

## Early Motorgliding in the USA

By Stephen Dee, SSF Trustee, DPE

The Soaring Safety Foundation is the dedicated “training and safety arm” of the Soaring Society of America. As such, most of our articles in this column are focused on current training and safety practices. I am going to deviate a bit from the norm and take you on a brief walk back in time to one of the early pursuits of motorgliding here in the USA.

To set the stage, the year was 1967, and I had recently soloed under the supervision of several great Instructors at the Adrian Soaring Club. My mentors included such notables as US Soaring Champion AJ Smith, Rudy Mozer, (Eric Mozer’s dad, and Schleicher rep to the USA) Rudy Wolf, Club Operations Officer, and Rudy Von Baumgarten. (WWII Luftwaffe veteran) I referred to the latter as the “Three Rudy’s.” The first and the last of the Rudy’s play a big role in this story. Rudy Mozer was always trying to make sure the first model of any new Schleicher glider would either come to our club, or be sold to one of our members. My CFI, Slim Jost, got a Ka-6e, the club got an early ASK-13, Rudy Mozer imported an ASW-15 for himself and Eric, and AJ Smith got an ASW-12. All were fascinating to me, but the germination of this story was when Rudy Von Baumgarten ordered an ASK-14. Whenever a new ship arrived on the field, there was always admiration and speculation, especially when it was the first of its type in the country. Most pilots ogled the ASW-15 with longing, and absolutely drooled over the ASW-12, but none caused the spectacle that the first ASK-14 did.

I’m sure that Rudy did not intend to ignite a firestorm within the club membership with his purchase, but he sure did. As certain as a few pilots were in favor of Self-Launching, the majority used terms to describe the new ship that could not be spoken in polite company. The prevailing thought among glider pilots at the time was that if you wanted an engine in your aircraft, you should fly an airplane! As a youngster recently soloed, having spent months waiting in line for tows to get my 18 flights to achieve solo proficiency, I was all for it. I remember the frustration of canceling more days than flying, some due to weather, but many due to the lack of a tow pilot. In my view, eliminating the tow plane was a great idea! Little did I know then that I would later pursue Self-Launching with vigor, and maximize the benefits offered.

It might help to describe the ASK-14 for those not familiar with it. It looked like what you would get if you took a Ka-6e, and mounted a tiny 4 cylinder, 2-stroke 25 hp Hirth engine in the nose under a streamlined cowling that was fitted with a 2-blade feathering propeller. It featured a bubble canopy and low wing configuration. It was a tail dragger, the main landing gear was retractable, and there was a fixed skid fitted at the tail. Self-Launchers with steerable tailwheels would follow many years later. The cockpit was classic Schleicher, with a few extra knobs and instruments crammed into the panel to facilitate the engine.

I well recall the first time I saw Rudy fly the -14. Watching from the flight line while awaiting my turn for a tow, Rudy climbed aboard and started cranking, or more accurately, pulling the engine to life. Nope, there was no electric starter, and a pull cord emanated from the center of the instrument panel. On that typical humid Michigan soaring day, it did not take long before Rudy was sweating, and cursing the cantankerous Hirth engine as it refused to start. I

chuckled inwardly, wondering what the former FW-190 pilot must be thinking. After numerous attempts, the engine fired with a puff of blue smoke, and off went Rudy. Once airborne, the -14 was delightful to fly, with the performance and handling of the Ka-6e from which it was derived.

Unlike the snobbish resistance to motorgliders in the USA, Europe embraced them mightily, and the first World Motorglider competition was held in 1970. ASK-14's took second, third, and fourth places in the Single Place category that year. In 1971, Soaring Magazine Editor Bennet Rogers set the first USA record in a motorglider by making a 330 km Out and Return from Rosamond, CA in his ASK-14.

Over the years, Self-Launch sailplanes have advanced in design sophistication to the point where powered gliders from all the major manufacturers constitute 70-80% of production. There are several big reasons why pilots opt for Self-Launching. First is the flexibility of being able to fly from any airfield. Trailer in, rig, and fly-no tow plane required. Second is the ability to extend a soaring flight when the immediate area lacks lift-the onboard engine can make transiting a dead zone a real possibility, to continue soaring under distant clouds unreachable without power. Third is the ability to self-retrieve. I well remember the days of my dutiful wife dragging a 38 ft trailer through west Texas to fetch me when I landed out in my Diamant 18. She was surprisingly supportive of my interest in buying a Self-Launcher-no more crewing!

Today, flying powered gliders is embraced by individual pilots, some clubs, and even a few commercial operators. Looking back to the introduction of the ASK-14 provides a glimpse into how the concept was introduced to the USA.