

# Taking Off On Nothing In Nothing

by Lynne Belluscio

In September 1929, Don Woodward bought a Alfara glider for the Woodward Airport. Russ Holderman described it as “taking off on nothing, in nothing.” It had been a while since Russ had flown without the roar of a motor in his ears. His first experience had been in 1911 in the Bronx, dangling beneath a Chanute double-wing hang glider that he had built. Under the guise of darkness, at midnight at a ball field at Crotona Ball Park in the Bronx, Russ attempted his first flight. With two friends pulling him forward, he jumped off an embankment ... and crashed. Undaunted, he attempted a second flight with another glider a few months later on Staten Island.

After a successful flight at 20 feet, he encouraged his friends to give him an extra long run, “and before I knew it I was gliding at 40 foot altitude and was so startled that I might as well have been leveling off at 1,000 feet. Instinct played me dirty this time. I pushed my body forward. Immediately the glider pointed earthward. Carrying me helpless under its wing, it dropped like a wounded duck. I tried to level it off. It was far too late. Mother earth came to meet me and we collided.” Holderman built another glider, patterned after a Wright design, but he never flew it. The lure of motorized flight took him in another direction.

When the Alfara glider showed up at the Woodward Airport, it posed a challenge. The Alfara glider was towed by an automobile. On the first day Russ made four trips above the airport. Unlike his earlier experience, he had a rudder control and stick. Every Sunday, there were glider demonstrations at the airport. Russ wanted to go higher, so they used faster cars and longer tow cables. One Sunday with a 1,100 foot cable, Holderman reached 700 feet, but then things went wrong – fast. The aileron and rudder failed to respond in a sharp turn and the glider fell into a half spin and half spiral. He was out of control but



luckily had enough altitude and speed, that when he pushed the stick forward in desperation he was able to come out of the fatal dive and bring the glider back to earth. He later wrote, “From then on I flew the Alfara glider with caution and respect.”

Holderman hired William Hawley Bowlus the famous glider pilot from California to head the glider school. In the midst of the Depression, people were more inclined to sign up for glider lessons.

In October 1930, the airport staged the first glider meet in New York State. Bowlus and Holderman enticed other notable glider pilots, Jack O'Mara and Wallace Franklin. Wolf Hirth, the noted German pilot arrived in LeRoy for the meet, bringing two gliders with him. He declared that the DW Airport was “A wonderful place and surprising for the size of LeRoy, better than many airports in Europe.” Duke Artran came to the meet and brought a Franklin Glider, which Russ described as more of a plane than the Alfara. Duke stayed on a few days after the meet and Russ had the chance

to try the new glider.

On May 10, 1931, Woodward purchased what was to be the first of four Franklins. Four days after the Franklin arrived, Russ received permission by the Department of Commerce to make an airplane tow. Vic Evans piloted a Fleet and towed Russ up to 3,000 feet. Evans was towing at 89 mph when Russ cut the cable loose. “I seemed to be hanging motionless in space. No spitting, roaring motor blasted in on my hearing. All was quiet and serene. The sturdy little sailplane was a silent servant, quick to respond to the controls, willing at the slightest touch to dive, turn and climb. I brought it down gradually in graceful circles and flew over the airport in wide arcs, finally getting it down on its single central wheel.”

After attending a glider meet in Elmira, William Bowlus suggested that they try a three-glider tow. Vic Evans piloted the tow plane and Russ wrote that it was probably the first three-glider tow in V formation ever flown in America. Russ also set some other records. On one flight, when he cut loose at 6,500 feet, he put the glider into

loops immediately and completed 37 before landing.

In the meantime, Russ's wife joined the ranks as a glider pilot. At Elmira, she broke her previous record of 4 hours and 31 minutes of sustained flight, by staying aloft for 5 hours and 17 minutes. Her hands were so blistered and her body so bruised, that it took three days to recover.

The Franklin gliders had served them well, but Russ negotiated with Dick DuPont for a German Gopengen sailplane. It was the last word in soaring. Russ's wife was so adept with the new plane, that she was the first woman in the country to receive a license to make an airplane tow. Soon Russ was so busy, and had taken the job for Frank Gannett that he had to give up gliding, but it is pretty obvious from his memoirs published last year in *“From Kittyhawk to the Moon”* that his love of gliding was one of his true passions. He wrote, “Some day I mean to have one (Gopengen glider) again. It was the greatest ship I have ever owned and gave me more fun than any other.”