

Know Your Soaring Centers

On a scenic plateau seven miles south of Erie, Pa., and 10 miles and two ridges back from Lake Erie, the Thermal G Ranch Gliderport is in its 10th year of business. It is a family operation headed by Larry Gehrlein, assisted by his wife, Grayce and some of their sons and daughters-in-law. The Thermal G was the first Schweizer dealership to be established and has been under constant improvement since its 1956 opening. It is a delightful place in which to spend a day, a weekend, or an entire vacation.

A pilots' lounge, an air museum, two ponds where guest-customers may fish free of charge, and a snack bar are among the attractions which supplement the soaring facilities at the gliderport. Dormitories on the site, and nearby motels are conveniences for overnight visitors.



Key personnel on the staff of the Thermal G Gliderport are, left to right, Larry Gehrlein, Grayce Gehrlein, Cindy Peres and her brother, Rodney Gehrlein.

The Thermal G field is approximately 3500 feet long and is located at the end of a 30-mile-long valley which extends from the gliderport to Lake Erie. Sailplane operations are conducted from a sod runway 700 ft. wide, except during early Spring when frost is frequent. At such times a gravel runway is utilized for take-offs and landings. On the field is a 50x60-ft. all-steel hangar.

With an elevation above sea level of 1400 ft. Thermal G is the highest point in the area. Thermal flying there is exceptionally good, with lift as strong as 600 to 700 fpm, about the same size and strength as thermals usually found at elevations of 2000 ft. The 30-mile valley extending from the field to Lake Erie in some spots is called "devil's backbone" because of the steep cliffs. West of the field there is a drop of 400 feet within one-half mile.

This terrain is responsible for frequent wave conditions which resemble those in England, according to Barney Wiggins, U.S. Weather Bureau Meteorologist, of Buffalo. While low, these waves are very exciting.

Cross-country soaring is extremely good from Thermal G. Distance is unlimited to the South and West, while to the East the Atlantic Ocean is Diamond distance. Among the best distance flights made

from Gehrlein's was one in which Larry, Sr. flew to Columbus, Ohio last August 19th.

When a stiff wind is blowing some ridge soaring is possible, but the ridge is not well defined.

The Gliderport is headquarters for Chapter 160 of the Experimental Aircraft Association, and for the M31 Astronomical Society, Inc. The former group is building a Fly Baby, while the star-gazers have built and set up a 12-in. telescope next to the hangar.

Winch tow, with equipment built by Larry Gehrlein, is used for flight instruction up to the solo stage. Then airplane tow is used. Pilots from near and far come to Thermal G to check out on winch tows. Two types of winch are available, the Air Force winch and a kit model for the home builder.

Sailplane rentals and free tie-downs are available, and also 80-octane gas for pilots flying in.

Way back in 1928 Larry built a homemade glider, but it was not until 1950 that he really got into motorless flight. With his wife, Grayce, and their young children (and the family dog), Larry flew his Stinson around the country. "The Flying Gehrleins" were publicized in a national magazine in the late Forties.

In 1950 the Gehrlein's met Paul Schweizer at Elmira, just as he was leaving to compete in the Nationals at Grand Prairie, Texas. Larry and his family flew to the meet, and later that summer Larry flew to Elmira and got checked out at the Schweizer Soaring School. The very next year he competed in the Nationals, flying his 2-22.

At the Thermal G, Grayce Gehrlein is bookkeeper, hostess, and all-around hard worker. Son Jay is in charge of field operations and tows. Rodney, youngest Gehrlein son, is official winch operator, while Ann (Jay's wife), and Ellen (Rodney's wife) are general helpers around the field.

The field officially opens May 1 each year and operations extend to December 1 or to arrival of the first big snow, whichever comes earlier.

A new set of T hangars for the sailplanes is planned and more dormitories are also under consideration for the not-too-distant future. The Air Museum, occupying the site formerly used as a riding stable (which has been discontinued), promises to be of growing interest. Already it contains items which have been acquired over the past five years and more are to be added. Admission is free to soaring pilots, their families and friends.

THERMAL G RANCH GLIDERPORT

Location: Seven miles south of Erie, Pa. Take Rte. 19 from Interstate 90. Gliderport is two miles off 19.

Services: Sales, rentals and repairs. Schweizer dealer. Season begins May 1, ends Dec. 1.

Contact: Larry or Grayce Gehrlein, Thermal G Ranch Gliderport, R.D. 4, Hamot Road, Waterford, Pa. 16441. Tele: Erie 866-1131.