

Just Say No

By Tom Johnson

Back in my Navy flying days, I had got the biggest dressing down I ever received from a comment I made at a squadron safety meeting. Our Operations Officer got up after my safety presentation and said that sometime you have to go anyway. I looked at him and replied that in wartime that may be the case, but in normal operations, "no flight is so important that it has to be flown." It was then explained to me, in no uncertain terms, that I was wrong and operational needs will override safety if the situation dictates.

Fast forward to my job now flying big Boeings for the man. We are no longer worried about national security, now we are trying to make money. The pressures are different, but no less intense. It dawned on me after a while, that my job is not to fly the airplane. My job is to say no when it is appropriate to say no. That is, to be the last line of defense in the safe operation of the aircraft. To say the airplane is not moving because of whatever, and be willing and ready to stand up for the decision.

This concept also applies to sailplane and tow plane operations.

FAR 91.3 states: The pilot in command of an aircraft is directly responsible for, and is the final authority as to, the operation of that aircraft. If you don't think the sailplane should fly, it doesn't. If you as the towplane pilot think the tow should not happen, it won't. Sounds simple and easy, right?

Sometimes, it is cut and dried and an easy decision to make. But what about those in between times?

Say the wheel brake on the glider is not really working effectively. Do you go?

How about if the RPM drop is a bit high on the left magneto, is it ok to go anyway?

What if the crosswind is not steady at the club limits, but occasionally gusting over?

What are your personal limits for equipment functionality and environmental conditions?

Each situation is different. But each situation requires the same approach. Does the combination of my experience, both total and recent, the equipment condition, environmental factors, and outside pressures allow me to make this flight safely? This is the PAVE model in operation. Pilot, Aircraft, environment, and External pressures taken into account. This is the basic model for Scenario Based Training. SBT is not just an academic exercise. It has practical applications to our real world operations.

Real world SBT allows you to look at each one of these situations and start playing "what if". Examine each situation and decide for yourself what your personal limits are. Then, if you really want to expand things, decide what your limits are if you are running the operation. Do you let the tow plane go if the RPM drop is a little high? Do you stop the operation if the crosswind is getting near or past the limit?

If the answer is no, then the response is pretty obvious. But what about those times when you just are not sure? Well, if there is doubt, there is no doubt. Play it safe and don't go. You will find your ability to assess the situation gets easier as you analyze more and more. You will begin to discover common themes that can lead to successful outcomes.

If you look at the accidents we have suffered in the past, many may have been avoided or lessened if someone had just stood up and said stop. That can be really hard to do. This is when you have to say no

when it is appropriate. This is when you have to be ready to defend the decision in front of the club leadership.

Hopefully your club or operation allows any and all personnel to call a halt to operations if there is a question about safety. Hopefully you are encouraged to view the operation with a critical eye. Hopefully dangerous situations are analyzed and discussed with an eye toward finding solutions and not finding blame. Hopefully there is an environment where mistakes can be discussed to make it a learning opportunity. If your club does this, you are in the right place. If your operation does not do this, work to change the culture and install this attitude.

What do you do if the club president with 40 years of sailplane experience says he doesn't need a positive control check? Do you hook them up? Do you launch them? Are you ready for the inevitable questions if something untoward happens?

What do you do if you are visiting an operation and find that the tow plane is left running and unattended because of a battery issue? I have it on good authority that the club members present will get very irate when you walk over and shut the engine down.

Is that the correct action to take? I always emphasized to my squadron mates that the time to make the real important decisions, like when to eject on a catapult shot, or what inoperative equipment was ok to continue into combat with, were best made in the ready room with a warm cup of coffee. The same logic applies to our soaring operations. I would rather have the club be mad at me than have to deal with the inevitable accident that will happen from this course of operation.

So, the situation is obvious. Your job is to say no when it is appropriate to say no. That is, to be the last line of defense in the safe operation of the aircraft. To say the airplane is not moving because of whatever, and be willing and ready to stand up for the decision.