

A concept of soaring

Earl
Menefee

from
Sailplane Builder



FOR YEARS I'VE WONDERED what it is that attracts so many of us to soaring. What is so compelling? Most of us who are addicted will admit that it is a lot of hard work. If that's true, why do we find the appeal of motorless flight so strong that at times we lose sight of, or perhaps even deny, our common sense duties and obligations? Surely, these questions have bothered others of us too. Also, it is very likely such questions have been asked by those affected by a loved one's soaring, but who themselves do not directly participate in this time-consuming activity.

Well, for once let's look at soaring and its associated activities directly in the eye, and question what we find there. This may not be the best course to follow, since occasionally it happens that when we chase a question down to its ultimate end, we discover an answer that is not exactly what we had hoped to find. But, let's take that look anyhow.

First there is without a doubt, the beauty of it. There are fantastic vistas of aerial scenes exposed to what would otherwise be unknowing eyes. Views heretofore enjoyed only by the wild soaring birds. Sights of such colour and magnificence passed too quickly in powered aircraft to be readily absorbed in our minds. The slowly sweeping masterpieces of nature are laid out before our view while man's scars gradually disappear to their proper insignificance. Even the beauty of the flight itself, a seemingly effortless, wheeling glissade across the sky, either to some pre-named goal or just for the love of it. Or, the beauty of the aircraft themselves which are, through a long process of evolution, gradually approaching the quintessence of aerodynamic perfection.

All this and more if we keep on searching. There is the release we feel (or escape, if

you will) from our daily and sometimes humdrum lives. This alone is enough to cause some people to continue their interest in high performance gliding.

Often when soaring in a gradually ascending and controlled gavotte of circling sailplanes, or perhaps coasting along the windward side of a cumulus street, we find ourselves near the top of the infinitely soft water vapor cotton balls beholding the elegance of these clouds and of the changing landscapes far below. We may then become aware of a sense of detachment from everyday concerns. It's a separation from worldly cares experienced in few other ways. The solitude and quiet can become so complete that signs of human existence (other than our own) have completely disappeared and we are left alone with our conscience and Healer in a manner seldom achieved in the life of the non-soaring man.

A hedonistic pursuit? Perhaps. For even all the other facets of the soaring game such as constructing, instructing, crewing, repairing, flying the towplane for some other lucky blighter, or even working with others on the same dreams and compulsions on soaring organizations of even national importance, can all bring a large measure of pleasure just due to association. The days, even years we may spend in building or lovingly repairing a sailplane, are all touched with a certain magical glow simply because we are continually aware, as we stumble on, that this too has something to do with soaring and, as such, that it is enough to make it all enjoyable. When the time does finally come for the first long anticipated flight, it unfaillingly seems to make such sustained effort worthwhile. Hundreds, even thousands of hours of groundwork fade away and are readily compensated for by the completion of a terrific hour or two of seemingly effortless flight.

Also, there's the challenge of it. We dare to emulate the birds — they that appear so free — though they too are confined by gravity, worldly cares and family obligations which may not be so apparent to us. But man has, for perhaps longer than recorded history, envied their apparent escape and exultation. We too can rejoice in a soaring flight well done. The adventure of it is sometimes fraught with a dash of danger that makes the uninitiated question our actions with a jaundiced eye. Our answer to their concern is, of course, that we do it for the same reason that man has always taken up his challenges. Soaring stirs his heart. For its very essence is beauty, and in this he glories and finds his love of it.

In theatre, it is the accolades and the applause that create in some actors a continual need of recognition, while to others in the same craft it is the thrill of knowing that they have achieved a near perfect performance. To the soaring pilot who has savoured the magnificence of a glorious flight without power, little else will suffice until he too has tasted it again and again.

Finally, in time, the realization comes that perhaps inexorably advancing age, or maybe ones native ability, or even personal financial resources do have their limits after all, and he (or she) recognizes that one can taste only so much of the wine before the bouquet slowly begins to fade. So, he then may recall the beauty he has enjoyed due to his soaring activities, the pleasure of just being associated with motorless flight, and with the people with the same dreams and flight aspirations.

He may at that time begin to settle back to earth, knowing he has shared in one of the most intriguing and beautiful of sports in his allotted time on this earth. ❖