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Stock 40 h.p. Volkswagen engine gives import from Europe top cruising speed of 112 m.p.h. It stalls at 44 m.p.h., but you don't have to worry about power—the RF4D performs very well as a glider

RF4D

Powered Glider: Fun Flyers' Delight

by DON DOWNIE / AOPA 188441

■ ■ As the saying goes, "There I was, flat on my back at 40,000 feet with the prop stopped."

This isn't quite the case. I was actually flat on my back at 7,000 feet, and it was later that the prop stopped. I made a most soul-satisfying hammer-head stall where the airspeed drifted almost to zero before the rudder came in and the little nose slid off to the horizon and then straight down.

When the engine noise became monotonous, I just shut it off and slithered around in the silent sky like a buzzard looking for lunch.

No, I wasn't out of this world, but that's close. It was pure, 100% flying for fun. No radio, no transponder, no flight plan, no student or copilot and no power chart. I was just boring old-fashioned holes in the sky for sheer enjoyment. This was a flight evaluation where I had a complete, 110% ball! Just as soon as the two-place version of this single-seater comes out, I hope to do it all again.

The airplane—if you choose to call it that—is the latest thing in European imports, the Fournier RF4D. It's just about as different as anything in the air today. It's not quite a bird and not quite a plane, but a careful blending of both.

The Fournier is a powered glider with a stock 40 h.p. Volkswagen engine up-front that swings a tiny 4'4" laminated wood prop up to a 4,000-r.p.m. redline. The RF4D is all wood with conventional plywood construction. All exterior surfaces are covered with fiberglass and finished with epoxy paint. It has a 37-

foot high-aspect ratio wing much like its sailplane sisters, yet the RF4D is fully aerobatic except for high speed "flick" maneuvers.

There's a single, retractable landing wheel, a conventional steerable tail-wheel and two tiny non-retractable plastic-wheeled pogos (outriggers) mounted two-thirds of the way out the wing where the spoilers stop and the ailerons begin.

With so many features that are unconventional for U.S. pilots, the RF4D is naturally an exciting airplane-sailplane to fly. The lines of this French-designed, German-built power glider are exceptionally eye appealing. To the soar-

ing purist, that little engine in the nose may not be welcomed. The true sailplane pilot will gripe about the drag of the non-featherable prop, but glider performance, power-off, is 20:1 or 4-feet-per-second down at 55 m.p.h. That's slightly better than some two-place training gliders.

Flying the present RF4D is strictly a do-it-yourself operation since it's only a single-seater. Check-outs are normally made in a two place sailplane and then you go out on your own. Phil Paul (AOPA 282821), owner of the first Fournier on the West Coast, uses his two-place Czechoslovakian Blanik L13 to check friends out as Fournier pilots. His Aero Sport Aircraft Imports in Lancaster, Calif., handles both the sailplane and the VW-powered-glider.

However, since I've held a commercial glider rating for more than 20 years, Paul dispensed with the check flight. But I didn't climb into the import "cold" without seeing how it handled. Phil Paul gave a most interesting flight demonstration while I shot pictures of the Fournier from his 150 h.p. Citabria towplane. We had the Citabria's door removed for photography and an American Airlines 707 captain, George Foster, did the flying.

It was easy to see that the Fournier was a lively bird in flight and quite sensitive on the controls. Paul is a copilot with the Flying Tigers on 100-ton CL-44's, and even though he's flown sailplanes for more than 12 years, you could see that the powered glider was dancing a little as we tried to hold a photo formation in steep turns over Fox Field near Lancaster in the Mojave Desert, north of Los Angeles.

Once our picture-taking session was completed, 34-year-old Paul pulled away and "had his enjoys" for the morning with a series of loops, rolls, power-off flight and then a smooth pattern to a landing with the engine restarted. He taxied unaided back to the hangar area



Author Don Downie tries the Fournier's cockpit for size. Downie, a tall man, found that he could just make it.

Photos by the author