

Mountaineering by air

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MOUNTAINEERING BY AIR.

(The following article is reprinted from the August issue of the "Aeroplane" by courtesy of the Editor.)

A Soaring Research Expedition has recently been concluded in the Swiss Alps whose results provide food for interesting thought.

During the week July 22nd-28th, four Swiss sailplanes and their pilots were based at Zermatt, and in the course of 23 flights did 42½ hours of most unusual flying. The sailplanes were catapulted daily from a smooth shoulder of the Riffelberg, 8,600 ft. above sea-level, and had available as landing place a meadow 3,300 ft. lower beside the village of Zermatt. This difference in altitude provided about 20 mins. of flying time in which to search the valley for upcurrents which, if found, might provide altitude for extended tours at 15,000 ft. or so among the surrounding snow-clad peaks. An unofficially declared goal was to soar to the summit of the Matterhorn.

The first two days provided little more than protracted descents. On the third day, Herr Alwin Kuhn climbed to 13,000 ft. in the sailplane Moswey III, and, after exploring various ridges, reached the south face of the Matterhorn. He was unable to climb this, but flew completely round the mountain before returning to Zermatt. This took him through Italian territory, but he says he noticed no flak coming up from the frontier stations. Herr Karl Haberstich, in his S-18, also climbed high and was able to cross the Gornergrat ridge with 20 ft. to spare.

Similar flights of increasing scope followed during the remaining days. Kuhn crossed the Dom, Switzerland's second highest mountain, and encircled the Matterhorn a second time, but was again unable to reach its elusive summit. Haberstich explored Monte Rosa. Herr Max Schachenmann, in another S-18, made a fine flight across the Bernese Oberland, via the Gemmi Pass, and landed 60 miles away at Thun. Herr Fritz Glur, after one of his flights in the S-22, landed at Brig. The greatest height of the expedition was achieved by Kuhn, who climbed in a local thunderstorm to 18,200 ft.

Usually the best upcurrents were found close to the mountain sides. When these are steep an almost imperceptible wind may have sufficient vertical component to support a sailplane. Thermal effects, however, tended to outweigh those of the wind, and after mid-day the most profitable technique appeared to be to fly irrespective of wind direction to whichever slope was receiving the most sunshine, and, on encountering lift, to circle as close to the mountain side as safety permitted. The patient progress of a sailplane pilot up the slope of his choosing is then remarkably similar to that of a rock climber. Only after passing the snowline do the thermals appear to rise with the independent existence they possess over flat country.


This expedition has undoubtedly provided useful information for the gliding fraternity and, perhaps, for meteorologists. But a surmise of wider interest is that aeronautics in the year 1946 may have presented a powerful new weapon to the mountaineer. Your correspondent, who spent two unforgettable days after the end of the expedition climbing the Matterhorn on foot, considers that a new weapon is much to be desired. Man's invention of the ski has enabled him to use his

wits instead of his muscles on the downhill part of certain mountain climbs, so that in winter his daily touring range is doubled. Now it seems that, by shaping 300 lb. of wood into the form of a sailplane, he can use his wits for the uphill climb, Summer or Winter.

After landing, the sailplanes were dismantled and returned to the starting point on the Gornergrat rack railway, the cost of which transport was borne by the Zermatt municipality. In view of the success of the expedition, the good people of this village now propose to improve the launching and landing facilities and to invite foreign pilots to an international soaring meeting there in 1947. They are particularly keen to have British participation. The name of Edward Whymper, the conqueror of the Matterhorn on foot, remains alive and honoured in Zermatt after 80 years, and it is certain that a party of his compatriots arriving there with sailplanes next Summer would receive an enthusiastic welcome.

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