

ONE WAY TO YUCCA

LLOYD LICHER

With the Gold badge distance entrance requirement for the 1961 Nationals, and the Schweizer Best Flight Contest for that year as incentives, I had the opportunity to make my first serious attempt at a long soaring flight on Sunday, July 9, 1961. My best previous distance was 45 miles for Silver badge distance some years previously in Paul Bikle's 1-23.

Forecast for the Southern California desert area for this day was for no wind up to 10,000 feet and 10-15 knots from the south above that level. Thermals were expected to begin at 11:00 A.M. when the temperature reached 86 degrees, and to go to 16,000 feet. Maximum ground temperature was to be 105 degrees. Very encouraging. I chose to fly from El Mirage Field since conditions over long distances were more likely to be consistently good in that part of the Mojave Desert.

After spending much of the previous day with our partner in Schweizer 1-26 (N3801A), Pete Petersen, getting the ship and trailer in good shape for the attempt, we got a good night's sleep and rose in time to leave for El Mirage at 7:50 A.M. Pete was to be my one and only crew member.

Arriving at the airport at 10:15, we set up right away and by 11:15 were ready to go. It would have been a good day for the Twentynine Palms-and-return milk run but I wanted to go straight out for the Schweizer prize. Fearing the notorious "Baker Grade" on the Las Vegas-Dry Lake, Nevada, run, I chose as a goal the road junction at Yucca, Arizona, a small wide spot on Route 66 almost due east and near Needles, Calif. After declaring this in writing and turning on the SCSA Peravia barograph, I was ready for take-off at 11:30. Three minutes later I was airborne for a six-minute tow to 1700 feet above the 2865-foot-high field. I released two miles west of the airport where one of Briegleb's TG-3A's indicated about the only lift around. Weak it was, too, allowing a gain of only 800 feet and holding about level there for almost 20 minutes.

With noon approaching and no miles gone by I made a pass at some high ground south of the road and was rewarded with lift that reached 7300 feet asl. Anxious, I headed east past the airport in smooth air, sinking to 5800 feet a few miles beyond. I was about to head back for another tow when good lift was encountered which took me to 10,900 feet. Out on course I went, again in fairly smooth air with but a few bumps as I passed north of George AFB where a few F-104's were shooting landings and discouraged any attempt to work lift in that area. At 7000 feet over the hills

back of Victorville good lift was found under some small puffs of cu far above.

With no oxygen on board I decided to work lift no higher than 11,000 feet and so rolled out at that height and veered a bit north of course to keep Highway 66 within range. Over slightly higher ground the closest part of the flight was soon experienced when no more lift was found until I was down to 6100 feet, some 3000 feet above the ground. I passed Daggett, some 50 miles and two hours out at 1:30 with 8,000 feet. Not a very good average speed. While climbing at 9500 feet in the next thermal, I suddenly heard the roar of four engines in the cockpit with me and became rattled. The barogram shows it. A C-130 passed directly overhead at 10,000 feet. As I climbed past his altitude I could see that his flight path never wavered.

Out over the lower desert again (2000 feet) frequent lift was used to maintain at least 8000 feet for a good stretch and 10,000 feet was peaked again near Ludlow. Now, at 2:30, I was 80 miles and three hours out. A short period of 1100-fpm sink there was unnerving, but it was shortly followed by 500-fpm lift, again to 11,000 feet. Cruising speed was a conservative 55 to 60 mph, depending on the indicated sink.

The next 55 miles passed uneventfully, up and down, up and down. The temperature was comfortable at my working altitude and I felt no discomfort except for seat sores. I was even getting the hang of interpreting the readings of our 2000-fpm rate of climb, my only lift indicator, since, for some reason, the Cosim wasn't working (a cracked rubber tube was discovered later). There was a fair distribution of short-lived Cu's but whenever I headed for one I ran into good lift before I reached it. Same thing happened when I went for the only dust devil I noticed during the whole flight. Essex was reached at 4:00 PM, 135 miles and four and a half hours out. It was beginning to look as if I might make it but then I got down to 6800 feet and scratched for 10 minutes again before getting into steady, but slower, lift to 11,000 feet. From this point I could see the Needles airport near the Colorado River just beyond one more range of 3000-foot hills. Forsaking the road, I headed for the airport.

On the way good 400-fpm lift was encountered so I decided to hang onto it for a try at Gold badge altitude if it remained strong so I wouldn't be too high for too long. It weakened at 13,000 feet so I left because I wasn't, or imagined I wasn't, feeling too sharp, even though I needed only 1500 more feet to cinch it and the cu's above were obviously at 16,000 feet or more.

Heading out across the Colorado River fairly smooth air with occasional reduced sink was flown through. The Highway 66 bridge passed by marking 175 miles. With 10,000 feet in hand the distance was in the bag. Over the first hills in Arizona two more weaker thermals were worked as gravy and the goal was well in hand. Yucca was reached at 5:50 P.M. with 7000 feet, plenty to case the joint.

I was disappointed to see a large airport just east of town that was not marked on my two-year-old aeronautical chart. Otherwise I would have declared it for a goal. But it was too far away from the road junction I had declared for this flight to count so I took my time descending to pick out the best spot to land