Up, Up and Away

By Beverly Creamer, Star-Bulletin Writer

One of the activities of the Civil Air Patrol in Hawaii is training young people in the skills of piloting gliders. And the biggest thrill for every cadet is the day he is allowed to pilot a glider by himself. For Chris Fromm, that came the moment he turned 14 —the minimum age for solo glider flights. It was a birthday he won't forget.

Chris Fromm steps into his glider for a solo flight.

On his 14th birthday Chris Fromm was dragged through the mud, soaked with a bucket of water and had the shirt ripped off his back.

But the curly haired, freckle-faced son of Mr. and Mrs. Rudolph Fromm says it was the best birthday present he ever got.

The unusual "gift" is part of the ritual that follows a glider pilot's first five-hour solo flight.

When Chris touched down on the Dillingham airfield in Mokuleia after his first flight alone last week he became the youngest member of the Civil Air Patrol's Mokuleia Composite Glider Squadron to complete a five-hour flight.

Chris has been gliding since November as a cadet with the Civil Air Patrol. As well as learning to pilot a glider, he learned to take one apart and reassemble it as all the cadets do.

For the 60 cadets enrolled in the CAP's two-week summer flying seminar, which begins on July 25 at Dillingham Airfield, the first solo flight usually comes after two weeks of intensive instruction.

But for Chris it was different. Although he's been ready to solo for several months, under CAP rules he could not fly alone until he was 14.

ON THE MORNING of his birthday he got up, put on his blue sneakers, a pair of long pants and a T-shirt and went out to the airfield.

He was strapped into the Schweizer 233 A glider donated to the CAP by Bowman Chun. Squadron Cmdr. M. R. Nevin climbed into his own airplane, a single-engine L19, hooked a rope to the glider, and took off down the field, towing Chris' glider behind him.

When they were 1,000 feet in the air he cut him loose and Chris was on his own.

For the first hour, says Chris, "I was concentrating on making my altitude. I'd gain altitude of about 2,000 feet (by the mountain ridge) and then I'd go under a cloud. There's usually good lift under a cloud. And then I'd thermal (spiral) up."

The spirals are slow circles upwards that take advantage of good air currents. To find the right currents, glider pilots often follow the birds that soar over Mokuleia, the black great frigate bird called the iwa or the white-tailed tropic bird, the koa'e.

"They look sort of like prehistoric birds," says Chris. "They fly up and down the ridge like we do and thermal. Whenever we see them we follow them because they know where the best lift is. But they ignore us. They won't fly to us."

When he thought he had achieved his altitude (a climb of 1,000 feet during a flight would earn him a special badge) Chris settled in for his five-hour duration test. He flew up and down the ridge and even dipped over his house near the airfield to wave to his family.

"They waved at me, at least I think they did. I was so high I couldn't see."

EVERY SO OFTEN, he'd try and stretch. "Your rear end gets sore, for one thing," he says. "And your legs get sort of numb."

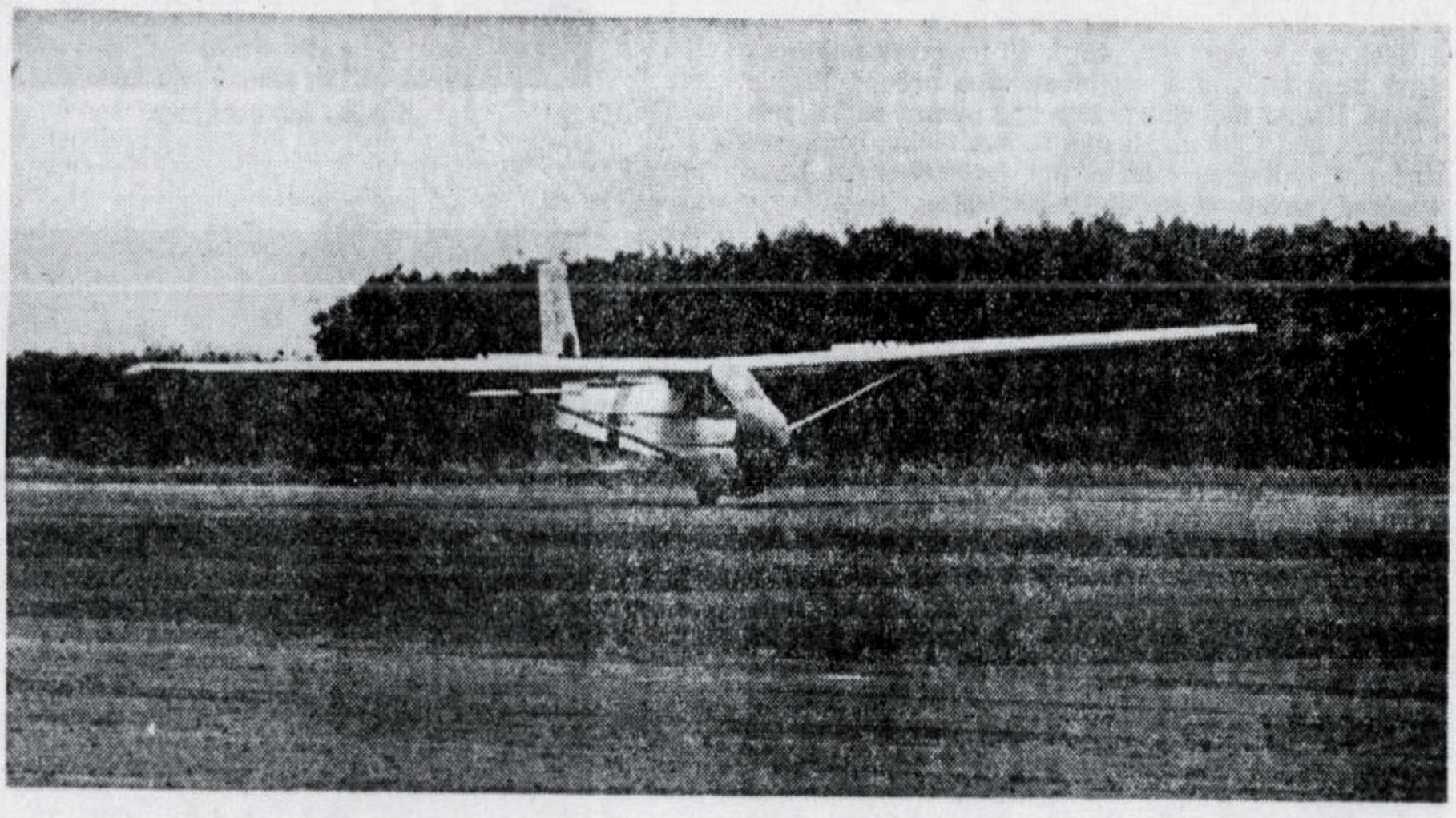
As he checked his watch for his time, he noticed it had stopped. So, with his stick between his knees, he took both hands off the controls to reset it.

In that uncomfortable position, he accidentally started winding the hours back. And when he reset it, he was off by an hour.

"I remembered what minute it was but I forgot what hour it was," he says.

Unaware that he was putting in an extra hour of flight, Chris was surprised when the tow plane came up and signalled him to come in. Only when he landed after a flight of six hours and 10 minutes did he realize his mistake.

"I landed and then there were about 20 people who came running out and took my picture. They were shaking my hand and then they threw a bucket of water on me. They took me to a mud hole and dragged me through. It's like a ritual. They do that when you first solo." They also ripped the shirt off his back and wrote his name and the date of his solo flight on it. That's part of the ritual too.

Only then did Chris Fromm get to eat his birthday cake.

He makes a perfect landing after a six-hour flight.