



What's in Your Wallet?

By Tom Johnson – SSF Trustee

One credit card offers airline miles on all your purchases. They claim it allows you to travel with fewer restrictions and hassle. Their tag line, “what’s in your wallet?”, got me thinking about what is in my wallet.

A look through my wallet at the cards and such reveal who I think myself to be. My FAA pilot certificate is one of the most valuable things in my wallet. It allows me to travel without restrictions to some of the most exciting places in the world. If you are reading this, you know where I am talking about. And one of the great things about being involved with the Soaring Safety Foundation (SSF) is the opportunity to meet many of our people and see many of the operations.

Like all the operational squadrons I saw in the Navy, each soaring operation has a personality. The personality reflects the values the leadership deems to be important. And those are the values new members may feel pressure to conform to.

Many years ago, an aircraft carrier had two different A-4 squadrons. One squadron did the entire combat six-month deployment without an aircraft lost. The other squadron, flying basically the same missions against the same threats with similar tactical results, had almost half of their pilots end up as POW's or were killed in action.

What was the difference?

It came down to squadron culture.

One squadron carefully analyzed the threats, mission objectives, and their own capabilities. They demanded of their maintenance personnel fully operational aircraft and systems. They did not add unnecessary risk.

The other squadron had a strap it on and go mentality.

The results were predictable.

Each of their wallets had similar cards; the A-4 NATOPS, the Airwing SOP, and other Navy specific operational instructions.

Sailplane clubs and operations are very similar to a Navy squadron. Each has its own personality based upon where and what they fly, and what they value as important. The values that you see when you visit an operation, are created by the influential members and mimicked by the people who have not been there very long.

At the sailplane operation, each of our wallets has similar cards; our FAA pilot certificate, SSA membership card, and maybe an FAA Medical Certificate. But how we play those cards varies from place to place.

The members of the squadron got what they demanded of each other. The Commanding Officer can demand certain actions be taken, but the members down the line make it happen. If they do not support the CO, very little will get done. Conversely, the CO must listen to the valid concerns of the members and institute or modify policies to enable positive change.





It is the same in a glider operation. If the club president demands a policy but the CFG's or the high time pilots reject the policy, it is not going to happen. Likewise, the president must listen to the members and determine their values and implement policies to safely achieve said values.

The rub in all of this is what values you decide to demand. If you are demanding values that place an emphasis on safety and prudent operation, that is what you will get. If on the other hand, you are demanding values that let you perform high risk maneuvers with impunity, that too is what you will get.

The pilots in the squadron that lost half their members knew how to mitigate the risks, but they chose not to.

Pilots in the soaring community are intelligent, motivated people who know what the risks are and how to mitigate them.

The choice then is up to you. Do you demand actions and policies that respect the risks we take, or do you strap it on and go?

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