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Tow plane pilots carry the load during soaring championships

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by CATHERINE AUSTIN
THE UVALDE LEADER-NEWS

Staff writer - When the sailplane pilots at the National Soaring Championships are towed 2,000 feet into the air before being released, they are in good hands. Veteran pilot James "Scratch" Lee heads the group of tow plane pilots who expertly perform that task hundreds of times during the contest that is wrapping up today at Garner Field Airport.

Lee has been joined at the local event by Bob Dittert of Hobbs, NM; Brian Duke of Boerne; and Bernie Gross, also veteran pilots. "We have as much fun as the glider pilots," Lee mused, while watching scales official Charlie "Lite" Minner conduct the daily weigh-in of the planes.

An ex-military pilot, Lee has been towing gliders for more than 20 years. "I joined the Navy in 1953, and then flew for the Marine Corps during Korea," Lee said. And he readily admits that he loves to fly tow planes. "It's kind of un-glamorous flying," Lee said. "But the take-offs and landings are the most fun." According to Lee, each tow takes about eight minutes, and while the pilots don't log very many hours, they can get in 70-100 landings in some

contests.

Lee noted that gliding requires a different skill level than flying a regular airplane. “The big difference is you have that engine in a plane,” he said. “A glider pilot has to use coordination with nature to soar on that hot air – not wind as some people think.” A banker by profession in the panhandle town of Littlefield, Lee has turned over most of the daily operations of the business to his son. “He’s a skier,” Lee laughed. “He takes off during the winter.” So, Lee takes off in the spring and summer, taking off in his 300-horsepower Ag wagon, an old crop duster plane, at soaring competitions, such as Uvalde’s. “I flew Marfa at Easter and Taos in June,” he said. “Then there’s Hobbs, Lubbock and now Uvalde.” This Thanksgiving, Lee plans to work the Turkey Fest in Alamogordo, N. M.

The worldwide sport of soaring involves a small, eclectic group of people who travel the country the whole summer for contests, Lee said. “And everyone in the soaring community knows Uvalde,” he stated. “People in Japan, Germany and all over know about the excellent soaring conditions here.” Furthermore, he commented, the contests are good for Uvalde as well as the other towns where contests are held. “For instance, like with this contest, you have 30 pilots, each with a crew of three or so,” he said. “That’s over a hundred people who spend 12 days here – eating and buying gasoline – that’s got to be good for any town.” This is perhaps one of the reasons for the stiff competition among towns when bidding for contests comes up, Lee admitted. “Yes, it’s too bad there won’t be a contest here next year,” Lee agreed when queried about the fact that Lubbock won the bid from Uvalde. “But it won’t be long ... we’ll be back. We’ll be back in Uvalde. Soarers love Uvalde.”

After the awards banquet tonight, Lee, his fellow tow pilots and the soarers will fly off to other parts of the world, and the National Soaring Championships in Uvalde will be history. The earliest a contest might be held here will be 2004, but the sites for those championships have yet to be officially decided.