



GROUND LAUNCHING, A NEW IDEA? Gene Hammand, SSF Trustee

SSF is showing our concern for people's safety by a major focus on our part to bring ground launching issues to everybody's attention in several issues of SOARING as the overall interest grows within soaring for lower cost launching.

During The SSA Convention in Albuquerque in February, 2008, the Soaring Safety Foundation presented a series of lectures regarding methods and techniques that could offer the individual pilot guidance to safer flight, including talks on ground launching.

The Europeans have ground launched for years, but neither winch nor auto tow have been popular in the U.S. for some time.

With the rising cost of tow plane gas, the use of ground launch as the method to reach a safe altitude to continue unfettered flight as well as to present a method to train pilots for a lower cost has caused several operations to commence (or in some cases, recommence) offering winch launching as an alternative.

The Convention lectures included statistics from Great Britain regarding how, using ground launch for a large portion of the flights in that country, a growing bad record of winch accidents could be overcome so that it can be done safely.

The SSF Trustees certainly do not condemn the use of ground launch, but must point out that it is a much more demanding launch than aerotow, and in the hands of inexperienced operators, may result in a rise in takeoff accidents if full consideration is not taken of the risks involved.

In the mid- to late 60's, Miles Coverdale authored a column in SOARING magazine called "Safety Corner" in which he wrote on several occasions of some of the problems that could be encountered during winch or auto towing. The following brief scenarios are direct quotes from those columns.

December, 1968:

"An incident has recently occurred in which a light-weight student pilot (but with the correct ballast added at the seat) went solo for the first time on a winch launch. Being unaware of the difference it would make not to have the weight of the instructor aboard as usual, the student climbed very steeply, and the cable broke at about 450 feet – resulting in a perfect loop and landing, which shook the spectators somewhat....."

I'll bet!

December, 1966:

“The second flight of a new Austria SHK was made by winch. After liftoff the sailplane pulled up very steeply and at about 250 feet altitude was stalled in an almost vertical attitude. After release, the Austria did three falling leaves, then turned over and spun, striking the ground nose first at high speed.”

December 1966:

“...a recent incident in which a light-weight pilot, making a first flight in a Schweizer 1-26 by auto pulley tow, spun directly off the top of the launch because the center of gravity of the aircraft was not within limits.”

February, 1968:

“There has been an incident in which a battery fell into the fuselage of a 2-22 in such a way that when the stick was moved forward, it rolled into the gap between the lower end of the stick and the bracework. The total available motion of the stick backwards was hardly an inch. The pilot had no way of knowing where the controls were jammed, but before the emergency developed, the launching cable broke for other reasons.”

A reader might say that these incidents could also happen during airplane tow, and that is true at least to some extent. The main difference is the speed at which events take place on ground launch as compared to aerotow. One's reflexes must be trained to react very quickly to stop the launch before a problem develops dangerously close to being fatal. There is no room for complacency!

As one can determine from the dates of the incidents, it's been a while since the soaring community has seen ground launching as a major part of the glider flying community.

This should further alert the community to be extra-careful as an operator brings ground launch into his/her operation. Consult with operators who have successfully used ground launch over a long period of time and listen carefully to how they do it safely.

Take heed of the material brought out in our series of SSF items in SOARING as well as what SSF can send you or is on our website.

