



SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE  
by Gene Hammond, SSF Trustee

In 1981, in conjunction with the Soaring Society's Flight Training and Safety Board (FTSB), the Soaring Safety Foundation (SSF) was tasked with recognizing, researching, and tabulating glider and soaring accidents. Research through National Transportation and Safety Board (NTSB) and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) data proved somewhat lacking, since gliding and soaring did not provide sufficient accidents to firmly establish causes or alert the soaring community of any trends which would help the FTSB or SSF to propose cures to a rather dismal safety record.

As SSF gathered what information was available, it was divided into several categories pertinent to gliders and sailplanes, such as type of equipment involved, number of launches, what part of the country was having accidents, and several sub-categories such as stall/spin, landing short, weather, mid-air collisions, and in what realm of flight the accident occurred.

This information was published in the SSF newsletter SAILPLANE SAFETY and distributed to all Life SSA members, airport and fixed base operators, and the SSA Board of Directors. Unfortunately, because of lack of adequate finances, it wasn't until much later the information began to appear in SOARING magazine. This column is one of the descendants of those early attempts to alert the soaring community to potential accident scenarios, and offers this brief review of any progress, if any, in those areas noted.

However, some things never change.

In the first quarter of 1981, these accidents were reported during the launch and towing phase of flight; an attempt to take off and climb with the spoilers extended, a cross wind attempt aborted because of wind gusts and shear, and two fatalities when the gliders were overstressed at low altitude when forced to release.

In the first quarter of 2008, a motorglider unsuccessfully attempted a take off with one aileron not connected, another pilot had spoilers come open and when the tow pilot gave the "something's wrong with your glider" signal, the pilot mistakenly thought it was a signal to release, and did so. Another pilot released when unable to control the pitch of the glider and after landing found his handheld radio blocking the elevator, and a fourth released at 200 feet and in the subsequent attempt to land off airport ground looped.

Some things never change.

Though SSF, SSA, contest organizers, and operators across the country have offered solutions to the launch/tow phase, and some have become universal signals and procedures, these accidents and incidents continue to happen.

After much discussion several years ago, the SSA/SSF adopted a signal, the rudder waggle by the tow pilot to indicate to the glider pilot that “there’s something wrong with your glider.” It could be the spoilers were open, the tail dolly was still attached to the glider, or some other situation the tow pilot recognized. Though there is no known count of how many times the signal has provided the glider pilot the opportunity to examine his glider and correct the offending problem, surely many have occurred.

At the same time, the signal has been mistaken for the “get off now” signal (tow plane wings rocked up and down) when the tow plane is having difficulty.

This is a training problem for both tow pilots and glider pilots. The difference should – should – be obvious; tow plane problem – wings rocked; glider problem, rudder “fanned” quickly. There is an opportunity to demonstrate the difference between these signals during all training, including flight reviews and preparation for a flight test. Ask your instructor(s) to include the demonstration next time you go flying.

After experiencing too many cases of controls not being properly connected, the POSITIVE CONTROL CHECK was promoted and seems to be recognized as a good way to ensure everything is properly connected. During SSF site surveys, it was noted that training and execution of the Positive Control Check is being used, but not at all sites. The process is simple and requires two people. Ask your site for a demonstration of the proper way to check the controls without causing damage to the glider.

With just these two simple training scenarios, the accident rate (not to mention the cost of damaged equipment and potential loss of life) can be reduced by 25% or more.

Some things CAN be changed.

