

LEONARD A. NIEMI (2004)
(1917-1995)



Leonard Niemi's entire life from high school on was devoted to flight in one form or another. For the soaring community his life efforts culminated in the most successful high-performance American sailplane ever produced, the *Sisu*. The name reflects Niemi's Finnish heritage and, broadly translated, means "guts."

The *Sisu*, first flown in 1958, was immediately recognized as an outstanding performer. It was the national championship mount of John Ryan in 1962, Dean Svec in 1965 and A.J. Smith in 1967. It set three world records with Al Parker out of Odessa, TX. Niemi's 11 production *Sisu* sailplanes dominated soaring competitions until the arrival of European glass ships. It is ironic that laminar-flow airfoils like the ones Niemi used on his *Sisu* had to migrate across the Atlantic Ocean to reach their ultimate potential in the hands of European designers.

Niemi learned the fundamentals of aircraft mechanics in his teens. He gained experience in every phase of aircraft construction at Bell and Curtiss-Wright in Buffalo, NY. He spent a year as an aircraft mechanics instructor and then was designated as a plant layout engineer the year before his 1943 induction into the U.S. Army Air Force.

Post-World War II, he attended the University of Michigan and received his B.S. in Aero Engineering in 1951. After graduation, Niemi worked at Bell, Frye and Convair aircraft companies. Then in 1960 he and Jack Baugh organized Arlington Aircraft to manufacture the *Sisu*. It became the world's highest performing production sailplane.

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Leonard Niemi holds Silver # 456 earned in 1960.

Len Niemi at the controls for the test flight of the *Sisu 1*



Photo by Charles Dobkins *Soaring*, March 1961, page 3

Sisu on display at the 2005 SSA Convention, *Soaring*, April 2005, page 22

Photo by Alexis Latner



Len Niemi “tries on” the cockpit of the *Monarch* as the designer Jim Marske looks on.
Soaring, November 1985, page 18



Arlington Sisu 1A on display at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum,
Udvar Hazy Center

Leonard Niemi's *Sisu* is the most successful American competition sailplane ever flown. John Ryan in 1962, Dean Svec in 1985 and A.J. Smith in 1967, all won the United States National Soaring Championships flying a *Sisu*. In 1967 Bill Ivans set a national 100 km speed record of 84 mph flying from El Mirage California. The *Sisu* on display at the Smithsonian was flown by Alvin H. Parker – the first pilot to exceed the symbolic barrier of 1000 km (1,042 km; 647 miles) July 31, 1964, from his hometown of Odessa, TX .