

Punching Above our Weight
by Richard Carlson

For most of the past 70 years the Federal Aviation Administration, and its predecessor the Civil Aeronautics Authority, have rigidly regulated aviation activities. Rules have been written that cover almost every facet of the pilot certification process, the aircraft certification process, and the operational aspects of flying.

Yet a closer look at the regulations impacting glider pilots show that the FAA has sometimes written less stringent regulations that we must comply with. Some examples include:

Medical Certificates: The medical requirements are described in 14 CFR 67 and they detail the medical fitness requirements a pilot must meet to hold a 1st, 2nd, or 3rd class medical. However, 14 CFR 61.23(b) states that pilots flying gliders do not need to hold any medical certificate. That said, ALL pilots must be medically fit and 14 CFR 61.53(b) puts the burden of compliance squarely on the glider pilots shoulders. In other words, glider pilots must self certify before every flight that they are medically fit to make this flight.

Transponder / ADS-B compliance: Transponder technology has been the heart of the FAA airspace system for 40+ years. Mode-C transponders augment basic radar signals providing ATC with altitude information for a target, and permit aircraft equipped with TCAS transmitters to identify potential threats. ADS-B systems will provide this same type of service after the 2020 mandate brings them into general use. Gliders are exempt from having to carry transponders today, and will be exempt from the ADS-B requirement in the future. However, numerous glider pilots have installed transponders and are looking at ADS-B equipment to increase their situational awareness when they operate in high density traffic areas. The SSA/SSF strongly encourages glider pilots to voluntarily equip their glider with a transponder today and ADS-B OUT transmitters by 2020.

Reporting requirements for foreign students: After 9/11 the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) mandated that all flight schools and flight instructors must report when a foreign national asks to begin flight training. To ensure that flight instructors and flight school staff know how to make these reports the TSA mandated annual training for everyone involved in the flight training process. Glider flight instructors and glider flight schools are exempt from this regulation. However, glider flight instructors are encouraged to voluntarily take this annual on-line training to know how to report someone if that becomes necessary.

External data plates: in the mid 1980's the FAA became concerned that an increasing number of aircraft were being used to smuggle drugs into the U.S. To assist law enforcement in identifying aircraft being used for this purpose the FAA required that an external data plate be attached to the fuselage of every N registered aircraft. After intervention by the SSA, the FAA modified these regulations and exempted gliders from this requirement.

Letters of Agreement for airspace operations: The U.S. airspace system is hierarchical in nature with Class G being the least restrictive and Class A being the most restrictive. Class A is so restrictive that ALL aircraft operating there must be on an Instrument Flight Rule (IFR) flight plan and in continuous contact with Air Traffic Control (ATC). Yet, we all know that 'Wave Windows' exist at several locations around the country and gliders routinely fly above 18,000 ft MSL in these exclusion zones. How is it that gliders can operate in this airspace without an IFR flight clearance? Its because of efforts

by glider pilots around the country who enter into letters of agreement with the local ATC facility to lay out exactly what a 'Wave Window' looks like, how it will be opened and closed, and how the gliders will communicate with ATC. By following these rules and maintaining good relations with ATC gliders can operate inside the 'Wave Window' and enjoy the use of airspace normally closed to VFR traffic..

These are just some of the privileges that come with flying gliders. Most of them came about due to the voluntary actions of dedicated SSA members who interacted with the FAA to identify and address rules that significantly impacted glider operations. Thus the SSA is 'Punching Above our Weight' due to the dedication of these usually unsung members.

As we move into next decade and the FAA's Next Generation Airspace system we will see our airplane brethren install and become familiar with ADS-B technology. Glider pilots will be exempt from these mandates, but that does not mean we should not embrace them if it makes sense. If you fly gliders in high density traffic areas, around Class B or Class C airspace or you routinely get above 10,000 ft MSL, then the SSA/SSF strongly recommend that you install and use mode-C or mode-S Transponders today and ADS-B transmitters in the near future. Being visible to ATC and other airspace users will only improve safety such that existing glider exemptions will be retained.

By acting responsibly and self ensuring that you are medically fit to make this flight and your glider is equipped with the instruments appropriate for the airspace you fly in we can continue to enjoy the sport of SOARING. We should also continue to thank those unsung dedicated SSA members who help us 'Punch Above our Weight' when new rules are proposed.