

Diamont Days

Back in the Sixties flying the latest and--one hoped--the best equipment was very much a catch-as-catch-can affair, unless one had the sort of money that bought Sisus, hardly the case for a \$7000 a year English teacher. You used any leads that were available and often ended up flying some pretty experimental ships.

In the case of the Diamont I had a last minute offer to fly the prototype, newly minted by an enormous Swiss engineering firm which planned to break into fiberglass high performance sailplanes with no previous aeronautical experience of any kind. Beggars can't be choosers, and it was that or my old wooden Austria, sooooo . . .

The ship arrived via air freight ten days before the Nationals were to begin in Marfa--2000 miles away. After getting it licenced--always an anxiety-fraught process-- we took it to Wurtsboro and promptly discovered problem #1. It wouldn't go together. Twenty experienced clubmates working for four hours in 90 degree heat never even got close. It became quite obvious that the ship had never been together, let alone flown. The next day was spent laboriously grinding down the wing pins by hand until they would fit in the sockets. Late that muggy, hazy afternoon we finally got assembled and made the first flight. The ship flew fine, but I soon discovered that the only thing I could see forward was the reflection of my white sneakers in the canopy. Landing proved interesting when it appeared that the lower skirt of the dive brakes blew back across the wing at 60 mph, jamming them full open until speed was reduced to just over stall, hard runway rapidly approaching.

No more flights were possible before the long haul out to Texas, but once there we discovered that plenty of problems remained. Practically none of the instruments worked properly, especially the vital total energy. It was days of trial and error, and well into the contest, before we discovered that the beautifully engineered Swiss hose disconnect fitting leaked like a sieve. Much more arresting was the flutter. At speeds around 120 mph--very common in Texas flying--the slightest turbulence would trigger violent flutter, the instruments turning to as unreadable blur. The first time broke the end off the flap control rod. The next time it was the other end. These being beefed up, the third occurrence rattled the whole flap quadrant off the side of the cockpit. On each occasion I seriously considered getting out since a friend of mine, the designer of the BS-1 had been killed when his whole ship fluttered apart. Finally I opted to set a very low VNE, not exactly ideal for Texas contest flying.

Meanwhile the water ballast bags had still not arrived from the factory, leaving me with great climb but not much penetration. Finally, on Day four, the bags arrived, air express. With pilots' meeting coming up, I told my long-suffering crew to install them, fill them up, and time the dump. I got back to find a very large puddle on the hangar floor and my crew convulsed with laughter. When I asked for the dump time Ralph asked "With or without the dump valve open?" It turned out to be eight minutes one way, ten the other. We finally got the bags cobbled together for the last couple of days of the contest, and I finally managed to squeeze out a fairly respectable fourth overall, just enough to squeek me onto the US Team for the following year.

Meantime I was desperate to sell the ship as I needed a Standard Class for the upcoming Worlds. A Californian banker was interested but dubious about the reclining cockpit. He asked friend and glider pilot Sylvia Colton to try it on for size, agreeing to buy if she approved. The Great Fitting occurred at the end of a hot and sweaty afternoon. Sylvia, a large and well upholstered lady, slipped in rather snugly but was comfortable, trying this and that control, chatting away for some minutes. Getting out time rolled around--and nothing happened. Sylvia was airlocked in, totally immoveable. Helping hands were politely extended. Nothing. More hands. More nothing. Finally, with about ten people heaving on various portions of Sylvia--beet red, and not just from exertion--there was a loud pop and out she came. And that was the last we heard of that sale.

Finally, in September with financial desperation setting in, we had a call from a chap in Ohio. He'd fallen in love with pictures of the ship, he had to have it. He would pick it up in three days. Whew! But the Diamont wasn't through with us/ The very next morning we received a telegram from the factory. ALL DIAMONTS GROUNDED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. DANGEROUS FLUTTER DISCOVERED. How tempting to pretend we'd never received the wire! Very reluctantly we called Ohio, and happy day, Caloo Callay, he was so desperate for the ship that he didn't care! We later learned that it took the factory rep some months to install 50 lbs or so of lead weights on the leading edge of the flaps. And the ship flew happily ever after . . .