

Albert E. Hastings: America's First National Glider Champion

by Gary Fogel

Introduction

The period of 1929-1931 was particularly important to the growth of soaring in the United States. Inspired by the success of Lindbergh's Atlantic crossing, yet mired in the depths of the Great Depression, young aviators struggled to find their way to the sky without the added expense of motors. Like-minded individuals formed local clubs with associated glider meets. Others seized the moment to convert these local experiences into a national movement, a movement that helped grow the sport prior to World War II. Many of these heroes of soaring are well known; Ralph Barnaby, Lewin Barringer, Hawley Bowlus, Roswell Franklin, Warren Eaton, etc. Appropriately, many of these individuals have been recognized by the Soaring Society of America with induction into the United States Soaring Hall of Fame. However, one pilot in particular, Al Hastings, remains an enigma. Inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1973 largely for his skill as the first (and second) National Glider Champion in 1930 and 1931 respectively, his life remains mysterious. Even his biography associated with the Hall of Fame makes note of this:

"Sadly, as is so often true, we know very little about this member of the Soaring Hall of Fame. We tend to think of our own ambitions and successes, certainly worthwhile. We love the sport; we want to do our best. However, our successes and accomplishments rest on the shoulders of those who came before us. Consider for a moment Al Hastings. Who was he? What did he accomplish? What do these early pioneers mean to us? Why should we care? We should care because the sport we love today exists due to the triumphs and accomplishments of those who came before us. Al Hastings is one such person." (1)



Al Hastings

It is hoped that this biography helps to clarify Hastings' importance to the history of soaring in the United States.

Early beginnings

Albert Eurotas "Al" Hastings was born March 30, 1902 at Colorado Springs, Colorado, to Frederick Reed Hastings and Mary C. (Bachelier) Hastings. One of three sons, Albert was named after his paternal grandfather, Reverend Albert Eurotas Hastings of Detroit, who had died in 1880. Sadly, Al's father, Frederick died on February 3, 1914 when Al was only 11. For a time he continued to live with his mother, Mary, in Colorado Springs. Al later graduated from the Kemper Military School in Boonville, Missouri.(2) The Kemper Military School was established in 1844 and closed in 2002, and for a time in the late 1890s and early 1900s advertised itself as the "West Point of the West." Will Rogers was to become its most famous alumnus. After high school, Al enrolled at the University of Iowa at Iowa City, Iowa, to study art as a member of Beta Theta Pi. While in Iowa, Al took his first flight in a plane.(3) It was also in Iowa where he met Miss Mildred E. Wyland of Walnut, Iowa.(4) Al and Mildred soon



Kemper Military School

married at her parents' home in Lincoln, Nebraska, in December 1922.(5,6) For a time they both attended the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. Al completed his second year of college but then, for unknown reasons, they moved to Washington State, the first of many moves for the couple. Upon arriving in Washington in 1925, Albert started flying airplanes near their home in Longview, Washington.(7) Al bought a powered aircraft, although the plane was demolished not long after by Harry L. Smith who had borrowed the plane. Entering a spin that became unrecoverable, Smith survived but the plane did not.(8)

Al and Mildred started a family with the arrival of their son, Frederick Reed Hastings (Al's father's namesake), on September 20, 1926. There isn't much known about Al's time in Washington between 1926 and 1928. It is assumed that he still worked around powered aircraft. By 1928 the family had moved once again to Oakland, California, where Al took the position of Field Manager for Golden State Aircraft Company at the Oakland Airport.(9) His daughter, Shirley Barbara Hastings, was born May 2, 1928 at nearby Alameda. A month later, Al became a dealer for Alexander Eaglerock in northern California.(10) With his career in aviation finally on the rise, Hastings established the Sierra Aircraft Company at Marysville, California near Yuba City for \$25,000 and served as its President.(11) Formation of the company was co-shared with Don M. Cornell (sales manager) and Jim Reid (pilot). It should be noted that there is no known relationship between Al Hastings and Charles Cook Hastings, the operator of a popular line of general stores during the Gold Rush. Charles Cook Hastings established Hastings Ranch in Pasadena in the 1920s, complete with its own airport (known as "Sierra Airdrome" or "Hastings Airport"), also complete with his own "Sierra Aircraft Company."(12) The oddity of two Hastings both in California operating aviation companies at the same time with the same company name is too unusual not to mention, but a connection has yet to be confirmed.

Al Hastings' Sierra Aircraft Company in northern California offered regional transport from Marysville to other cities in northern California. In order to help publicize the company, he flew from Marysville to Vallejo in an Alexander Eaglerock to attend the opening of the famous Carquinez Bridge.(13,14) Business was good and the office in Marysville was expanded in mid-July at Cheim Airport just to the northeast of town.(15-17) Sierra Aircraft Company also operated from a private field about two miles out of Chico, California.(18) The Chico Airport was dedicated on September 30, 1928 and the Sierra Aircraft Company staged the main celebration including a broad assortment of planes and an address by Army Lieutenant Joseph R. Hargrove. As the event's main organizer, Hastings also addressed the crowd of 6,000 people.(19) In March, 1928 Hastings visited Paradise, California, in an attempt to convince the Paradise Progressive Association of the benefits of having their own local airport (likely with service by Sierra Aircraft Company).(20)

In the spring of 1929, the Hastings family moved yet again, this time to San Diego, California. There Hastings enrolled as a student at Airtech, a popular flight school at Lindbergh Field. It was likely that he focused on an advanced aircraft training course offered at Airtech, including night flying towards his transport pilot's certificate. However, upon arrival to Airtech, Hastings was thrust not only into a training program but into the arrangement of a midsummer social for Airtech personnel at the Thursday Club near Sunset Cliffs on July 20, 1929.(21) Hastings also became team manager for Airtech's "indoor baseball" team and in early August, the Airtech team beat the rival Ryan Aircraft team 10-6 to decide the "Civilian Air Championship of San Diego." The family residence at 3785 Dana Place was within walking distance of Lindbergh Field.

Students at Airtech were exposed to many facets of aviation and taught by very experienced instructors. His small class of five students included Douglas Corrigan, who earned his transport license in October 1929 and would later earn the title "Wrong Way" Corrigan, as a result of his "unintentional" flight from New York to Ireland in 1938.(22) One of the Airtech instructors was William Hawley Bowlus, who was also in the process of flight testing his #16 sailplane, the Bowlus SP-1 at Lindbergh Field. Bowlus's interest in gliding was infectious. In September, 1929, Bowlus easily took first place honors at the Pacific Coast Glider Meet, held in Pacific Beach, then a small town on the outskirts of San Diego. It is quite likely that Hastings was in attendance. Al quickly became hooked and started to take glider instruction at the Bowlus Glider School, also located at Lindbergh Field. Already adept at piloting, Hastings rather quickly received U.S. third class glider license #32 under Bowlus's instruction.

Alexander Eaglerock with Curtiss OX-5 engine



In early December 1929, a large contingent of glider aficionados from the Bowlus Sailplane Company and Airtech drove north to attend the very large Redondo Beach Glider Meet west of Los Angeles. While the winds required for ridge soaring were rather non-existent, the San Diego contingent still performed well with John C. "Jack" Barstow winning the grand prize, William Van Dusen taking first place for distance, and with J. Allison Moore and Wm. Hawley Bowlus also taking prizes. With three large Bowlus sailplanes entered in the meet, Hastings had a chance to fly in what was his first of many glider contests to come.(23) Just two weeks later, over December 14-15, 1929, six students from the Bowlus Glider School qualified for their first class glider licenses at Plumosa Park near Loma Portal, a suburb of San Diego. These students included William Van Dusen, J. Allison Moore, Earle R. Mitchell, Roy Pemberton, Jack Barstow, and Al Hastings. Al earned second class glider license #7 and first class glider license #6 in the United States. Having observed Hastings' managerial skills, Bowlus hired Al as sales manager for the Bowlus Sailplane Company.(24) In the midst of the Great Depression, Bowlus needed all the help he could get to sell sailplanes.(25)

Bowlus's SP-1 "Paperwing" sailplane being launched at the 1929 glider meet at Redondo Beach, likely with Wm. Hawley Bowlus standing in the foreground watching the launch.



In January 1930, Bowlus envisioned a set of Bowlus Glider School franchises providing gliding instruction at cities in California. Hastings gravitated to this idea. Soon thereafter, the Hastings family left San Diego for Los Angeles, with Al establishing a Bowlus Glider School at Mines Field (the current site of Los Angeles International Airport). Bowlus primary glider T-2 serial #2 (identification mark 365V) was sold to Hastings as a part of the plan, with some undisclosed proceeds of the franchise coming back to the Bowlus Sailplane Company. While Hastings established this first glider school in Los Angeles in February, 1930, Bowlus and Charles Lindbergh conducted gliding experiments at Lebec, California, to the north of Los Angeles.(26)

Mines Field, known today as Los Angeles International Airport, circa 1930.

Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust / C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.



When Frank Hawks decided to make a transcontinental aerotow in the Franklin *Eaglet* glider, he tested the idea in late March 1930 with a flight between San Diego (Lindbergh Field) and Los Angeles (Mines Field) on March 28, 1930. Hastings would have been at Mines Field at the time of this test, and it is likely he assisted in some manner, although there is no direct evidence.(27) Hastings' glider training program continued at Mines Field throughout April and into June 1930 (28,29) complete with auto-tow demonstrations for the official dedication of Mines Field as Los Angeles Municipal Airport on June 8, 1930. His last flight that day included a perfect landing directly in front of the administration building. Riding on the growing popularity of gliding, his instruction program gained considerable traction. By July he was also training members of the Union Oil Glider Club at Vail Field southeast of downtown Los Angeles, although it isn't clear if this was as a part of the Bowlus Sailplane Company or on his own accord.(30)

Al Hastings giving instruction with the Detroit Gull in Los Angeles.



The 1930 Nationals

The Bowlus Sailplane Company folded in mid-1930 due to the Great Depression. Bowlus moved to the east coast to continue his gliding instruction and sales. It remains unknown what became of the Bowlus T-2 primary glider that Hastings used for instruction, but Hastings also closed his Bowlus-related glider school at Mines Field. On September 7, 1930 the Hastings family left their home in Inglewood, California, driving to Monticello, Iowa, to visit Mildred's sister. Just prior to leaving, Al Hastings noted that he would be back, and planned to fly a glider from the top of Mt. Lowe, the namesake of American Civil War aeronaut, Professor T. S. C. Lowe. The Hastings family arrived at Monticello on September 15, and Mildred and the children stayed there while Albert continued on to Elmira to attend the 1930 National Glider Contest, the first of its kind in the United States.(32) Hastings arrived at Elmira three days later as the first out-of-state pilot to report for the competition.(33) According to the press, Hastings had 376 glider flights to his name prior to his arrival at Elmira. Hastings had not trailed a glider along with him from the west coast. Instead, he made arrangements with Wallace Backus of New York City to team up with him and make use of Backus's two Franklin PS-2 utility gliders for the contest. They would help crew for each other during the meet.

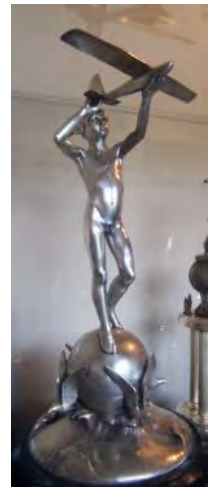
As was the case at Redondo Beach in 1929, the winds required for ridge soaring failed to materialize during the early portion of the contest. On September 24, the lack of a contest but plethora of expert instructors generated an idea in the mind of Donald Walker, then manager of the National Glider Association. He personally selected a Navy aircraft Inspector by the name of Lt. Roland Myer and Al Hastings to help instruct locals in the art of gliding in an effort to generate improved local interest. Al jumped at the chance and became a rather outspoken advocate for local sponsorship of a group of young boys interested in their own glider club at Elmira.(34)

Once the winds arrived, Hastings really proved his talent as a pilot. Taking off from Elmira's South Mountain on the next to last day of the event, he managed to soar 7 hours, 43 minutes and 11 seconds in his Franklin PS-2. He was forced to land only because of darkness as the U.S. Dept of Commerce required lights for night flying and such lights had not been installed on the Franklin.(35) The flight was judged by R. T. Walker, and was billed as a new national soaring endurance record. (Although Hawley Bowlus had flown for over 9 hours at Point Loma near San Diego and although Hastings' fellow glider school classmate Barstow had soared for over 15 hours at the same location in 1930, both were considered unofficial). During the meet, Hastings also had soaring flights of 3 hours, 16 minutes; 2 hours, 45 minutes, 15 seconds; 1 hour 47 minutes, 35 seconds; and 45 minutes and 15 seconds. While German soaring ace, Wolf Hirth, had amassed more total points than Hastings at the contest, Hirth could not claim the championship due to his German citizenship. Thus, Hastings was crowned America's first ever National Glider Champion and received the Evans Trophy personally from Robert B. Evans, son of Edward S. Evans who had helped guide the burgeoning gliding movement in the United States. Hastings also received a check for \$250 (roughly \$4000 in today's dollars).(36-38) Hawley Bowlus had also made the journey to Elmira but was unable to outperform his former student, Hastings.

More instruction at Los Angeles



Franklin "Bud" Iszard, Al Hastings, Warren Eaton and Hawley Bowlus at the 1930 National Contest





Al Hastings receiving the Evans Trophy as America's first national glider champion. Elmira Star-Gazette, October 6, 1930.

Insets feature (left) Wallace Backus, altitude winner, and (right) Wallace Franklin, spot landing winner.

Al Hastings was immediately the subject of considerable national notoriety. At age 28, he took some time off to survey soaring sites in Massachusetts.(39) Realizing that the same glider training program he had helped establish in Los Angeles could also work in Elmira, he began instructing students at Elmira. With assistance from Wally Backus and using the same Franklin PS-2 used to win the Nationals, they established the glider club Hastings had championed during the meet. (40) The first meeting of what would become Elmira's first glider club was October 21, 1930, with Sherman P. Voorhees elected president.(41) This club became known as the Mathias C. Arnot Gliding and Soaring Club of Elmira, named after Arnot who had built Elmira's first glider. Hastings then established a glider school, a course of instruction, complete with glider licensing. To graduate, each student was required to have a minimum of 3.5 hours of primary instruction (auto towing), and 1.5 hours of secondary instruction (gliding from a hill). 16 students signed up for the instruction program at the club's first meeting for a price of \$35 each (the equivalent of \$540 in 2020 dollars) with primary instruction at Elmira's Caton Avenue Airport. Some of Hastings first students to receive their glider licenses included Franklin Iszard, Edward Barton, Robert Atwater, Daniel Lewis, Holmes Shoemaker, Norman Weiberg, and Bramwell Terrill.

By the end of October 1930, Mildred and their two children left Iowa to join Al in Elmira and establish residence.(42,43) Hastings was invited to participate in a two-day benefit airshow at Caton Avenue Airport on November 9, 1930 to raise money for the unemployed. He was aerotowed to 2,000 feet at dusk, and made a nice flight for the spectators with a landing illuminated by the headlights of many cars.(44) 10 days later, he gave a lecture entitled "Building and Flying Model Gliders" to the local Elmira Air Cadet Corps.(45)

Over the winter of 1930-1931, Hastings likely focused on ground school instruction, as there isn't much recorded of any flights. His notoriety remained intact, as by spring 1931, Hastings' national championship was mentioned once again in *Popular Science*.(46) On May 6, 1931, Al helped Warren Eaton make an auto-tow from Norwich Airport. Eaton creatively glided back to a nearby hill, found some lift, reached a comfortable altitude of 2,100 feet and soared for 1.5 hours before being forced back down due to rain. It was believed to be an unusual unofficial duration record for an auto-tow.(47)

By mid-1931, glider looping records started to become a "thing", with Lyman Voepel making several well-publicized loop records in a Heath Super biplane glider. Not to be outcompeted, on June 16, Hastings made 5 loops in a Franklin P-S-2 at Elmira. It was believed to be the first time a loop was made with a monoplane glider. (48) Late in June, Hastings was one of only a handful of pilots who received special permission from the Department of Commerce to use aerotowing as a form of launch.(49,50)



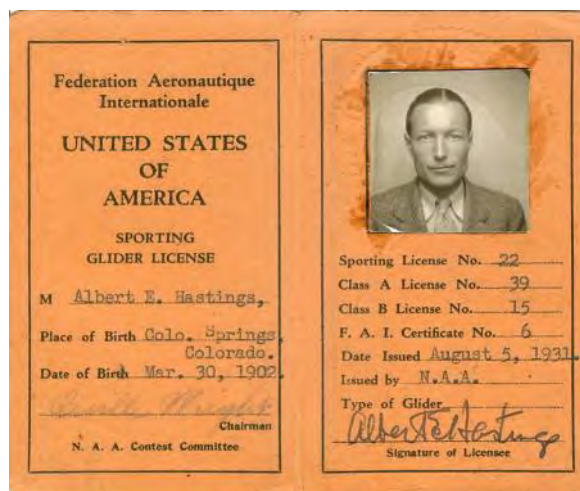
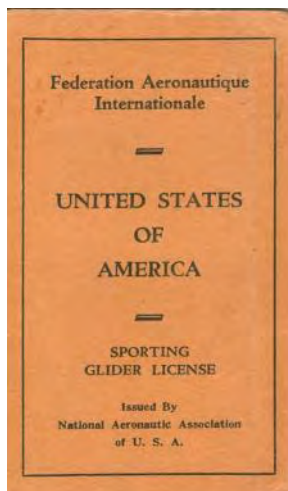
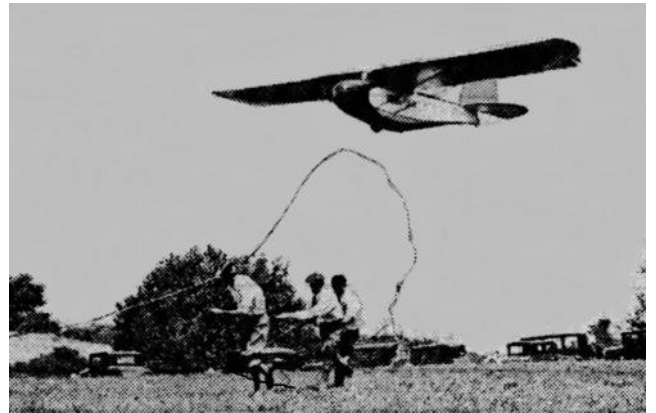
Al Hastings instructing Franklin Iszard

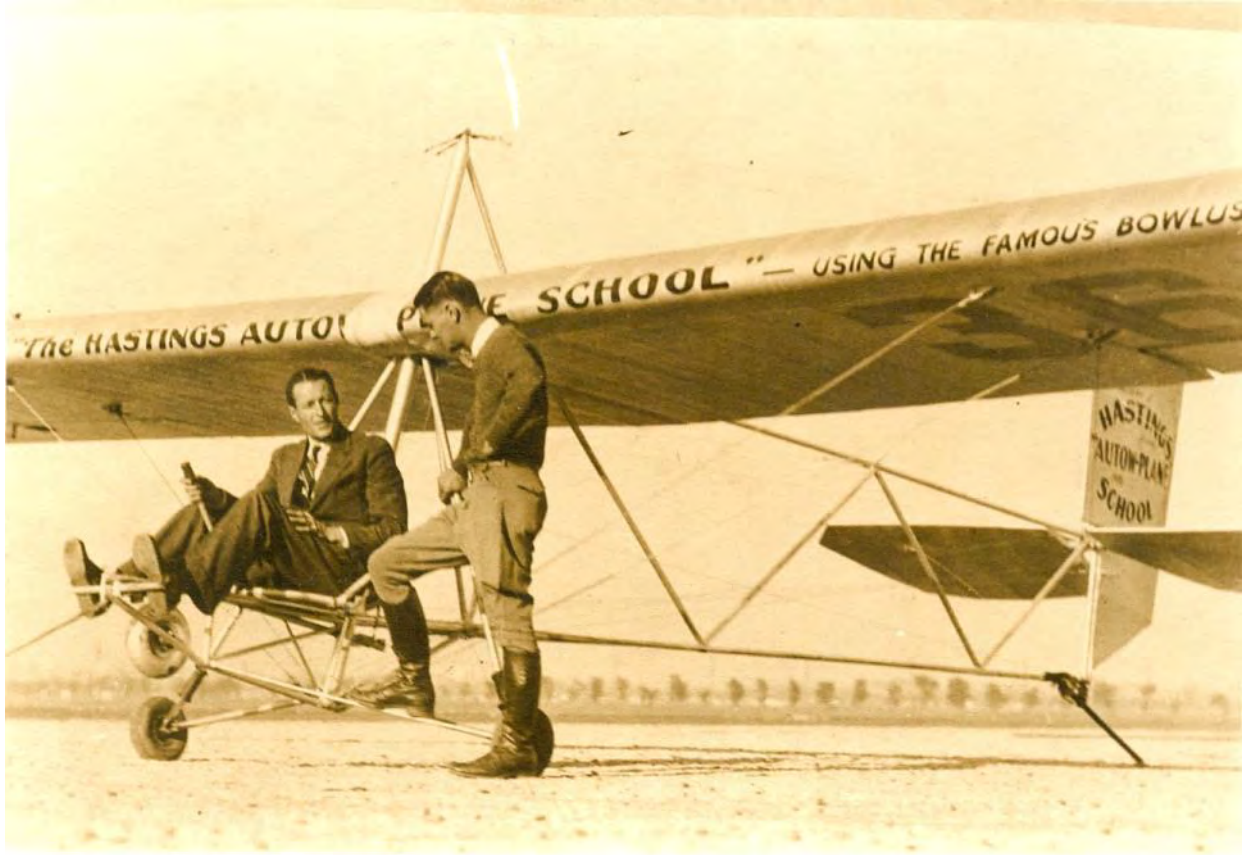
The 1931 Nationals

In preparation for the 1931 National Glider Contest, Hastings arranged for the purchase of a brand new Franklin PS-2 for a local glider club sponsored by Evans-Dunston Chevrolet. He drove to Buffalo to bring the glider back to the club in early July.(51) Hastings had been so busy with training, that it was said he had trained roughly 100 local glider pilots in the Elmira region between the 1930 and 1931 Nationals, with his students making more than 1000 flights and having logged more than 70 hours of airtime collectively.(52) His efforts were clearly making a difference and helped to solidify Elmira as a "soaring capital."



The National Glider Contest was held once again in Elmira in August 1931. Hastings flew a Franklin PS-2, likely the one that he had so recently retrieved from Buffalo. Early in the meet he made a nice distance flight from the East Hill in Elmira to Erin, NY, a distance of 15 miles in 2 hours.(53) On August 12, he took off from Elmira Airport via aerotow at 10:07:30 a.m. and climbed on the lift at South Mountain. 7 hours and 30 minutes later he landed back at the airport at 5:37:30 p.m.(54) Interestingly, Hastings's flight was nearly matched perfectly by another pilot, Bud Stickler, who took off via shock cord from South Mountain at 10:03:00 a.m. and landed back at South Mountain at 5:33:05 p.m. for a total time of 7 hours, 28.5 minutes. It was a great day of soaring at the Nationals! Hastings finished the meet first in duration, second in altitude, and third in distance. The strong showing was good enough for Hastings to finish in first place overall and retain his title as National Glider Champion.(55,56)





Hastings and friend at the Caton Avenue Airport hangar

Cross country

After the Nationals, Hastings left Elmira briefly during the second week of September 1931 to spend a week training glider students in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. However, state officials closed the glider school shortly after it opened because it failed to meet some state requirements.(57) Hastings returned to Elmira and soon embarked with the family on a planned tour of the midwest and southwest to help promote gliding. The route also took the family through Nebraska to see family. With winter arriving and Hastings in need of income, he took the opportunity to find warmer climes.(58)

In October they visited Iowa City, Iowa. Hastings provided a gliding exposition at Cedar Rapids Airport on October 10-11.(59) He then hooked up with an aerial troupe making airshows throughout Nebraska. This "All Nebraska Air Tour" had its first demonstration on October 21 at Burwell, Nebraska with Hastings making demonstrations by both auto-tow and aerotow.(60) From there they continued on to Cozad, Nebraska, but the show scheduled for October 29 was canceled due to high winds.(61) Hastings continued to be somewhat of a gliding celebrity as the October 1931 issue of *National Power Glider* magazine had a full article that focused on Hastings and his gliding school at Elmira.

Albert Hastings made it back to Los Angeles. It is assumed that the family also came with him but it is possible that they also stayed with relatives in Iowa. 1932 was the year of the 10th Olympic Summer Games in Los Angeles and as such many activities were planned throughout the first half of the year in anticipation. A two-day glider meet was planned by the American Gliding Association at the Hollywood Riviera Gliderport at Redondo Beach. Hastings entered in the contest, perhaps with his Franklin - it is unknown. On the first day of the contest, the winds were great and five sailplanes were soaring in competition. He finally had a soaring flight at Redondo! But as if right on cue, the wind died very suddenly, forcing all five planes that were in the air to land on the beach below nearly simultaneously. In an attempt to avoid traffic, some sailplanes made "watery" near-shore landings. Hastings was one of them, along with his friend Harland Ross.(63)

Hastings remained in the Los Angeles area through the winter and into spring of 1932. It isn't clear how he was employed at this time, but in June of 1932 he managed to make another "first" for gliders: the first aerotow behind an autogyro. Taking off from United Airport at Burbank, California, he climbed behind a Kellett autogyro flown by G. H. Miller. The stunt was arranged as a part of a short movie being produced by Hastings and a man named Vic Clark.(64,65) It remains unknown if the movie was ever released. Later that same month, a three-day "Pre-Olympic Glider Contest" sponsored by the Curtiss-Wright Flying Service was held at Glendale's Grand Central Air Terminal. 20 competitors entered in the meet, flying 10 gliders, including Hawley Bowlus, Don Stevens, Frank Hutchinson, Harland Ross, and Al Hastings. 10,000 spectators watched the activities over the three days as the entrants competed for duration, spot landing, altitude and the unique "landing over a hurdle" event. Most of the flights were made by auto-tow. However, on one day Hastings was aerotowed to 2,000 feet and completed three loops on his return for the crowd. His stunt was good enough for first place in the altitude category and he managed to capture first place overall with 22 points. Harland Ross placed a close second with 19.(66-73)

California to Texas via New Mexico

Hastings' whereabouts become a mystery after this time. For some reason he chose not to defend his championship at the 1932 Nationals, possibly due to a lack of financial resources. However, he did remain connected to the soaring community. In 1933 he was selected by the National Aeronautic Association to serve on a new NAA Committee on Gliding with Warren Eaton as chair.(74,75) It is possible that Hastings simply took the time to be with his family, either in the Los Angeles area or in the midwest. By 1940, he had taken a job as a foreman of the Houston Packing Company, living with his family in Harris, Texas.

At the beginning of WWII, the federal government took quite some time to understand the true importance of gliders to the war effort. Eventually a glider training program was established. Hastings was requested to serve as a glider instructor and eagerly did so at the Lamesa Advanced Air Force Glider School in Lamesa, Texas, starting in 1942.(76,77) After the war, he and the family moved yet again to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he helped to establish the Civil Air Patrol Glider Club at Skycourt Airport after a free glider demonstration on February 10, 1947. He took a job as an aircraft technician for the School of Mines. His daughter became a student at the University of New Mexico with the family living together at Martin's Trailer Court.(78)

Over his many years of glider instruction from Los Angeles to Elmira to Lamesa, several of his students eventually became commercial pilots after the war. They stayed in touch with Al for the remainder of his life, visiting him when possible. In 1952, the family moved to El Paso, and Al worked as a salesman for an art school. He had finally returned full circle to his original college interest in art.(79,80) His mother died on September 23, 1953. In 1960, the U.S. National Soaring Contest came to Odessa, Texas. Al Hastings couldn't resist the urge to visit and to see old friends. He soon helped to form the El Paso Soaring Association. Suffering from chronic bronchitis and emphysema, Albert Hastings passed away August 17, 1965 at El Paso at the age of 63. He was survived by his wife Mildred, son Frederick who was at the time in the U.S. Air Force, daughter Shirley, and seven grandchildren.(81,82)

Postscript

In 1973, Albert Hastings was inducted into the U.S. Soaring Hall of Fame for his two national championships, dedication to the early promotion gliding, and service to glider training from his early involvement with the sport through World War II. In 1996, a bronze plaque was installed at Point Loma by San Diego sailplane enthusiasts and The Environmental Trust to honor the pilots who helped make San Diego another capital of soaring in the 1930s. Hastings was specifically included in the list of pilots on this plaque. Not long thereafter, the National Soaring Museum dedicated National Soaring Landmark No. 7 at Point Loma, California, to honor the flights of Hawley Bowlus and Jack Barstow at the site. Today the two plaques exist side by side near the entrance of Cabrillo National Monument.(83)

Acknowledgements

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