

Towpilot Currency and Proficiency

by Burt Compton, Trustee of the Soaring Safety Foundation.

You are the Pilot In Command of your glider and ready to launch by aerotow. You assume that your towpilot in the towplane is “current” because:

- a) The towpilot has flown three solo tows in the towplane in the past 24 months.
- b) The towpilot was a passenger in a glider three times in the past year.
- c) The towpilot is also an airline pilot and receives recurrent training.
- d) The towpilot logged ten flights as PIC of a towplane before May 17, 1967.
- e) None of the above

FAR 61.69 allows a pilot already endorsed to tow to maintain currency by two methods:

Method 1. Your towpilot must make three actual or simulated tows in the preceding 24 months (don't stop reading here) while accompanied by another qualified, current towpilot. Did you catch that? Another current towpilot must ride with your towpilot inside an airplane and sign their logbook in order that your towpilot will meet the currency requirements of FAR 61.69. Some folks believe that if a towpilot made three tows (solo) in the past 24 months, that towpilot is current. Wrong.

Method 2. Instead of making the above three flights in an airplane, your towpilot can be current to tow by making three launches by aerotow as Pilot In Command of a glider in the preceding 24 months. (Formerly 12 months until OCT 2009.)

Let's review the quiz questions:

- a) No. Even if a thousand tows were flown in the last 2 years, the towpilot must make at least three actual or simulated tows while accompanied by a current towpilot within the preceding 24 months. Your club only has a single seat towplane? Towpilots can get current in a two-seat airplane. Even if it is not a towplane then “simulated tows” will satisfy the regulation. “Accompanied by” means that another current towpilot is physically sitting in a two seat airplane for the 24 month endorsement and not sitting in the glider as an observer when towed behind the towplane.
- b) No. Being a passenger in a glider doesn't apply. The towpilot must be the PIC of a glider that is launched by aerotow, at least three times within the preceding 24 months.
- c) No. Airline recurrent training is comprehensive, but certainly doesn't make a towpilot “current” under FAR 61.69.
- d) No. May 17, 1967 does not apply to currency, even though this date is mentioned in FAR 61.69 for compliance with the initial towpilot endorsement.
- e) Yes, none of the above make a towpilot “current.”

Read FAR 61.69 closely. Not much flying needs to be logged to be current but specific steps must be taken to satisfy the regulation.

In addition, a towpilot must have at least a FAA Private Pilot certificate, a flight review with the preceding 24 calendar months per FAR 61.56 and a current medical certificate. Consider calling a group meeting of all towpilots to assure their currency per the regulations and conduct a groundschool discussion of procedures and signals. Having the line crew / wing runners attend this meeting would be very worthwhile.

Now that you have determined your towpilot is current by the regulations, what about “proficiency”? Ponder your comfort level before being towed by a towpilot that has not flown a towplane in many months but is “legal” to tow by the methods stated in FAR 61.69. Know if your towpilot understands all eighteen SSA Signals. Know if your towpilot is proficient in the model of towplane. Proficiency should be determined by the second towpilot riding along for the three “currency” tows, but a more comprehensive check should be considered especially if a different model towplanes are used at your soaring site.

The FAR does not specifically state what needs to be accomplished during the minimum of three currency flights. Simulating the reduced climb rate of a tow and making landing approaches with an imaginary 200 foot towrope would be a good starting point. Review the FAR 61.69 requirements for the initial endorsement for towing, which include emergency procedures, signals, airspeed limitations and maximum angles of bank. Talk about engine temperature management while climbing and descending. How about fuel management and the 30 minute reserve of fuel VFR rule? Know how quickly a glider “kiting” too high on tow can put a towpilot in serious jeopardy. Discuss how a towpilot can confirm the glider has released. Review procedures for release mechanism failures. Do not rely solely on radio transmissions, which can be “stepped on” or misinterpreted. Use the SSA signals simultaneously with the radio. Watch the “SSA Signals video on the Soaring Safety Foundation's YouTube Channel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iok4FCKn7V4>). Discuss air traffic “see and avoid” techniques. Discuss how you can use Single Pilot Resource Management (SPRM) skills to better manage the towplane. Stop any aggressive turning and diving of the towplane after the glider has released because this has resulted in mid air collisions or the trailing towrope disabling another glider below. Obtain a current aeronautical chart and note the airspace around the gliderport. Confirm how to check the daily NOTAMS for runway closures or Temporary Flight Restrictions. Discuss twenty or more possible emergency scenarios and the towpilot’s options at any given moment during the aerotow.

Glider pilots consider aerotow as a means to an end. “Get me up there” is the command and most towpilots are often in a hurry to comply. Well, slow down a minute. Glider pilots must understand that they are literally connected to the proficiency of the towpilot and towpilots must be aware that they are connected to the proficiency of the glider pilot. Towpilots should insist that glider pilots manage airbrakes and lock canopies, use checklists, know the signals, have emergency plans and respond accordingly. Remember, the towpilot has the option of releasing the towrope and motoring on to safety. Well-trained towpilots know their limits and will have no hesitation about releasing a wayward glider. So if you quiz your towpilot about their currency and proficiency, be ready to answer a few questions about your own understanding of tow signals and procedures.



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