



Whack-a-Mole, Glider Style

by Tom Johnson SSF Trustee

Remember that old arcade game, Whack-a-Mole? The idea of the game was to hit the mole on the head with the mallet as soon as the mole popped out of the hole. As the game progressed, the moles popped up faster and stayed up for less time. It soon became almost impossible to keep up with the pace of the moles.

It was a fun game, but it soon became very frustrating. Because no matter how much you did, the pace would soon overtake your ability to whack the moles.

With the on-going pandemic, it seems to me that we, in the soaring community, are playing a game of Whack-a-Mole.

Take, for example, the visiting airplane pilot who took off into sailplane traffic on final approach. The sailplane pilot saw the airplane taking off but was unable to maneuver. By pure luck a collision was avoided. The airplane pilot never saw the sailplane and was unaware the sailplane could possibly be where it was.

Or how about the tow pilot who finished his morning duty and left the field. An hour later, he called back to the operation. He informed the Operations Manager that, oh, by the way, the towplane is a quart or so low on oil and probably should have some put in. He said he was sorry, but he could not get access to the towplane shack in the morning.

And what about the solo student who took off without the ballast they required? The student took the word of the line crew that the ballast was installed. The student pilot did not think he needed to verify that the ballast was installed.

So how is the pandemic affecting us?

One of the keys to flying safely is effective communication. Effective communication requires interaction by the principles involved. And due to social distancing and safe hygiene practices, effective communication can be a challenge.

The airplane pilot, the tow pilot, and the student pilot all exhibited the same basic behavior. They thought they were being safe and responsible by not closely interacting with the operations people and line crew. They did what they thought was prudent without confirming it with someone else.

How many times have each of us looked at a situation and formulated a plan only to find out there was one or two crucial bits of information we lacked? Our careful and thoughtful response to the situation was now invalid and potentially dangerous to ourselves and others.

Those of us in the soaring community are generally smart, proactive people who take aggressive measures to accomplish things. Here is where the Whack-a-Mole game comes in.

When we do not, or cannot, communicate easily and effectively with the other people involved in the operation, we start to make decisions and assumptions that may not necessarily be correct. And the person who is, often, left holding the bag is the Operation Manager. They are trying to run the





operation safely when a mole pops up. They try to bang the mole back down before another one pops up.

In a large or fast paced operation, the moles can pop up faster than the people running the operation can react.

This where we, the average pilots, come into play.

Know your local Standard Operating Procedures (SOP).

Know your aircraft operating limitations and procedures.

If you see someone new to the operation, take the necessary steps to make sure they know the SOP.

If you see someone who should know the SOP but appears to be in violation of it, bring their actions to the attention of someone in authority to address the situation.

As the pandemic goes on, it is incumbent upon us to be our brothers' and sisters' keepers.

Each of the incidents described above could have been avoided had the individuals involved talked with the operations people prior to acting.

If you are unfamiliar with the departure procedures for an airport or runway, ask someone with local knowledge.

If you are the tow pilot and the engine oil is a bit low, get someone to help you remedy the situation. After a long morning in the cockpit, it is amazingly easy to forget to pass on details like this.

If you are the student pilot, do not be afraid or intimidated by the authority of others in the operation. Remember FAR 91.3(a) says that as Pilot-in-Command, you are directly responsible for, and are the final authority as to, the operation of the aircraft. If you are unsure, talk to your CFIG.

The pandemic may make it harder to get close and communicate, but communicate we must.

So, if you are going to play Whack-a-Mole, do it with your eight-year child or grand-child, not your operations team.

