



WINCHES - PAY ATTENTION

by Bernald S. Smith, SSF Trustee

Within only a 7 week period in May/June this summer there were 4 accidents that we have heard about that began while still on the wire/rope during winch launch, resulting in one fatality, two injuries and substantial to total hull loss. In contrast, for the first 26 weeks of this year, we have heard about 3 incidents that began while still on airplane tow which resulted in no injuries, no fatalities and canopy damage only. During 10 incidents/accidents in 2008 that began on aircraft tow, there were no glider occupant fatalities nor injuries reported.

That data emphasizes why so much concern has been expressed in these pages by the Soaring Safety Foundation concerning the ever-increasing move to winch launching. Granted we don't know the exact numbers of winch launches/airplane tows, but there is no doubt that sailplane launching methods are mostly by airplane tow in the USA. Thus, the data reflects what we reported on previously - the risk of serious/fatal injury during the launch/tow are far higher when winch launching than when aerotowing. It can be a huge percentage difference, favoring airplane tow as being, in some cases, up to 10 times safe than winch launch.

UNLESS! Winch launching requires extremely close attention to the risks, utilizing only good equipment, highly trained people in the glider, winch and ground crew, and an awareness without question for what is being done.

- Have you accessed the available winch launch material from SSF?
- If you winch launch do you keep everyone fully qualified, current AND proficient?
- Do you know the risks and take steps to minimize them?
- Did you read our previous items in SOARING re winch launching?
- Do you want to keep gliding safe?

What's the difference, you may ask, don't all those questions apply to all aspects of soaring? We at the Soaring Safety Foundation very strongly believe they do.

BUT! We know from the experience in other countries, as we've reported to you, that winch launching is another animal when it comes to getting a glider airborne. One of the most important is that things happen faster, leaving less, if any, time

for corrections. Another is that attitude is different, and that applies to both the aircraft and the people. You just don't have much leeway for error on a winch launch! And, the more powerful the winch, you have less, to even no, leeway. Maybe airplane pilot mothers in the old days knew something when they said 'don't fly too fast or too high, sonny', because you get fast sooner on a winch than just about anything else except a catapult off an aircraft carrier and high from a climb steeper than just about anything else except a U2 takeoff.

So, we urge everyone to 'be careful out there', as the old sarge in Hill Street Blues used to say, and to take special care to that end when you winch launch.

