

"I saw a saddle in the backbone of the Wasuks and slipped through the muck to the sunny icestern side. It took me 45 miles after that to get rid of the ice and whenever I circled the ship shuddered and shook."

Another pilot who slipped through to the western side was evidently having trouble finding lift and was surprised to suddenly find power lines before him running toward the crest. As he dived below them his shadow startled some buzzards sitting at the base of a power pylon. They took to the air and as he observed them realized they had marked a thermal for him!

Not all were so lucky. For many the boiling thunderhead with its capricious largesse of lift, sink, and precipitation proved their undoing. For others, even if they didn't go down, the storm was the deciding element. The wily Paul Bikle, veteran of many contests and one-time holder of the world's unofficial distance record, is an example.

"Watching the development on the way to the turnpoint, I figured I'd have trouble if I tried to return under the storm. I also knew from the prevailing weather patterns of the area I could expect increased ground winds at lower altitudes in the late afternoon. This meant final on-course glides to Stead would buck heavier and heavier winds as they sank lower.

"I gambled and skirted the thunderhead by flying south of it. Then I set a course directly toward the Sierras and what appeared to be active cu's. I intended to turn north there and fly along the cloud street that had formed over the first range. This way I would only have to fight a cross-wind instead of a head-wind."

He made it to the lee of the Sierras, but unfortunately found himself out of phase with the cloud-development cycle and lost valuable time maintaining altitude. He sensed the day slipping from him and took a second chance.

"To the east I could see the shearline at the convergence zone was still working. The cloud streets showed that it had not moved east as fast as expected. I ran for it and made it, but it was a mistake that took too much time. I started my final glide there at 17,000 feet."

Other pilots had their tribulations too. Graham Thomson, after an exemplary flight out, made a side trip on his return that took him over the historic ghost town, Virginia City. This was occasioned not by any curiosity to view the relic of the wild and woolly West, but by failure to draw a course line on his chart and establish a compass heading. Flying into the lowering sun, he mistook landmarks and veered off his course. Eighth place was his reward for the day.

Dick Schreder had hooked his variometer to a pint bottle instead of the required quart size, but surprisingly, he completed the course anyway to win fifth spot.

The start-and-finish gate was monitored under a tent roof erected in the open desert about a mile from the hangar. It was a small speck against the sweeping background of the hills in the far distance. In the late afternoon the 35-knot wind whistled through the guy ropes, flapping the canvas roof viciously. Oblivious of the howling wind, the officials

traded jokes and friendly insults in the colorful patois of Texas and Oklahoma. The informality was deceptive and hid an alertness that spotted the returning ships at the limit of vision. Binoculars swept the sky above the low hills to the southwest of the airport. Since the approaching sailplanes were aligned with the tent, there was little apparent motion, but with experience it became possible to judge their speeds somewhat.

Some pilots who found they were arriving with an excess of altitude became visible at a faster rate. When the razor-thin line of their wings became discernible, it was possible to see the rapid flexing caused by the red-line speed of their approach. These would whistle by the tent, sometimes within a few feet of the surface, and would burn off the speed in beautiful climbing turns that put them on the downwind leg for their landings.

Others would squeak over the hills and sink lower and lower until they dropped into a shallow valley that hid them from view. Here their crews retrieved these victims of final-glide miscalculations. One pilot narrowly missed this fate by flopping on a distant runway and barely rolling across the finish line. A few, by virtue of superior judgment (or the favors of nature) made their approach in such a way as to make an optimum trade of speed for altitude.



Red Wright at the timing gate.

On his final glide from 13,000 feet Moffat had not circled once; he could see no point in circling in weak lift when he would gain 600 ft/min during portions of his straight glide. Smith, pressing to make up for time lost, was storming toward the finish line at 150 mph when he hit a gust that threw him violently against the canopy. His head happened to be turned in such a way that he received a painful twist in the neck and bloodied his finger against something in the cockpit.

Of the 65 pilots who set out upon the task, 40 managed to complete the 202-mile course. When the final straggler had landed in the dusk, a knot of the returnees and their crews gathered outside the scorekeepers' office in the dimly lit hangar. A murmur of incredulity ran through the group as the day's speeds were posted. Moffat had made 71.1 mph and Smith 68.3 mph to win first and second respectively for the day.

"Seventy-one miles an hour!" said one spectator. "Would you believe it? That's within one mile of red line on my TG-2!"