

NORTH TO THE SAWTOOTH

Hannes Linke, flying his new Libelle eastward across the barren Nevada desert, stiffened when the call for assistance came over his radio. He recognized the voice of Graham Thomson, another Libelle pilot. During the morning hours of the fifth day he had been pushing steadily northeast along a course that roughly paralleled U.S. Highway 40. The terrain below him was forbidding, with immense areas of vast uninhabited emptiness, rocky north-south mountain ranges corrugating the high desert plateau, and the landing areas between a threat to man and ship. However, with experience, the pilots had become less apprehensive and had accepted the hazards as the price of the magnificent soaring challenges the region offered.

Two hundred and fifty miles out of Stead Linke had caught a wave behind a range that lay north of Wells, a small cluster of buildings on Highway 40. During exchanges between pilots and crews he had monitored a transmission which placed Graham Thomson ten miles ahead thermaling over the next range on the course. He raced ahead in an effort to overtake his competitor only to find that Thomson had already disappeared. But Linke was delighted when a thermal carried him into a new wave which he rode to 16,000 feet.

At this point he was about fifty miles from the Idaho border. It occurred to him that Thomson had turned north to follow Highway 93, a black ribbon two miles below that crossed Highway 40 in Wells.

Throughout the day the 63 contestants had been gradually overtaking the trailing edge of a cold front moving to the northeast. As they neared the Idaho-Utah border a massive cloud build-up seemed to block access to that region. To the north lay the inviting Sawtooth Range in Idaho—the area from which Paul Bikle had springboarded into Canada with an unofficial record flight during the Northwest Regionals of 1964. Obviously the canny Thomson was making a break for the north. Linke followed.

From his vantage point in height he caught sight of Thomson ahead.

"He was very low and was flying on the eastern slopes so that the range lay between him and the highway to the west. He found a small pass and was able to slip through. But then he seemed to sink rapidly and glided into what looked like a bowl with no exit. There were big boulders and no possible landing spots. It was a horrible place to be in."

It was at this time that Thomson called for assistance.

"I couldn't see above the rim of the bowl," Thomson said later, "and I became concerned for myself as well as my ship. Had I landed the pieces could only have been recovered by helicopter."

With the prospect of a long walk he questioned Linke, who was now circling high above, about the surroundings. A sort of gallows humor developed at this point. Both men are naturalized U.S. citizens, but Hannes, a German expatriate, was stymied by the Old School British of Thomson, an English emigrant, and was at a loss when Thomson repeatedly asked for the location of the nearest "ravnch."

Thomson managed to extricate himself from the maw of one threat only to find himself in another. He was able to circle out of the bowl, but immediately dropped into a steep rock-filled canyon on the other side.

"A trail twisted through the bottom of the canyon but big boulders were everywhere and a landing would have been impossible. I found myself at a point where I was planning to dissipate the kinetic energy of a crash landing by turning the wing tip into the ground at the last moment."

Thomson was spared these extreme measures when he succeeded in thermaling out of the trap and pressing on to the Idaho border. During Thomson's tribulations Linke had remained steadfastly above offering what help he could. His vigil cost him three thousand precious feet and twenty minutes of valuable time (and rewarded him with a spontaneous outburst of applause at the pilots' meeting the following day).



If any pilot at the 1966 Nationals was fortunate it was Graham Thomson. Graham's crew, his wife Helen, and Ray Proenneke, are two of the reasons he could count himself lucky. His escape from a rather tight bind was another.

Both pilots reached a small town inside the Nevada border a stone's throw from Idaho. Two casinos, a service station, motel and airstrip boasted the plausible name of Jackpot, Nevada. At this point the harsh face of the desert began to yield to an occasional cultivated field that broke the monotony of sage, sand, and rock. Ahead was the gradually increasing verdure that presaged Snake River Valley of Idaho. The benign countenance didn't deceive the pilots arriving on the valley edge. Heavy down-slope winds, abetted by a retreating front, swept through the valley washing the surface clear of thermals. In the distance, fields of summer cumulus floated temptingly over the Sawtooth Range, but the menacing Snake River and its wide valley presented another barrier, especially for the low pilot.

Linke had arrived with 8500 feet, but without Idaho sectionals, and he elected to terminate his flight. Thomson, much lower, ridge soared over a small hill near Jackpot waiting vainly for a thermal to break loose. Twice he sallied forth across into Idaho but was forced to return.

"I was too low and the ground wind had veered to the north. In addition, my state of mind was not exactly conducive to further struggle at the moment, so I gave up and landed at Jackpot an hour and a half after Hannes, at 7:15." They had flown 315 miles.