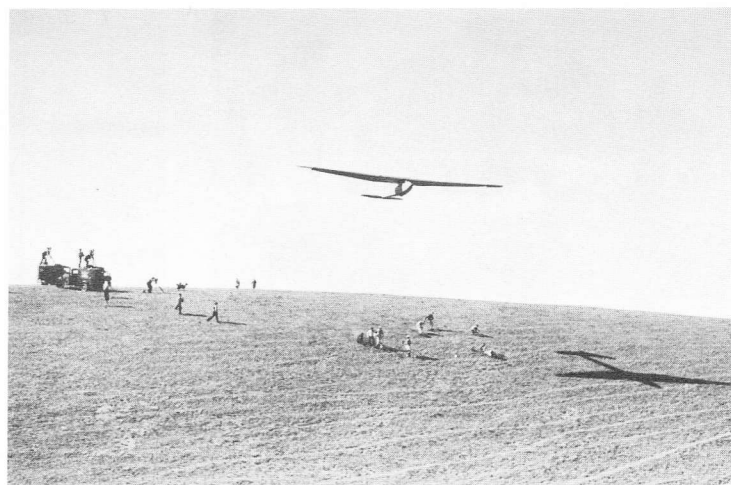




FLYING THE ALBATROSS WITH LINDBERGH

By Bob Meakin

Three years after flying alone across the Atlantic, Charles Lindbergh glided above Southern California in a plane which flew by no other engine but the wind



It was Saturday morning, January 25, 1930. A small monoplane sped down the runway at San Diego's Lindbergh Field and climbed steeply into the sky. At the controls was Charles Lindbergh; his companion, Hawley Bowlus, was America's leading sailplane designer, builder and pilot.

Having recently completed a number of successful soaring flights at San Diego's Point Loma, the two friends were off on a mystery flight — made in secrecy to avoid publicity — searching for a suitable location somewhere in the mountains of Southern California from which to expand their gliding activities.

Three years earlier, in 1927, during the design and construction of Lindbergh's transatlantic airplane, *Spirit of St. Louis*, the flyers had worked together closely. At that time Bowlus was shop foreman at the Ryan-Mahoney plant in San Diego, where the famous monoplane was built.

Lindbergh steered the red and white Lockheed Vega north into the more arid Antelope Valley, just across the mountains northeast of Los Angeles, then westward toward the main Los Angeles-to-Bakersfield highway through the Tehachapis. Soon the topography became more interesting to the flyers — rugged terrain with deep valleys surrounded by tall mountains. Lindbergh pushed the plane's nose down, rolled into a descending turn and circled low over the cluster of unusually smooth, rounded, almost treeless mountaintops rising high above the small communities of Lebec and Gorman.

Since there was no place to safely land, the survey was continued from the air. Both flyers agreed that the area would fill the bill as an experimental soaring site: grassy hilltop knolls for launching and landing, unobstructed flying space in three directions, passable access roads, sheltered and secluded campsites nestled in the oak-lined arroyos, groceries and supplies available in town and a government weather station located at Lebec.

On the return flight to San Diego plans were made to bring a sailplane to the mountains for a few days of experimentation, sport and relaxation. Both flyers, long accustomed to a wide spectrum of flying weather — from the fury of great storms to the pleasant smoothness of fair skies — were looking forward to sampling the early spring weather of the Tehachapis. Motorless flight was still a primitive science, particularly in America; and it loomed as an aeronautic challenge even to Charles Lindbergh. So right then and there it was decided to begin the Lebec adventure the following weekend. During the discussion, Bowlus mentioned that a group of flying enthusiasts in Bakersfield had recently acquired one of his big, new Albatross sailplanes. "Invite them to come along," Lindbergh replied.

At 5:30 Saturday afternoon, February 1, 1930, Hawley Bowlus and public relations manager Phil De Mandel, pilots Jack Barstow, Bill Van Dusen, Bud Perl and Forrest Hieatt, and official expedi-

tion photographer Howard Joep drove north out of San Diego headed for the Tehachapis. A large folded-wing Albatross, on its specially constructed trailer, was hitched behind Bowlus' Studebaker sedan. The other automobiles, loaded with equipment and pulling the tent-trailer, rolled along behind. (Another glider came later.)

At about 8:30 that evening the flyers drove into the quiet little town of San Fernando. So far there had been no sign of the press but, as an extra precaution, Bowlus decided to park the trailers at the nearby home of friends and then, according to plan, rendezvous with Lindbergh at a local cafe. Lindbergh had arrived in town earlier that evening, driving a new air-cooled Franklin sedan, and he joined the others for sandwiches and coffee.

The first time any of the gliders realized that the newsmen had them covered was when they trooped out of the cafe. The sight of several carloads of reporters, photographers and Movietone News crews sitting there cat-and-mousing their every move was quite a jolt. The names Charles Augustus Lindbergh was still a very powerful publicity magnet in 1930, three years after the thrilling New York-to-Paris solo flight. The public's admiration and interest in this man's every action was unrelenting and universal.

Monday, February 3, 1930, dawned clear and bright in the Tehachapis. A week of thrills, companionship, humor, successes and some disappointments was beginning for the enthusiastic flyers who had pitched camp the day before.

Over a fire a breakfast of flapjacks, fried eggs, bacon and coffee was prepared. After mixing the batter himself, Charlie, as Lindbergh preferred to be called in camp, cooked a batch of flapjacks and some bacon, and ate heartily.

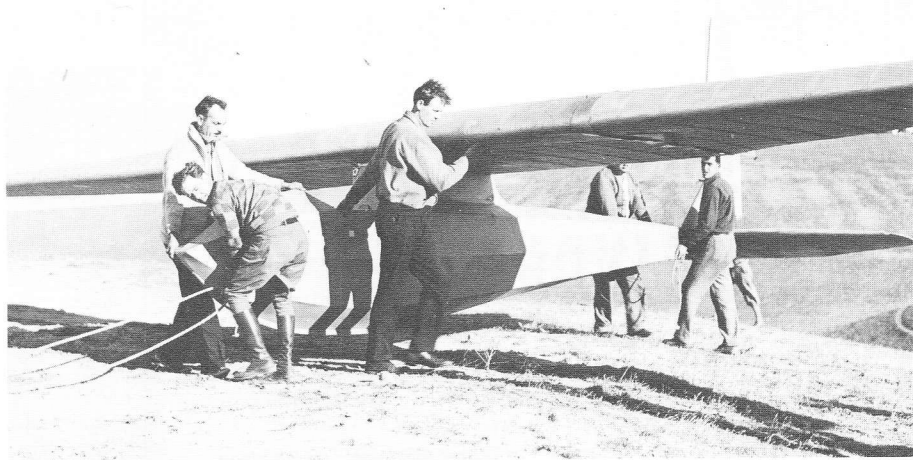
With breakfast over, the time had come to do some soaring. As this was the first time any of the pilots had attempted flying off the top of a high mountain, and with so much still to be learned, it was decided to fly only one sailplane that day. Excitement mounted as the Albatross was towed slowly into takeoff position. A Studebaker convertible, connected to the sailplane's nose-hook by a short rope, did the pulling; a crewman walked along at each wing tip, balancing the aircraft on its single landing skid. Wheels were not required.

A slingshot launching technique was to be used. An elastic rope, called a shock cord, was laid out on the ground in a V — fanned out downslope ahead of the sailplane — with its apex at the ship's nose. Ten determined onlookers were recruited to generate the energy required for stretching the 150-foot shock cord just prior to launch. The musclemen, spaced evenly out along each leg of the V, picked up the shock cord and waited for the signal to run.

Charlie and Hawley tossed a coin for the first flight, and Bowlus won. After a final inspection, he seated himself in the narrow



A camp scene. Charles Lindbergh sitting on steps. Anne wearing white head band . . . While Phil De Mandel and Bill Van Dusen attached the shockcord, Lindbergh tossed a coin for the flight. He won.



cockpit, fastened the safety belt, tested the controls, then shouted, "Ready for takeoff!" The launching crew lunged ahead in unison with all their might. Each downhill stride stretched the elastic rope more and more.

Suddenly the Albatross shot ahead a few feet, as force overcame deadweight, and was catapulted into the air. It sailed over the heads of the spent launch crew, leveled off, then flew away from the crest as beautifully as any bird. The Albatross handled well and, following a couple of gentle turns, the pilot brought her right back in for a smooth landing. Taking the next flight as well, Hawley was forced to make a rather hot landing after dodging some power lines running through the area, dragging a wing tip in the dirt. An inspection revealed no damage.

Lindbergh tossed a coin with Jack Barstow, chief instructor at the Bowlus school, for the next flight. Charlie won this time. Climbing into the cockpit, he got set, then shouted, "All right. Ready anytime. One — two — three — go!" Again the Albatross accelerated rapidly and lifted some forty feet into the air. At just the proper instant the shock cord slipped off an eagle-beak hook under the nose and the ship gained a few additional feet of altitude from its own momentum. For several moments everything appeared normal. Suddenly, at an altitude of about 300 feet, something tore loose at the left wing tip. As the Albatross veered to the left, Lindbergh's head jerked from side to side as he looked around in an effort to determine what was happening.

"There goes an aileron!" Bowlus shouted.

Charlie's friends groaned and yelled warnings, which he could not hear at the moment. The next instant the left aileron (a control surface used for leveling the wings) blew completely off and fluttered toward the ground.

"He's giving it hard *opposite* aileron!" someone else yelled.

Instead of attempting an immediate landing, the experienced pilot took his time, realizing that a sudden turn back toward the takeoff area could mean loss of control and a crash.

The direction of flight did not falter now. Gliding on down through an arroyo, Charlie hedgehopped over another ridge, toward the valley, and was gone.

Momentarily stunned by it all, those on the ground sprang into action. Automobile rescue parties sped downhill, threading their way along random, roadless paths in the general direction taken by the Albatross.

The leaders of the rescue pack, pilots Van Dusen and Perl, bumped and careened down the mountainside. Attempting to find some usable route over the crisscrossed livestock trails and oak-filled arroyos tested their persistence and endurance, but they roared on.

Then a more formidable obstacle loomed up — a barbed wire fence. Van Dusen leaped from the car, jumped the fence and ran on, shouting back instructions to cut the wire and drive on through!

Other cars raced up. While Perl and a couple of volunteers struggled with the wire, Van Dusen had reached a vantage point and was able to catch the first glimpse of the downed Albatross. The sailplane was spread out on the hillside some distance below.

Back up the mountain, the newsmen had reached the point where they too could see the grounded Albatross. They were shocked! Parts of the sailplane were indeed scattered around on the ground, at odd angles. Lindbergh, the press immediately concluded, had crashed! The news was relayed back up the mountain, and a telephone stampede began.

Bowlus, Van Dusen and Perl arrived at the landing site first. Some sailplane parts were lying about, but it had been evident to their experienced eyes that there was no cause for alarm. Charlie stood there uninjured and enjoying a hearty laugh.

By this time the first reporters were pulling up, displaying visible relief at finding Lindbergh uninjured and far less excited than his associates. "My land," he greeted them, "this thing controls almost as well with one aileron as it does with both of them."

Subsequent news reports stated: "Lindbergh escaped unhurt in a landing crackup two miles from Sandbergh, according to a report brought in by runner this afternoon." The final editions would state: "Lindbergh succeeded in landing the sailplane safely without further damage." The record had been set straight.

Back at camp, repairs were begun. The broken aileron had been retrieved, and a close examination revealed that it could be repaired.

As the gliding gang stood around a roaring fire, relaxing and letting the feel of another beautiful night in the mountains soak in, Lindbergh and Bowlus agreed upon when the flying would be resumed. Then, as he would do each night during the coming week, Charlie said goodnight and began his return trip to Los Angeles where he and his wife Anne were guests of Jack Maddux, founder of Maddux Airlines.

Some time before noon on Wednesday, the Lindberghs, accompanied by Helen Maddux and six-year-old Jack Maddux, Jr., drove to Lebec. While the two women and the boy made themselves comfortable in camp, Charlie pitched right in helping on the aileron repair job.

Lindbergh elected to make the test flight. The shock cord was laid out and the launch crew took their positions. During these preliminaries the guests stood by watching, clustered to one side out of the way. On an opposite knoll, the Movietone trucks and reporters were lined up. No one dared miss any of the action.

Charlie shouted that he was ready to go. From the ground, as the big Albatross shot skyward, everything about the takeoff looked smooth and effortless.

In the cockpit, the pilot simultaneously saw, felt and heard a series of the most pleasant sensations. Bareheaded and without goggles or windshield, Lindbergh maintained perfect control by attuning his responses to the sounds of the wind whistling past the cockpit, and also by adjusting the position of the plane's nose against the distant landscape. With no instruments of any kind, as was the case with most motorless aircraft in those days, Charlie was flying by the seat of the pants — and loving it.

The Albatross soared farther out away from the mountains at about forty-five miles an hour. Strikingly beautiful in flight, and a tribute to the designing skills of Hawley Bowlus, the sailplane's delicately shaped wings had the graceful lines of those of a soaring gull. Backlighting by the bright sunlight, each wing and tail rib was visible through the almost transparent fabric covering. Charlie soon turned left and flew parallel to a ridge for a ways, then wheeled out toward the valley and reversed course.

The next thing Lindbergh knew, the Albatross began losing altitude, which meant he'd flown into a downdraft or that the wind had died down. Unfortunately, it proved to be the latter, so a forced landing was made. The plane touched down safely on a knoll about a mile away, some 500 feet below the takeoff point.

It was not quite daylight on Thursday when Lindbergh returned to camp. Never one to pass up an opportunity to play a practical joke — a devilish Lindbergh talent — the flyer switched off the Franklin's engine and headlights and coasted noiselessly downhill into camp, stopping within inches of the tent-trailer. Then he cut loose with both air horns! The sleeping beauties inside leaped from their beds, wide awake and running! Lindbergh remained safe behind raised up windows and locked doors, smiling at the positive reactions to his early morning overture.

The morning air remained frustratingly calm. For awhile the pilots just stood around, gazing out over the vast panorama of the Tehachapis. Finally, as the windless day wore on, Lindbergh decided to make the first flight, despite the lack of the usual ridge-soaring breeze. At 4:40 P.M. he strapped himself into the cockpit and was catapulted northward. After leveling off and establishing a steady glide, he turned right and flew eastward on silent wings. Finding no lift in that direction, he again swung northward, gliding down Bear Canyon and out over the valley floor toward Castiac Lake. By then the sailplane had lost about half its takeoff altitude; Lindbergh already had an eye on an open field off to the left, near Lebec, in preparation for the inevitable landing.

The next instant the Albatross flew into a moderate late afternoon updraft which was exactly what the pilots had come to the Tehachapis to find, and which had proven so elusive until now.

With a whoop, Lindbergh banked smoothly into a turn and patiently began maneuvering the sixty-two-foot wing into the thermal's center of lift. Around and around the sailplane wheeled, in lazy, graceful, upward spirals, continuing its soaring flight above the lake shore, probing for an indication of the invisible thermal's shape. After some twenty minutes of the most stimulating flight, the updraft mushroomed out at the top and lost its lift. Turning westward, the pilot glided reluctantly toward Lebec and landed on what turned out to be a flat, dry, bean field.

Charlie was jubilant. Back in camp he excitedly related the details of his pioneering flight — the best yet at Lebec — and received a round of compliments. Here was a first stolid step toward getting into competition with the European soaring pilots. Although the landing point proved to be only five miles from takeoff, the Albatross had covered some fifteen wandering air miles during the flight. So enthusiastic was Lindbergh that he ordered a new Albatross of his own from Bowlus right on the spot. "Flying a sailplane is about as good a sport as there is in the world," said Lindbergh.

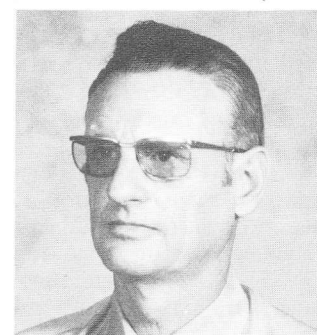
On Friday Charlie pulled into camp a little later than usual. His companions were already out of bed, full of breakfast and moving about, making themselves less vulnerable to another broadside of Lindbergh's practical jokes. At about 3:30 Lindbergh took off into a light breeze, on a final flight, gliding downhill, probing each arroyo for lift, putting known methods into practice, experimenting with new techniques.

The mountain holiday was drawing to a close. In a gesture of appreciation to his companions for their days of waiting for the wind, running shock cords, handling sailplanes, washing dishes and otherwise making the Lebec expedition possible, Charlie invited them all to a late dinner down at Sandberg's Lodge.

In his final statement to the press, Lindbergh said, "Further soaring will probably be done in the San Diego area. We plan to carry on at Point Loma, due to the steadier winds necessary for endurance soaring. But we will still further explore California for promising soaring sites of the future."

The Lindberghs departed for home on Easter Sunday, April 20, 1930, flying their gleaming new orange-and-black Sirius and setting a transcontinental speed record — Glendale, California, to Long Island, New York, in 14:23 hours.

Appreciation is extended to Westways Magazine for permission to make use of material featured March 1974.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bob Meakin's interest in aviation began about the time of Lindbergh's New York-to-Paris flight. Born and raised in the West, Bob's travels provided opportunity to become familiar with many famous aviation centers — a situation leading to life-long interest in aviation history. During thirty eight years in aviation, including duty as a naval aviator and airline pilot, Bob has logged some 15 thousand flying hours — now instructs and tows sailplanes and aerial banners. Researching and writing aviation historical articles is another of his favorite pastimes. An early A.A.H.S. member, Bob authored a special book titled "50th Anniversary of Naval Aviation — 1911 to 1961" for Douglas Aircraft Company.