

BELOW ME the hill stretches away how far? A quarter of a mile? Could be. Pretty steep. Down there the thousand-tongued crowd stands around cars and chatters and buzzes and waits to see me break my fool neck.

"It doesn't matter which way you run," says my young friend Taras, "but keep the nose pointed into the wind."

This thing is trying to get away from me. I wrestle with the bamboo poles, and above me 256 square feet of plastic rustles and flutters. To its strength and to the aeronautical savvy of three high-school boys, I—a licensed pilot of 25 years' experience—am about to entrust my mortal body.

The place is a hill above Newport Beach, California. We are celebrating, on this May 23rd, the birthday of German glider pioneer Otto Lilienthal by staging a hang-glider meet.

A note on terminology: A "hang glider" is a glider from which the pilot hangs. OK?

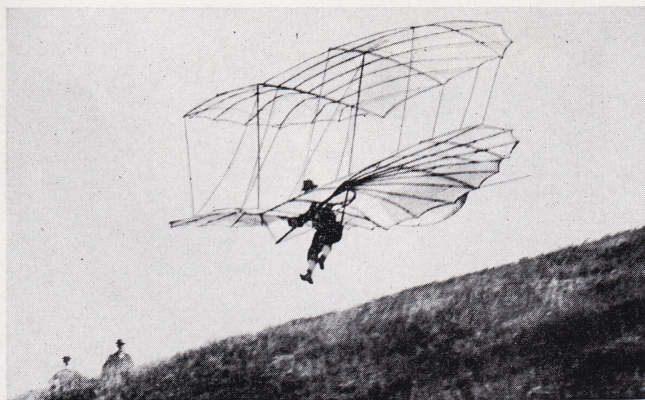
Four young aeronauts from John Muir High School in Pasadena have been the heroes of the day. Taras Kiceniuk, Jr., 17, his sister Katherine, 15, Tom Dickinson, 17, and Steve Elliott, 17, have each stayed aloft in free flight for a quarter of a minute and covered distances of 300 feet or more; that's about 200 feet farther than Orville Wright's first successful flight under power. And to get off the ground at all in a hang glider is something of an achievement.

It has been proposed that I fly this glider of theirs. Nobody rejects the idea, so events march onward. Tom Dickinson wraps the green nylon tow cord three times around the left arm pole. "Put your thumb on this," he says. "Rest your arms on the poles, then slide back as far as you can."

A pilot standing nearby adds, "When you're high

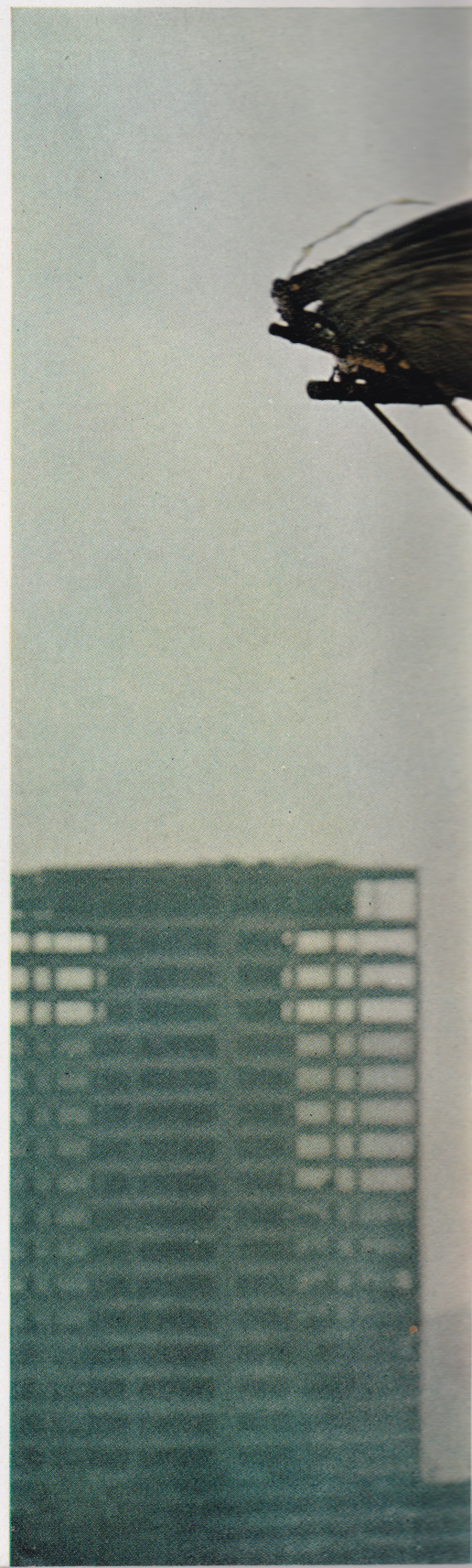
Happy

By RUSSELL HAWKES



R. W. WOOD, FROM THE AUGUST 1908 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

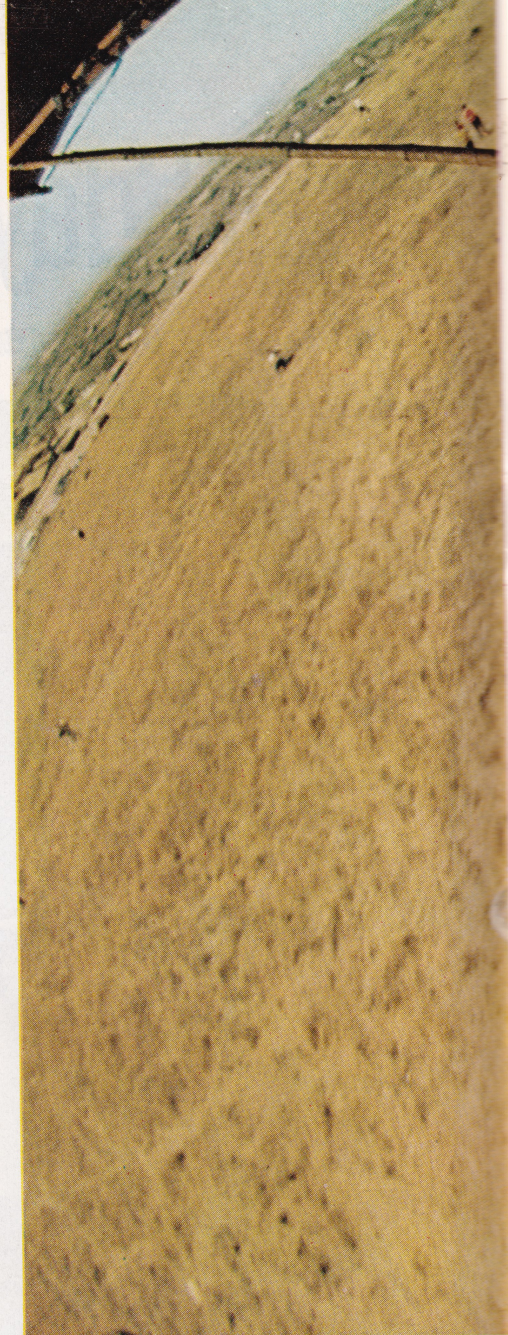
To fly like a bird: The eternal dream of earthbound man captivated Otto Lilienthal in the 1890's (above). The German engineer's glider flights inspired the Wright brothers. Reviving the art, enthusiastic Californians meet near Newport Beach to fly home-built gliders (right) on Otto's 123rd birthday. Who knows? There might be another genius among them!



Birthday, Otto Lilienthal!

Photographs by JAMES COLLISON





Ingenious flying wing (top, foreground) was built by Richard Miller, a retired book dealer. With it, he ran a few strides, stepped off the hill, and glided for 280 feet in 12 seconds, the longest flight that day without help of a towing team. Like many hang-glider fans, Miller combines meticulous engineering and "trash technology." Anyone who spends more than \$100 on materials loses status.

Floating free, 17-year-old Tom Dickinson (**upper right**) steers by shifting his weight to right or left to turn as desired. Wide-angle lens of a camera mounted on the bamboo rigging curves the horizon.

Heavy home-designed glider with elaborate bracing (**above**) never got off the ground.

Leg power propels David Actor, a 22-year-old college student (**right**), to lift-off. His glider carries a yellow-and-green jib for greater stability.





enough or scared enough, just lift your thumb." Everybody chuckles.

Taras advises, "When you let go of the line, slide forward to pick up speed and to set your glide angle. Just before you land, swing your body aft to flare out your glide and touch down easy. Watch that. Some people swing their feet forward to take the impact. That makes the nose drop, and you pick up speed. You can really slam into the ground."

I nod, and he steps away from the big, black, diamond-shaped wing. Thirty feet downhill, Tom and Steve are waiting to run with the line. There is still time to change my mind, still time to lay this plastic-and-bamboo contraption down and walk away.

Taras says, "When you're ready to go, yell."

If the only alternative is to look like a fool, I'd as lief break my head. "Let's go!" We run three strides, and I rise into the air.

What can I tell you about this first step that encounters nothing solid? There's nothing to it. This upward stride causes the jaw to drop and the mind to cease its disciplined churning.

The people around me sink out of sight. Their voices thin away behind the rumbling of the sail-like wing. I look down the tow-line at Tom and Steve. They are running down the hillside, bounding over rocks and thistles as they go.

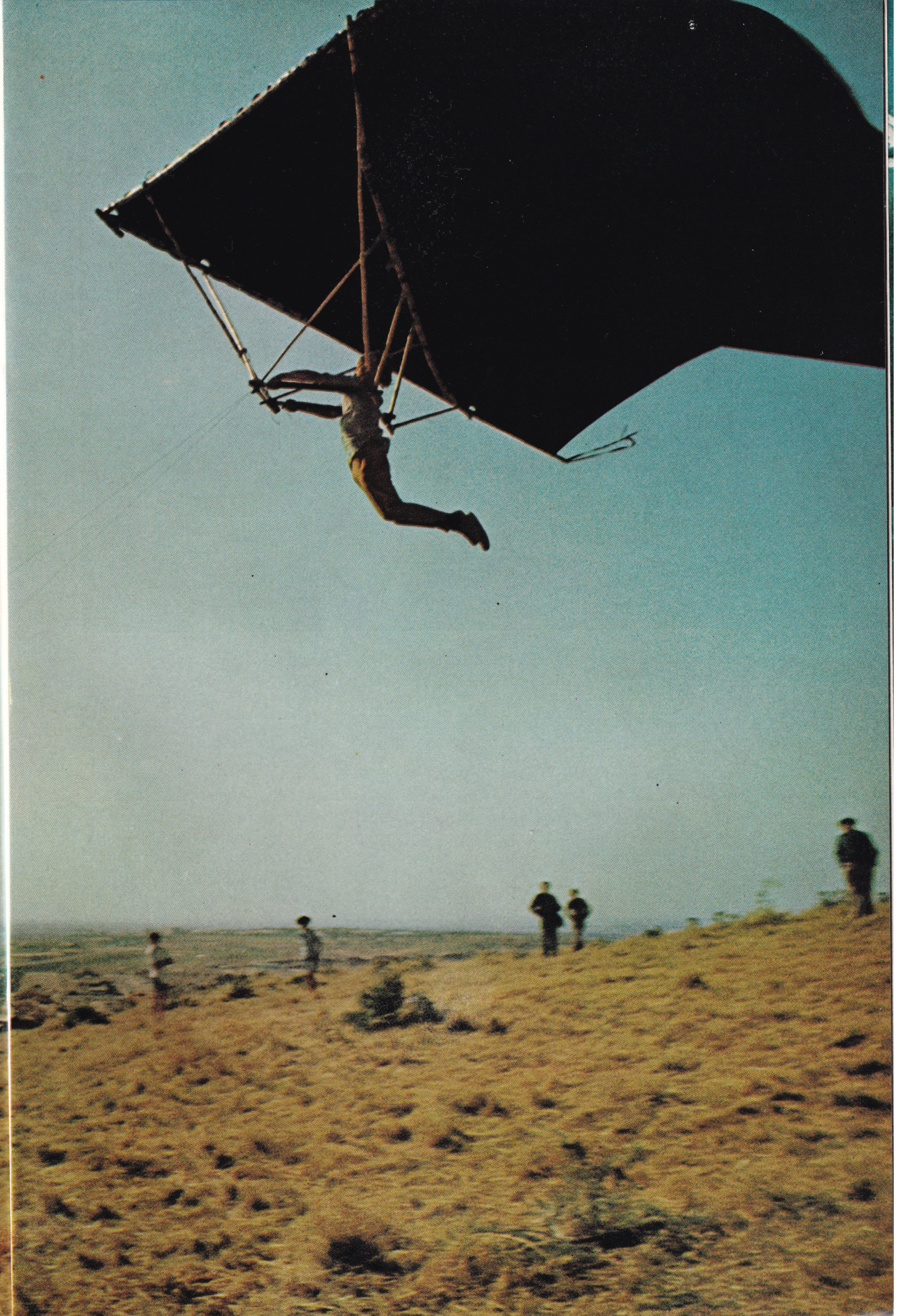
They look winded, I think. So I lift my thumb, and the green cord disappears. I become a pendulum, swinging under the wing.

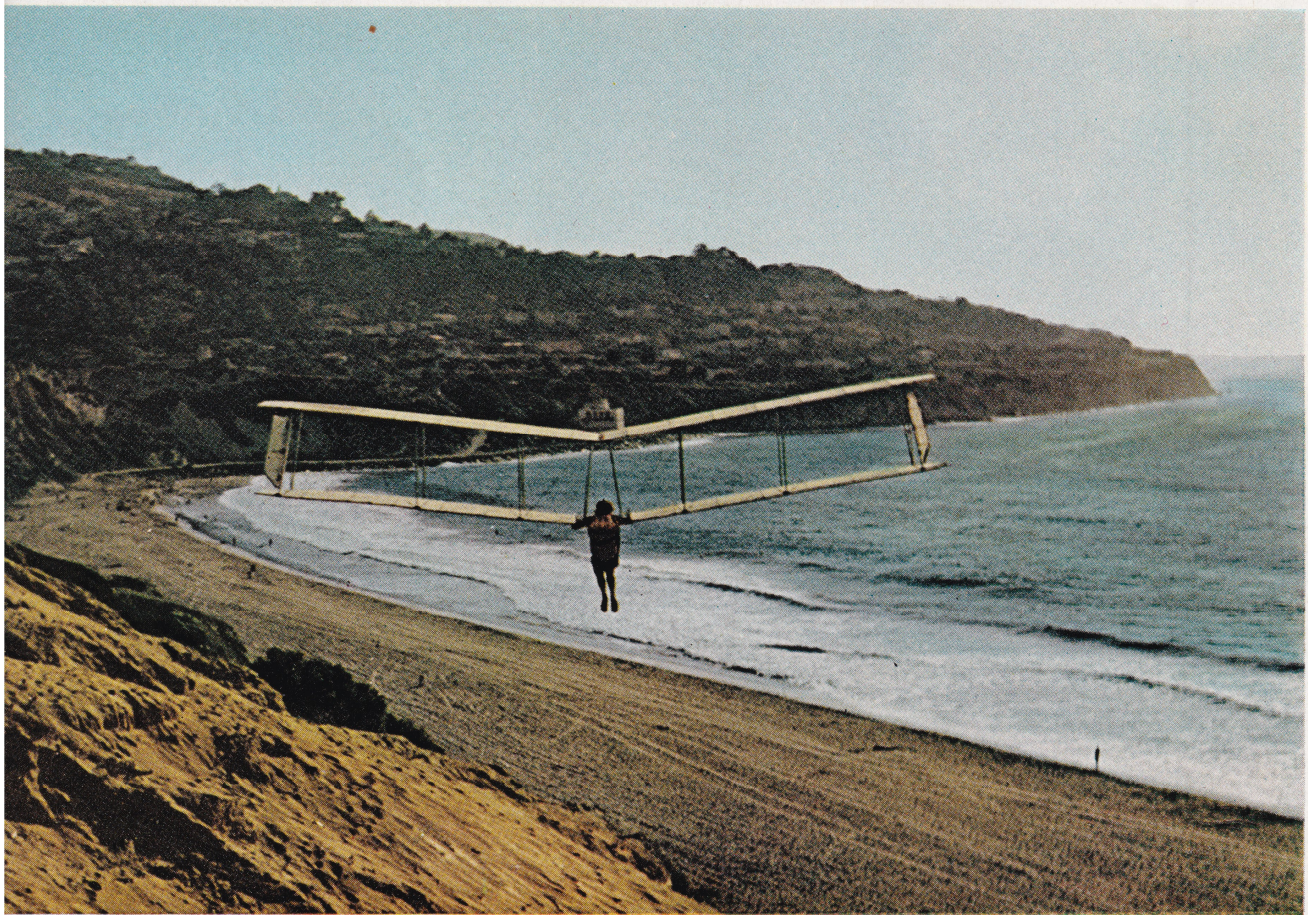
LAUNCHING A BIRDMAN,
*friends tow Taras Kiceniuk, Jr.,
while he swings his legs
back to make the wing climb.
At 30 feet he will drop the
towline and pull himself
forward, bringing the
nose down and picking up
speed to stay aloft. The
craft covered the greatest
free-flight distance of the
day—some 320 feet.*

*Unlike sailplanes, hang
gliders must shun strong
updrafts that might carry them
too high. Number one rule of
the sport is "Never go higher
than you are willing to fall."*

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TARAS KICENIUK

Into the realm of sea gulls, Taras soars for five minutes along windswept bluffs near Torrance, California. Inspired by the meet, he designed this biplane, dubbed *Icarus*, with a sling seat and hand controls connected to rudders on the wing tips. Like other serious fans of the fledgling sport, he spends months studying aerodynamics and making practice flights.

The ground shoots upward, downward, then steadies. I am neither comfortable nor uncomfortable; I'm just there, like the people standing below me. I feel no fright. For roller-coaster thrills, go to an amusement park. This is something else.

I am supposed to be the pilot of this thing, but it seems to have little requirement for my services. We slide into a stratum of air where a crosswind turns us slowly to the right. I swing my legs to the left. Not as easy as it looks. Try to get some weight off the right pole. The turn stops. The earth is rising faster. Faster. Fascinating. WHACK!

The rocky hillside smites the soles of my boots, and a gout of gravel flies away. I sit down immediately and lay the bamboo frame on the ground. A spatter of applause dies away; Taras ducks under the wing and sits.

"You forgot to flare out," he says.

I jab an irritated glance at him. Of course I forgot to flare out; I know I forgot to flare out. I wiggle my toes, and the smarting in my

feet starts to go away. My flight, counting the tow, lasted 15 seconds and covered about 200 feet. Nothing earthshaking, but I begin to understand what this sport is all about: To fly without awareness of the means of flight.

Days later I'm still pondering. What does Otto's birthday party signify?

Is it one more rash of the endemic madness that periodically breaks out in California? Or the birth of a genuine national leisure-time mania, like drag racing and surfing? Hang gliding, like those sports, involves calculable hazard to life and limb. Flying a frail contraption of bamboo and bailing wire cannot be undertaken casually.

A dozen and a half gliders, fifty pilots, a thousand spectators at the birthday party don't constitute a ground swell of mass enthusiasm. But for all of them to come together at one time and place, with almost no organization, suggests that larger numbers must be lurking in the hinterlands, leaping off hillsides when no one is looking. □