

Normalization of Deviance Part Two
By Ron Ridenour SSF Trustee

Last month in Soaring Magazine, Bob Wander did an excellent job of defining Normalization of Deviance. He raised our awareness of how easily and insidiously our safety standards can be compromised. As he said, "It's human nature". This month, I will provide some ideas of how to avoid and correct the erosion of standards on a personal as well and as an organizational level.

Earlier this year, during the SSF's Safety Seminar at the SSA Convention in Reno, I presented the topic "Normalization of Deviation", which is the human tendency to repeatedly push the safety boundaries to the point that the deviation becomes the new normal operating procedure. Here are some of the highlights of that talk.

The FAA allows certificated pilots to assemble gliders. This privilege is trained by instructors and evaluated during the certification process by the DPE. However, through the years many accidents have been traced to improper assembly of the sailplane. It has been strongly advised by the SSA and SSF to avoid distractions during the glider assembly process, yet we have all observed pilots allowing themselves to be distracted during this activity. Remembering to follow assembly checklists, accomplish critical assembly checks, and perform a positive control check after the assembly process is complete will help in reducing the risk of an assembly error. These are the normal operating procedures that will mitigate the deviations. The SSA recognizes the importance of this process by requiring pilots, flying during contests, to validate that these checks have been accomplished by signing their 'wing tape' before beginning the tow.

The low altitude 'save' has been talked about for as long as I can remember. Other pilots listen intently as the 'save' is recanted in great detail. Unfortunately, many of those pilots who have been unsuccessful during this maneuver are not around to tell their story. As a CFIG, with thousands of hours of observation from the back seat, I recommend that a 'hard deck' altitude is chosen by the pilot before the flight is begun. This is the time to make a rational decision about what the safe altitude at which thermaling can be accomplished. Each day that altitude should be evaluated based on weather, terrain, type of sailplane and pilot currency and proficiency. This is a procedure that will allow a pilot to operate within normal safe operating practices. Not thermaling at altitudes below your personal 'hard deck' altitude has been the recommendation of the SSF for many years.

Another aspect of the normalization of deviance is that of intentional non-compliance with safe practices and regulations. Some pilots have decided that the rules apply to others and not to them. Thermaling up to cloud base, flying low high-speed passes over the runway before landing, flying without being in compliance with the Flight Review requirements, and flying when medically impaired because "I don't need a medical to fly gliders" are but a few examples of this intentional non-compliance. The antidote to these hazardous attitudes is to "Follow the Rules". Most of the rules and safe practices that have been developed are a result of an aircraft accident or incident.

Many clubs and commercial operations around the country allow take-off and landing operations that conflict with each other as a Standard Operating Practice, SOP (i.e. take-off in one direction and land in the opposite direction). This kind of operation is sometimes done as a matter of convenience with little or no consideration for safety. Convenience almost always compromises Safety. There are many factors that should be considered when conducting this kind of operation, the next paragraph highlights a few that we have discovered in our club.



Our club flies off a grass field which can be soft and have high grass during many months of the year (this spring has been unusually wet and soft). Combine these factors with a tail-wind on takeoff, a heavy glider (ballasted) or an underpowered tow plane and the end of the runway can come up very fast! Oh, and did I mention that there is a public road that crosses at the end of the runway and we have new tow pilots doing the towing? At our spring safety meeting we discussed how there is a great amount of peer pressure, especially for new members, to conform to the club operation even though they may have reservations about the operation. After a robust discussion, we decided that if someone in the operation (i.e. glider pilot, tow pilot, ground crew or ANYONE) has any doubts or concerns then the operation should get additional scrutiny before continuing. Your club should establish clear rules to follow when dealing with both emergency and every-day operations. Having and adhering to club policies and procedures is an essential part of an organizations 'Safety Culture'. Having a Safety Culture that is supported by the organization and everyone within the organization is one method to avoid an erosion of standards. This is a method to avoid the 'normalization of deviance'.

Instructors can assist pilots by helping them to identify deviations from the norm during such activities as flight reviews and FAA Wings activities. Instructors also need to be mindful of deviations that they observe during any training they conduct, remembering that a pilot is more likely to remember what he/she learns first due to the law of primacy. As instructors we have an obligation to recognize and correct any deviations that we observe during such training activity.

The Soaring Safety Foundation (SSF) offers three hands-on programs that will aid your organization in evaluating your safety culture. Our Flight Instructor Revalidation Course provides state of the art training techniques while revalidating your flight instructor certificate. Our site surveys offer an outside and objective opinion of your operating practices and safety culture. We do not share this information with anyone other than the operation that we are reviewing. Our third offer is to provide experienced instructor personnel to conduct a safety seminar at your site. Go to our website at www.soaringsafety.org to find more information about these and other resources that are available.

In conclusion, pilots need to recognize and correct deviations before they become the norm. Develop strategies to maintain your pilot currency, proficiency and knowledge including using the FAA Wings program and online seminars offered by the SSA, SSF or other organizations. Take the time to discuss deviations, that you observe, with other pilots and decide how to correct those deviations back to a safer operation. Continue to exercise good judgment and decision making skills along with practicing good risk management skills by using the P.A.V.E. model. Have a safe soaring season!

