

More is better?

By Tom Johnson

Believe it or not, flying a sailplane cross-country, or in a competition, or even thermalling at the field, requires many of the same skill sets as flying tactical jet aircraft off of an aircraft carrier.

You fly your sailplane in a highly dynamic environment with constantly changing conditions. You are constantly making tactical decisions about what to do next. You fly in close proximity with other similar aircraft. And you fly with, and compete against your peers in overt and subtle ways.

Most flying involves taking off, going to the destination, and landing. Challenging in its own right with weather and traffic and such, but not in the same league.

In carrier flying, we launch off the boat, much like we launch via the tow. We rendezvous overhead the boat, much like we join the gaggle above the field. We press out on the mission, much like our trekking out cross-country. We come speeding back to the only place to really land for miles. And then 20 or more of us land on a tiny space. Thanks to GPS, the first one to the chalkboard no longer wins the fight, but the stories of our adventures begin immediately.

The Navy figured out that the “sweet spot” for tactical flying on the safety curve was at 22 hours per month.

Fly less than 22 hours per month and you are behind the aircraft and not proficient in the maneuvers required to complete the mission. Out of necessity to stay alive, your vigilance is high. Your attention to detail is also high.

Fly more than 22 hours per month, and now things really start to slow down and your comfort level in really dynamic and dangerous environments begins to rise. Because flying high speed aircraft close to the ground at government expense is really fun, you start to look around and notice interesting but not necessarily important details. Your confidence in your abilities can easily outstrip your ability to deal with dynamic situations. Your reaction time can be razor thin. Your comfort level affects your ability to be as diligent as required.

In both cases you're not at your peak, so you use your risk management skills to compensate and keep things from getting too far out of bounds.

The same thing happens at the glider-port.

You pull the gliders out after a winter off, or your slow season, and your attention level and diligence are high. That first launch of the year is always challenging. You remember that this used to be really easy and fun. After the landing, hopefully your CFIG patiently goes over your flight with you. Every part of the flight is covered. What you did well and what you did bad, you probably know without having to be told. You go up again, and now things are better. It all starts to come back.

But you still have that little edge. It is familiar, but you realize deep down that you are a bit behind. You are looking out for the unexpected, because even the normal can be unexpected after some time out of the saddle.

Fast forward to the end of the summer, or the end of the season. You are up to speed, up on the step as they say. It has been a fun, invigorating season. But, now some things different are surprising you. Nothing dangerous on its own, but odd nonetheless. Whereas early in the season on tow, you were concentrating of the flying only. Now you are comfortable enough to look around, watch the PDA, and you can take your eye off the towplane to mark the spot on the ground where the lift is.

Much like the proficient carrier pilot, you are now vulnerable to different, yet equally dangerous threats.

The key to flying safely when you are proficient is to analyze and plan for the threats as if you were not proficient. Always behave like it is the first time. It can be hard, but you must remain focused on the task at hand, even if it is a simple task.

Today's launch has as much potential for failure as the first. Are you ready? Did you review your launch failure plan? Are you noting the various points in the launch where your options change?

Was your preflight planning adequate? Was your flight computer programmed properly? Did you analyze the weather and plan accordingly?

Did you give yourself adequate land-out options?

When you got back to the field, did you do a steady, boring, unremarkable entry into the pattern?

Did you analyze the wind on return? Did you plan your pattern for safety or convenience of your parking spot?

Some people have accused me of trying to take the fun out of the sport. Maybe so, but like carrier aviation, the launch, en-route phase, and recovery are the mundane tasks that must be done to get to the fun stuff in the middle. The key to safely doing these mundane tasks is to not treat them as mundane. In fact, try to make them mundane by removing as many threats as possible.

The bottom line is that the more you fly, the better you get. But this can allow you to normalize high threat areas and let your guard down. That's when the monster will strike. That's when your comfort, preparation, and ability all enter the game.

Hopefully preparation and ability will win out.

Remain vigilant.