

Towing Gliders is Easy

By Tom Johnson SSF Trustee

Grandpa Pettibone is an icon to those who flew in the Navy. He is the fictional cantankerous CFI who reviews the accidents and incidents of intrepid Naval Aviators like Youthly Puresome and Truly Handsome. He looks at the events from a perspective of disbelief that highly trained individuals could make such dumb decisions. Of course, the implicit joke is that flying tactical Navy airplanes appears to be easy, but in reality is a very hard and demanding in extremely dynamic situations.

Such is life as a tow pilot. While towing gliders in normal operations can be extremely routine, and at times, downright boring, it has great potential to jump up and bite us.

Being a good tow pilot is hard work. The hours are long, and the pay is poor. The workspace is hot, cramped, and loud. The tow pilot is expected to do it all without complaint and with little support. Yet when it comes to the application of safety resources and pilot training, the lowly tow pilot sometimes gets left in the dust.

If Grandpa P. were involved in soaring, he could have a field day with our tow pilots.

He would be amazed that experienced tow pilots could let their towing currency lapse. How hard is it to read FAR 61.69, he would lament? Performing 3 PIC flights in a glider being aero-towed, or 3 actual or simulated tows while accompanied by a qualified tow pilot in a powered aircraft with dual controls within the preceding 24 calendar months would fill the bill. Making hundreds of tows in the Pawnee during the last two years does NOT, by itself make you current to tow. Plain and simple, black and white.

And on the other hand, if you haven't been PIC of a tow plane in ten years but meet the requirements of FAR 61.69, you can legally tow. Legally, you are current to tow, but probably not proficient. How do you explain that to Grandpa after you bend the metal of the towplane?

He would ask the same questions I would ask. How many of our tow pilots are properly trained and does the club management understand or track the currency requirement?

The best way to keep him off your back is to have a system in place to track your clubs tow pilot currency and to give recurrent training.

Grandpa P. will tell you that one of the keys to flying off the ship safely, is that the launch procedure is the same every time. Have you ever been to an operation and every launch seems to be different? You ask the pilots and ground crew what the launch procedure is and you get a collective shrug. Barney likes to do it this way, but Fred thinks it is better this way.

What are you, the tow pilot, supposed to do about this? Well, not much until you can get the operation leadership together and develop a plan. Work it out and try it out. Make sure everyone in the organization knows what the procedure is. Have someone who can enforce the implementation of the procedures. Try it for a while and revisit your plan. Tweak it if necessary. Make sure new and old alike get on board with the plan.

Finally, Grandpa P. would screw himself into the overhead if he found out that more than 1/3 of our insurance claims for tow planes DO NOT involve flight. One third of the claims are for people taxi-ing, doing run-ups, or just repositioning the aircraft. He would scream he was being horse-whipped.

On this point, I have to agree with Grandpa P.

Moving the aircraft on the field has to be one of the highest threat environments our pilots operate in. Cars, children, dogs, poles, trailers, and other aircraft are just a few of the many items waiting to strike the tow plane.

How you taxi the aircraft is just as important as looking out for obstacles.

The stick should be kept all the way back most of the time in a conventional gear aircraft that is on the ground and moving. The idea is that you want to keep the tailwheel firmly planted on the ground. This helps improve directional control with the steerable tailwheel. Application of power to get rolling can produce enough wind to lift the tail. Slow speed is when you need directional control from the tailwheel the most. It also helps keep a sudden brake application from causing a nose over and propeller strike.

When moving in a tailwind, still keep the stick back. The tailwind has to be pretty strong to exceed both the combined taxi speed and propwash speed. Greater than a 10 knot tailwind is a good place to begin thinking about using forward stick during taxi.

It is also important to have the ailerons positioned correctly during taxi. If the wind is from the front, position the aileron into the wind, ie right crosswind, right stick. If the wind is from the rear, position the aileron away from the wind, ie right crosswind, left stick.

How fast you taxi is important also. Don't taxi so fast that you cannot stop the aircraft if someone or something runs out in front of you. Keep the speed reasonable and always have a place to go should a brake fail or a tire go flat

During the engine run-up, keep the stick firmly in your lap and the brakes held firm. Most of our tow aircraft at run-up RPM produce quite a bit of power, and a lack of vigilance can easily lead to a nose over or propeller strike.

Being the good guy Grandpa P. is, he would take Youthly and Truly under his wing and emphasize the important points in a firm yet kindly manner. Knowledge of FAR's and operational procedures is basic to the job. Vigilance during taxi is imperative. Moving at a reasonable speed is essential. Understanding how to taxi the aircraft is vital. And understanding where the stick needs to be positioned can help prevent an incident or accident. And Grandpa would sternly tell them not to taxi so fast that stomping on the brakes would cause them to nose over.

Remember, Grandpa Pettibone is almost 80 years old and doesn't like to get upset. Practice safe ground and flight operations in the tow plane, and let him enjoy the afternoon on the porch.