Modeling thermals

Gerhard Waibel

Bad Hindelang, Germany

Gm.Waibel@t-online.de

Abstract

Thermal models are used by sailplane designers in order to decide on major configuration data for their design. Based on their own gliding experience and in communication with pilots models of thermals have been developed and modified over the years.

Introduction

Every thermal is an individual and our colleagues of the OSTIV Scientific Section are eagerly exploring the secrets of this meteorologic phenomenon. For glider pilots however thermals are the energy supply for their flights and every new thermal increases the pilots’ experience and adds to their knowledge.

Sailplane designers are mostly experienced glider pilots themselves, having flown thousands of hours in the convection layer of the lower troposphere. They try to use their experience for the design of more efficient sailplanes and are driven and encouraged by the best competition- and record pilots.

Early history of modeling thermals

In the May/June 1954 issue of Soaring, Bruce H. Carmichael published three standard thermal profiles, see Fig. 1, reproduced from his famous article “What price performance” [1]. The author of this paper measured the performance of the D34d-sailplane in level and turning flight [3] at DVL-FFM and a K8 was evaluated in the same way. Both measurements showed that the measured polar curves in turning flight are marginally — if at all — inferior to the calculated ones. The calculations were done using formulas published by Zacher, Eppler and Haubenhofer, see Ref. 4 and Fig. 2. Additionally, Wolf Lemke flew the small and relatively heavy D34d in the 1962 German Nationals in the Open Class, as it had a retractable landing gear. He found quickly that he had to turn with more bank than the other pilots, frequently with as much as 40-45° of bank when working tight thermals at low altitude.

With that knowledge in mind, W. Lemke and G. Waibel, both members of the Akaflieg Darmstadt, had an student internship at the English Steel Corporation at Sheffield, England and dreamt about the D36 design. Both set the “Ka6-condition,” that the new sailplane should not be inferior in sink to the Ka6 in 40° bank turns. They found that this condition is the optimum bank for a “thermal gradient” of -0.02 sec⁻¹, equivalent to 2 cm/sec more climb for 1m tighter radius of turn. The D36 turned out to be an excellent design for the time.

Measuring real thermals


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shows what the author’s flight experience had indicated already. Bruce H. Carmichael’s thermals were not wrong, however generally a bit too tight.

When Konovalov’s paper was presented at Alpine, pilots at the World Gliding Championships experienced strong and wide thermals, which suggested the use of water ballast, even in the Standard Class. See Figures 3, 4 and 5.

In 1978 L.M.M. Boermans presented a paper about his “Development of computer program for parametric sailplane performance optimization” [8], varying axial symmetric thermals of the Konovalov “b” type with strong gradients in strength. The weight of an ASTIR CS-Standard Class glider should be variable in MTOW from 280 kg to 520 kg to cover the range of 4 m/s to 8 m/s vertical speed of the thermals in the center. In 1987, Boermans improved his program with newer models of measured thermals, see J.R. Milford [9] and T. Küpper from DFVLR, which was very helpful for the author in designing the ASW 24 Standard Class sailplane. Both presented their work at the XX OSTIV Congress held at Benalla in 1987 and a paper discussing this was also presented [10]. A thermal model constructed of a combination of 15% narrow and 85% wide thermals was chosen to establish the aspect ratio for the sailplane. The model shows a flat optimum for aspect ratio and wing loading. For practical reasons a slightly lower aspect ratio was chosen compared the calculated optimum. This or similar design strategies have proven so far to be successful. The author recently saw a new parametric study [11] considering whether split flaps, slotted flaps and wing chord extending flaps were promising. A new model of thermals was used based on recent flight measurements. The measurements fit well in older ones, as can be observed in Fig. 6. The mathematical model seems very attractive.

A designer’s experience

Studying turbulence in the boundary layer of aero- and hydrodynamic bodies, as well as that in the atmosphere that causes gust loads on airplanes, the author has found that one-dimensional turbulence is extremely stable, as, for example, the two vortices behind a high flying jet or a tornado which have a long life. Two-dimensional turbulence
like smoke rings or torus-type thermals is very stable too, but three-dimensional turbulence is quite unstable, as is the case with our beloved cumulus clouds, and follow Kolmogorov’s law. This law says, that the energy of the turbulence stays constant when the big “eddies” split up in smaller ones in a cascade-process.

Only when the eddies get in the millimeter diameter range the energy dissipates into heat. This knowledge coincides much with the author’s experience as a pilot.

- Thermals are most turbulent and narrow near the ground.
- Thermals get wider and smoother with altitude and the optimum bank angle gets flatter.
- When no wind shear disturbs thermals they get very smooth at altitude and have no strong core. Birds which out-climbed us low are soaring with us at altitude.

In an early overhead foil the author characterized the different thermals types, as shown in Fig. 7.

Concluding remarks

The author proposes to modify the models of thermal such that they include the “hat-type” thermal and that they vary in width and size of turbulence eddies with altitude. In this way, the models should be more accurate and provide a better representation of what the gliders experience.

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References