



## The Tow Goes On

By Tom Johnson

When you walk on to an airliner, you probably realize the Captain is the one in charge. But what you may not know is that a Dispatcher, somewhere in a windowless room deep in the bowels of the airline operations building, is also jointly responsible for the safe operation of the flight.

The Captain and the Dispatcher both must agree that the flight can be conducted safely. They can both stop the operation at any time if they believe continuing would be unsafe. They can both declare an emergency and get outside agencies involved in the flight.

This requirement is mandated by the regulations.

And so it is with a glider launch.

Unless you are self-launching, you require the assistance of a tow pilot or a ground launch operator. Someone must agree with you that the flight is safe to continue. That person can also stop the operation at any time. And that person is as intimately involved in the launch as you are.

This is also mandated by the regulations. FAR 91.309(5) states: "The pilots of the towing aircraft and the glider have agreed upon a general course of action, including takeoff and release signals, airspeeds, and emergency procedures for each pilot".

You, as the Pilot-in-Command of the glider, are required to get together with your tow pilot and come to an agreed upon course of action. You probably had to do a tow pilot brief as part of your rating checkride.

The real question is not whether you know there is a requirement, but does your operation make sure that everyone abides by it? And how do they go about this?

At our operation, as the tow plane taxis up, the glider PIC points to where they want to go and they hold up the appropriate fingers to indicate the altitude. If there is a desire to do any maneuvering on tow, the PIC notifies the tow pilot via the radio. This is also the procedure should a different than normal airspeed be desired.

Signals and emergency procedures are standard to our operation, and all of our pilots are expected to know these prior to solo operations. For those of you who like videos instead of books, the SSF has a one showing the standard SSA signals at <http://soaringsafety.org/learning/FTvideos.html#video5>

Hopefully your operation has something similar set up. Hopefully you are introduced to this procedure from the start of your association with the group. And hopefully, there are individuals, CFIG's, club officers, commercial owners/managers, etc., who make sure these procedures are followed.

A good tool for remembering what to have in a tow pilot brief is A-A-A-S-E: Area to be towed to, Airspeed required, Altitude desired, Standard Signals, Emergency procedure. In reality, this works well and can be very quick. For example: "Please tow me to the northwest at 65 KIAS up to 3000 ft AGL, standard club signals and emergency operations". Briefing complete.

Unfortunately, we have had a couple of incidents this summer that indicate very strongly that the required briefing is not taking place.





For example, a heavily ballasted sailplane being towed too slowly may be unable to climb away from the ground after the tow plane has lifted off. The tow plane may also then be unable to climb if the sailplane is in a stalled condition. This can and does put both aircraft in a dangerous situation. Both the tow pilot and the sailplane pilot need to know what airspeed they need to operate at.

Another scenario is a low performance glider being towed downwind over unlandable terrain. If the glider has to release before an altitude from which a safe return can be made, the glider pilot has no options should an abnormal situation arise.

These risks can be mitigated by ensuring that the tow pilot and the glider pilot both agree to the course of action they are about to undertake.

It is incumbent on club management, commercial owners, and CFIG's that they reinforce the need for the tow pilot brief. Make it so every member expects it to happen and to say something when it doesn't.

So embrace the joint responsibility and do your part to keep the pilot on the other end of the rope safe. You will be glad you did.

