

## Heartache Avoidance 101

By Tom Johnson – SSF Trustee

The airline world demands a “Sterile Cockpit” during essential phases of flight. For example, whenever the aircraft is below 18000 ft., the crew must limit discussions to safety of flight items only. No talking about the Cowboys, or how great the Lifetime Christmas movie was last night, or where dinner will be. Checklists, traffic avoidance, and safety related items only.

It was a failure to apply the Sterile Cockpit principles during a glider flight that almost cost myself, my daughter, and the tow-pilot a whole lot of heartache.

One late summer day, I decided to take my daughter for a glider flight in one of our clubs L-13's. She was 5 years old and really enjoyed flying in the glider. I strapped her in over a pile of cushions and was climbing in myself, when one of the other club officers came over to discuss a club issue heavy on his mind.

At the time, our club was experiencing a great amount of stress. Our club was, as always, on the ragged edge financially. My unilateral decision, as club president, to install transponders in the three gliders and towplane, and then an unexpected major mechanical expense, had us near financial collapse.

The other club officer had made the trip to the field to confront me about the decision. He thought the expense was too much. As I was strapping into the cockpit, the exchange became heated, voices were raised, and words generally said after missing a short putt were used.

I explained, in no uncertain terms, that the decision to install the equipment was for safety of flight, and was not up for discussion or review.

All this time, I was trying to do my checklist and the wing-runner was getting the towplane into position and the rope ready for hook-up. I finished my checklist, and while closing the canopy, I told the club officer it was a done deal.

I was agitated as the rope came taught. I signaled the wing runner to lift the wing, rocked the rudder, and away we went.

Being in the front seat with very little weight in the rear, the tail came up rather unexpectedly. I got the aircraft under control and began to realize the towplane wasn't accelerating like normal and something felt odd.

The trusty old Blanik felt sluggish and did not seem like it wanted to fly. The towplane, which was still on the ground, was going to use a lot of our 2800 ft runway.

The towplane finally broke ground and was climbing rather slowly. Part of me thought it was the 3000 ft density altitude on a hot, hazy, humid coastal day.

Slowly and incredulously, another part of me began to understand that something was wrong. What was it? So I started with the basics. The airspeed was a bit low but ok. The aircraft was climbing, although at only about 200 FPM. The trees across the road from the end of the runway were no longer a factor, as long as we maintained this climb. The gliders attitude was much steeper than normal and the controls felt mushy.

What was it?

All of this was happening in less than 5 seconds. But it seemed like a lifetime.

What is wrong?



The towplane started to settle a bit. I glanced down at the big yellow release handle to confirm where it was. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the spoiler handle fully aft. I slammed the spoilers shut so vigorously it scared my daughter.

The gliders attitude returned to normal, and we started to climb as expected. Crisis over. The towpilot never realized what had happened.

I was furious with myself. I had let an administrative matter get into my head while preparing to fly. I had almost put three people and two aircraft into the trees because of my desire to have it done my way. I let an inflated sense of invulnerability get the better of me.

The flight ended uneventfully.

I apologized to the tow-pilot, the ground crew, and the club officer, and anyone else standing around. I knew better than to let an administrative matter interfere with flight operations.

I had read the reports about experienced pilots taking off with the spoilers deployed and wondered what kind of pilot does that. Now I knew intimately the kind of experienced pilot who does that.

It is the kind of pilot who thought his 30 years of glider experience, 2000+ flights, and cross country abilities would prevent something like this from happening. But it was precisely that attitude that made it happen.

I took a long hard look at how I did things and at the example I set for the club. I realized I was just as vulnerable as anyone else. I had to change my ways and set a positive example. I publicly told my story to the club and asked for their input on how to solve the problem. They came up with good solutions, and I knew, from my 30 years of experience, they had to be implemented.

So we instituted their recommendations. A club policy of Sterile Cockpit, that is no interference or conversations about anything not related to the flight once the pilots were at the aircraft. And minimal personnel around the glider at launch. And using the wing runner to help with checklist discipline. And



most importantly, beginning to develop a safety culture that demanded that everyone, no matter your experience or position, conform to the policies and good-practices that promoted safe operations.

