



There I was. . .

Stephen Dee, SSF Trustee, DPE, CFI

Over the years, one of the great opportunities for aspiring young pilots to learn has been the chance to rub shoulders, or at least hear stories of the exploits of the pilots in their circle of peers. We used to call it "hangar flying," but now it has the more formal title of "Scenario Based Training!" Call it what you will, I would like to inject this article into the SSF stream of instructional articles into what we hope will become a popular series. We invite anyone to submit a story that might "share a collective learning experience," or regales "you won't believe what happened to me!" tales. We want to share these stories of the true accounts of things we lived through and learned from. I will hereby start this effort off; this one happened to me in the spring of 1969.

To set the stage properly, I was a Private Pilot, Glider (only) pilot with about 60 hours of flight time, and somewhere just over 100 flights. I had recently had the chance to complete my Silver Distance flight in our club's 1-26, and was anxious to move up in performance, and expand my soaring horizons-literally. I had the great fortune to learn to fly Gliders alongside my Dad, a decorated WWII B-25 Pilot who recognized soaring as a perfect Father and Son bonding opportunity. As a result, we had just taken delivery of George Coder's old Austria S, a beautiful example of the final progression in wood and fabric sailplane design. The site was the old Black Forest Gliderport, nestled across the I-25 valley from the USAF Academy, a real Mecca for great thermalling in the summer, and wave flying in the winter.

After rigging, Dad approached me and said "Steve, you have more glider time than I do-why don't you take the first flight?" I was humbled, honored, and jumped at the chance! In the days prior, we had both had check outs from a local CFI in a 2-32, to give us a good local orientation, and provide some spin training for me, since I had never had any. Those of you who have flown some of the older ships, especially the Austria, know that while thermalling in close proximity to the stall, there is a distinct possibility of spin entry.

After an uneventful tow on a very average soaring day with some gusty wind and broken thermals, I was thrilled to be making my first flight in a high performance glider. Following a thermal to the west, I did not realize, nor comprehend the significance of staying clear of the extended centerline of RW 17 at nearby Colorado Springs Municipal/Peterson AFB. The Localizer for that runway extended right up the I-25 valley, and it was apparently routine for airline traffic landing south to intercept and fly the Localizer from many miles out, which included the position I occupied. I will never forget just how big a Convair 580 looks when you don't know it's coming, and you turn to face it nearly head on from about 50 feet away. I could tell you the brand of the Captain's sunglasses as I pulled aggressively away from the area and headed back toward the gliderport, to territory I hoped would be much more benign.





Recovering my heart rate, I proceeded to circle over the southern edge of the Black Forest, looking for lift to sustain my first flight in that delightful ship. After a few minutes, it became apparent that even with the noticeably improved penetration over the club equipment I was used to, I was barely breaking even with an increasing wind drifting me north of the gliderport. I vowed to try harder, and banked aggressively into a choppy thermal. Moments later, the glider's nose pitched up in a gust, and I was immediately in a spin, providing me with a face full of whirling black forest pines not that far below. Putting my recently acquired spin training to use, I pushed the stick forward and stomped on the opposite rudder, breaking the spin and leaving me in a steep dive. That was when I learned how fast a clean, high performance glider accelerates in a dive-WOW! Pulling out of the dive just below red line airspeed, I took a moment to assess the day so far. Let's see: poor airspace familiarity-strike one; inappropriate aircraft handling in gusty conditions-strike two! It was at that moment I decided that discretion was the better part of valor, and headed for the traffic pattern. Fortunately, the pattern and landing were uneventful, and I rolled to a stop in silence. After a minute, my Dad walked over with a smile on his face, asking "well, son, how did it go?" I responded with joy: "piece of cake Dad-you are going to love this ship!"

It was not until years later, when I started taking Instrument instruction in airplanes, that I learned just how ill prepared I was that day to operate where I did. What could I have done better? More study of the local airspace would likely have resulted in asking about where big, fast airliners fly, and what to do to avoid them. More investigation into the handling qualities of the Austria would likely have prevented the inadvertent spin entry. Both of these events certainly contributed to my bag of collective experience. I can only suggest that you can never be too prepared for a new flying area and/or glider-maybe it would be a good idea not to have them occur at the same time!

