

You Can See a lot by Watching

By Tom Johnson

One of the perks of being a professional pilot is being able to jumpseat around the country. Sometimes you get to ride in the back, and sometimes you have to be in the cockpit.

Riding with the crew is usually an enjoyable experience. It is enlightening to see how others in the profession view the world, and how they operate their cockpits. If the aircraft is the same type you fly at your company, you can actually learn a lot about how you do business. You can compare how each of you do the same tasks.

What you learn is that your company does some things well, and their company does other things well. You find that sometimes one of you makes a simple task very difficult and complicated. It is remarkable how procedures can vary dramatically for, what is essentially, the exact same type of airplane.

If you pick the crew's brain, you can learn the technical reasons why they do things the way they do. Most of the time, the reason is technically sound. But sometimes the reason is very arbitrary.

And so it goes with soaring operations.

Next time your travels take you near another soaring site, go visit it. Even if you do not fly, look around, meet the friendly folks, and take copious notes about how they do things. Don't walk around with a note pad, but with an open mind and an eye for detail. Watch closely and ask questions. Engage them and get them talking about the most interesting subject they know; themselves and how they fly gliders.

Look to see how they get into the glider. Does someone hold the nose down and help tend to the canopy? Do they help the pilot strap in? Does this helper make sure the wing or tail dolly is removed, and the ballast installed? Or are they ignored and treated like necessary yet inconvenient tools for launch?

Watch the pilots. What is their demeanor? Are they focused on the task at hand, or are they involved in matters that are best left for later? Observe their checklist discipline. Do they do a checklist? Do they all do the same checklist? Do they read it out loud? Is there an active discussion and review of the emergency plan? Are they actively looking for traffic and watching what is going on? Is there a tow-pilot brief conducted as per FAR 91.309?

Watch the launch and compare it to how things happen at your home field. Does everyone do things the same way? Is the wing-runner actively involved in the launch or are they just hooking up the rope and staging the towplane?

Ask yourself if you could figure out what their launch procedure is after watching a few launches.

After the glider and towplane take-off watch what they do. Does the towplane follow the same departure path every launch? Does the towplane's departure path keep the glider in position to make a successful return should a pre-mature release occur? Or does the towplane turn and head downwind at low altitude with the 2-33 in trail?

Watch the gliders land. What do they do upon landing and during the roll-out? Where do they end up, and is someone there to meet them immediately? Does the crew smartly exit the aircraft and begin moving the glider clear of the runway?

If the flight were an instructional flight, does it appear a de-briefing was taking place at some point?

Remember, the point of this exercise is to observe, not to judge. Observe what they do to help question what you do. Take those observations back home and apply them to your operation. Maybe they do something much better than you for a better reason.

Maybe you can try this at your home base without traveling away. Look at your operation as if you were someone trying to figure out what is going on. Is there a sound, purposeful reason you do something? Or is it because that was the way you did it back in 1974? Try and get consensus that there is a problem and that it needs to be fixed.

No operation can be perfect, but we all should be continually striving to improve our flying skills.

Fly safe, and keep a watchful eye out.