, for one, had given up: in an open meeting, the Dade County Port Authority had flatly stated that we would never fly from any of their airports and there were no others. My last words to Fritz Sebek on leaving for Odessa with my Ka-6 were, "Count me out." I planned to leave my equipment in Odessa and commute.

The rains came to Odessa so I followed George Arents on to Albuquerque. I had just arrived when the phone rang and Fritz Sebek said that Ed Brigham had secured a lease option on a suitable strip; Fritz had formed a corporation with \$2,000 of his money and signed up for the deal. Heaven forbid! \$45,000 worth of land! Fritz was certain that every soaring pilot in the area would leap to his aid with time and money. Neither George nor I were that naive; but, we couldn't let our friend sink . . . we each sent \$700 by air mail.

Ed Brigham, our soaring legal council, had, as President of our local club, sent a letter to every soaring pilot in the area, soliciting their aid and ownership in a new, nonprofit corporation, aptly named Thermal Research, Inc. We waited for the checks to pour in but were not inundated. We were off in solid sink.



The new hangar, just about completed. Concrete block construction, pre-stressed concrete beam roof, 60 by 100 feet and a 60 foot door.

At the first meeting of the corporation we elected Jim Parrott President and discussed the enroute obstacles. The strip was high in brush, but superbly located as a soaring site. We only had to get through four governmental agencies and raise the purchase price. The night of the ignorants.

Dade County Zoning: We were 20 miles out of town. But, imagine our surprise at the hearing. Eighty people protested. Sebek, Parrott and I were alone but made an impassioned plea and succeeded.

Dade County Port Authority: OK; glad to get rid of us!

State of Florida: Initially turned down, as a large adjoining landowner protested. In due course, we received approval, pointing out that the large landowner should have protested at the hearing.

FAA: Jim went to Atlanta and the FAA surprised us with their support and continued cooperation.

By January of 1963, Tin Ferry had driven the bulldozer for months. In spite of his free work, our group was still a candidate for the poverty program—but, we were legal, licensed and flyable. We subsisted, through the courtesy of R. B. Zinker, on tomatoes—they are good fried, boiled, cold, red or green. R. B. farms a thousand acres of winter tomatoes around us and he can be assured of our prayers on frosty winter nights.

In three months, Jim made nearly 600 commercial flights but little money. We again made a plea to all local soaring interests to come in as \$100 per year members—with no part of the now \$50,000 debts of the corporation. The trickle did not turn into a flood.

The 1962-63 winter was mainly spent figuring out how so few could raise so much by the imminent option date. Fred Brittain, our new President, and I went to see the landowner and in due course got a price reduction of \$7,000 on the land. The fellows must have thought the land a good buy as we raised the money with no difficulty. We were riding high as the corporation owned the towplane and owed only a meager \$10,000, or so.

For the coming winter we needed a hangar and spent the summer negotiating with various contractors. We learned all about such phenomena as the Florida Building Code, hangar doors, and the cost of bringing power 1,000 feet. Suffice it to say that a 6,000 square foot hangar is up.

Our group is small but entirely without factions. We have each learned to respect and trust the other. We welcome all soaring pilots to fly at the Miami Gliderport. It's on the sectional, fellows, and the winter thermals are good. Drop off your dues at the hangar!