



Getting It Right the First Time
Steve Dee, SSF Trustee

After many years of flying high and low flying aircraft, fast and slow movers, peace-time and combat, (fortunately, mostly peace-time) I have concluded that aviation is really a very simple linear activity. Regardless of the mount, flying requires that certain things are done in a certain way, and in a very certain order. Get them out of order, and it generally does not bode well.

During this year's Auxiliary Powered Soaring Association sponsored gathering at Parowan, Utah, some fantastic soaring was had by lots of pilots. Many in attendance broke personal distance and speed records, and, in fact, the string of good days stretched out so long that it took tremendous mental discipline to take a day off and rest. It was during this period that we had a few close calls that I'd like to summarize in the interest of learning a lesson from them.

This basic lesson is simply focusing on the task at hand. With such good conditions forecast each day, it became feasible and reasonable to successively plan longer and more ambitious tasks. In the process of launching and boldly going where individually you had never gone before, the boring details of launch preparation started to pale compared with the excitement of new achievements, and posting new records. Consequently, we had some small incidents that revealed our inappropriate focus: an unscheduled relight to allow the oxygen system to be turned on; flying for a couple hours and then realizing that the gear was down; doing the same with the canopy: closed and latched, but not quite really centered/locked, and therefore, leaking, until one especially good bump slapped it into place. . .

Then we upped the ante on excitement. On two successive days, we had someone launch, work the local area attempting to get out on course, and find themselves falling out, resulting in a hasty retreat back to the airport for a relight, dumping water in a rush. Unfortunately, both of these arrivals were in the face of Self-Launch departures. Fortunately, both avoided mishap through last minute maneuvering, but it was certainly exciting for all parties! This string of events lead me to believe that our group was too focused on the task of the day, and not focusing on the task at hand; our linear string was getting out of order. So how did we fix it? We had a brief Safety Stand Down at the next day's Pilot Meeting, and laid everything out in the open, concentrating on the "what" of the events, not the "who," and tried to identify how to regain our focus. We identified the following factors:

- 1) We all needed to use a pre-flight checklist that included every factor affecting a flight-not just the ABCCCCDE's, but the important additional items like Nav database loaded, checked, and on; daily Task loaded and activated; oxygen system on and tested; relief system hooked up and ready; lunch on board and stowed securely, land-out kit aboard and stowed, water ballast and drinking water aboard, stowed, and accessible.
- 2) We needed to better communicate our intentions in the landing pattern. The radio is one of the best Situation Awareness tools we have, but if you don't use it, it doesn't help much. Realizing that talking may take a back seat to performing a challenging close-in maneuver to land, we also needed to be more vigilant for unannounced arrivals, especially those from an unexpected direction. Along those lines, we also recognized that many Self-Launch cockpits are so noisy during takeoff that even with headsets, meaningful radio reception is limited. Consequently, it becomes even more important for us to verify that the takeoff flight path is clear prior to commencing a Self-Launch.
- 3) We needed a better operational plan. The runway situation at Parowan is such that morning launches are preferably to the north, due to the proximity of the ramp, and the downhill slope to the north. The prevailing winds are normally from the south, and so a close watch of the tailwind component is vital; sometime around mid-day, most pilots would choose to launch instead to the south, into the wind. (see Airnav.com for Parowan, UT to help visualize) At the same time, recoveries are preferably to the south, due to the southerly winds and uphill slope. These factors combined for a built-in conflict should someone need to land south during the time frame that launches were still taking place to the north.

After that very thing happened twice, we decided we better act. Our plan was simple; we manned the start grid with a "Ground Boss" with a portable VHF radio, who was in position to see and direct all launches, and dictate at what point during the day the launch operation would "turn around," versus allowing individual pilots the choice. This extra supervision provided the Situation Awareness we needed to keep everyone marshaled safely.

After incorporating the above, the remainder of our time at Parowan went well. Staying focused on the task at hand has to be job number one in aviation; it's up to all of us to do just that. Hopefully, that will see us all through many more years of high and low, fast and slow, peaceful safe flying!

