

Motorgliders test thermals in Hobbs

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HOBBS NEWS-SUN

The gliders slowly rise from the runway toward the sky, some under their own power, others towed by an ungainly tow plane.

The gliders, and their pilots, gathered in Hobbs for some competition in The Auxiliary Powered Sailplane Nationals, some from as far away as North Carolina.

The contest involves flying around three points with nothing except the power of rising heat—called thermals—to keep them in the air. The motorized gliders in Thursday's competition got in the air under their own power, but once aloft the pilot must ride the wind to keep going.

A few of the gliders required a tow plane.

Some of the engines roar as they race down the runway to get airborne; others sound a bit like a lawnmower engine.

Once in the air the pilot shuts off the engine and the craft glides through the air.

One of those pilots is Maj. Russ Maclean, an instructor with the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

Before the Air Force lets its cadets get their hands on any kind of fighter jet, they must learn the basics of flight on a glider similar to the TG-11 Maclean flies.

Before becoming an instructor at the academy, Maclean flew B-52s for five years. Now you might think someone who flew something like a B-52 bomber would find the pace of a glider a bit tiring—even dull.

Not Maclean. If given a choice between the TG-11 motorglider and a B-52 he says it's no contest.

"I'd rather have one of those," the major says, gesturing toward the sleek, gleaming white glider.

Now why in the world would a man who once flew one of the most powerful,

and deadly, airplanes in history prefer a mere glider?

"There's not much fun you can do in a B-52, but there are a lot of fun things in a motorglider," Maclean said.

The motorglider the major flew Thursday is a sleek, modern thing. The propeller sits in front and retracts when the motor is shut down, leaving a streamlined aircraft that slices through the air. Immediately behind the pilot is a four-cylinder engine that drives the propeller.

The Air Force, however, didn't send the major out to Hobbs just for fun and

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Dr. Al Whitesell of Santa Fe protects himself from the sun as he conducts last-minute checks before competing in the Auxiliary Powered Sailplane Nationals Thursday at Hobbs Industrial Air Park.

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games. And Maclean doesn't care much about the competition, saying Thursday's event "is just another assignment like any other."

The Air Force sends their instructors out to competitions like this so they can keep their skills and ratings high enough to better train their cadets.

Maclean added that the academy also has a competitive glider team.

And like many other glider pilots, Maclean said one reward of flying gliders is the sense of freedom and tranquility of soaring through the sky without the constant droning of an engine.

Al Whitesell, an anesthesiologist from Santa Fe, echoed Maclean's sentiment, saying that piloting a glider is "more like flying like a bird than an airplane."

Whitesell brought his family—son Connor and wife Lorie—with him to Hobbs.

While the pilots in Thursday's competition stressed the freedom of soaring, they also say they love the challenge of flying without an engine.

The challenge, many say, is what attracted them to the sport and keeps them interested.

Because there is no engine, or in this case the engine is shut off after takeoff, the pilot has to be especially skilled and intelligent about flying.

The object in Thursday's portion of the competition, which began Monday, is to fly around three points—Hobbs, Plains and Wink.

The object is to finish with a combination of speed and distance over an established course. The more skilled pilots fly farther and faster around the points.

Pilot and Soaring Society volunteer Paul Elliot says the pilots have to look for thermals they can ride to gain altitude.

"Altitude is to a pilot what money is to a banker,"



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Maj. Russ Maclean from Colorado Springs, Colo., performs last-minute checks on his motorized glider at the Auxiliary Powered Sailplane Nationals Thursday. At the time, his team was ranked seventh out of nine entrants in a week-long competition being held at Hobbs Industrial Air Park.

Elliot said. "You circle and ride up those thermals like a buzzard. ... Altitude is freedom."