



A Big Enough Blanket

By Tom Johnson – SSF Trustee

At one time in my life, I worked for the power company “splitting atoms for peace” in the Chicago area. The regulators would tell us, the Quality Assurance staff, that our safety blanket could only cover 4 of the 6 plants we had making nuclear power. We would move the blanket to cover one area, but the area we left uncovered would almost immediately begin to present problems.

So it is with safety in the soaring world. As volunteers for the Soaring Safety Foundation, we can only provide so much coverage to our community. This will and does lead to us having to prioritize where we direct our limited assets.

It might do well to let you know how and why we make the decisions we make as a group to try and get the safety message out to the soaring world.

When I began working with the SSF 16 years ago, the landing pattern was the leading cause of accidents and fatalities.

We started to look at the accidents and came to a stark realization. The people having accidents and fatalities were doing exactly what we, the experienced CFGI, taught them to do. The learners were taught to go to the Initial Point in the pattern and to then fly a nice rectangular approach to a landing.

Unfortunately, we incorrectly believed the learner would realize that if they did NOT have the altitude required to fly a complete pattern, they would modify it. We realized that the ability to modify the pattern was essential to reducing the number of fatal accidents. We began to develop another method.

The “Goal Oriented Approach” emphasized a safe outcome to any approach, and not necessarily a strictly flown pattern.

Our emphasis on the “Goal Oriented Approach” appears to have helped lower the rate and number of fatalities occurring as a result of stalling and spinning into the ground on the turn to final.

About 8 years ago as we saw the number of fatalities in the landing pattern decrease, the Launch Failure accident (Premature Termination of the Tow PT3) fatalities began to emerge. Pilots were killing themselves doing PT3 training. At one point around 2020, one in four fatalities in our community were happening on a planned training or checking event.

We looked at how people were training for the PT3. We realized the training emphasized turning back to the airport as soon as the PT3 was recognized. Pilots were beginning an





aggressive turn back to the field without re-establishing an attitude that would allow the glider to maintain flying speed. Pilots were also taking a “one size fits all” approach to briefing any PT3 that might occur.

We started to emphasize a detailed PT3 plan for every flight and bringing in all the players on a PT3 training event. The learner is given a thorough brief about what will happen, what to expect, and common errors. Hopefully the learner is also fully de-briefed on what happened.

I found that when I started using this method, the learners made the same mistakes at the same time for the same reasons, but now the de-brief was much better because it reviewed and explained what they saw.

Our emphasis on the PT3 training appears to be making some headway because in 2023 we had NO PT3 accidents or fatalities.

About 4 years ago, we started to see the PT3 fatalities begin to drop, Cruise Flight accidents and fatalities began to come forth. The leading cause is now, by far, stalling the aircraft while thermalling at low attitude.

I do not care how good a pilot you are or how good you think you are, at some point you become physically too low to recover from a stall before you impact the ground.

An outlanding is no fun. No one likes to land out. It is part of our sport and you have to accept it.

We, as a community, need to have a methodology for mitigating stall/spin at low altitude away from the home airport.

We realize you MUST have a pre-determined set of parameters that once they are met, you put the gear down and land. If I reach 700 ft AGL in my Ventus, the gear comes down and I land. I do not allow myself to become deluded into thinking that 600 ft, or 550 ft, is acceptable today.

We also need to make it socially unacceptable to brag about a “low save” out on course. The person doing the bragging must understand their actions endanger our sport. Firmly tell this person “NO”. Let them know their actions are unsafe and not conducive to a long soaring career.

As you can hopefully see, we direct our efforts where the data tells us the problem is.

Which brings me back to the blanket. The SSF Trustees and Advisors do not have the time and resources to provide coverage for the entire community.





We must therefore rely on you, the local pilot to keep our message going. We must rely on you keeping safety at the forefront of your operation. You know your local operation better than anyone at the SSF ever can. You can take the ideas and concepts we believe work, develop and modify them, and implement them at your operation.

The SSF can bring a speaker to your safety event. We can bring someone to observe your operation and provide feedback on your strengths and weaknesses. We can help train your CFGs to become better at what they do. All of this will help make the blanket bigger and able to cover the entire community.

We really want our safety blanket to be a big fluffy quilt put together by you'all.

