

Don't Crash. Really?

By Tom Johnson

One of the challenges in writing this monthly column is coming up with ideas that are fresh. Or more importantly, presenting proven ideas in a fresh light.

One of the oldest vaudeville jokes is when a person says "Doctor, it hurts when I bend over." The doctor replies, "Don't bend over." What makes the joke work is that the advice is patently obvious and yet of absolutely no use to the patient.

But, if you combine that joke with the famous Albert Einstein quote that insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results, you may be on to something.

The advice to not crash is prudent. Duh? But how do you prepare your mind for the flight to minimize the chances of crashing? And how does the community around you prepare not to crash?

When I am training a candidate for any phase of glider flying, I always ask them to describe the take-off. I demand that they break the take-off down into all of its parts. We then go through every phase of the flight. Take-off emergencies. Tow, release, pattern entry, approach, and landing. Even experienced pilots are challenged to actually be able to break down what they are actually doing.

The take-off, for example, I ask them to get into specifics. Where are your controls positioned at the start of the take-off roll? What nose attitude do you try for on the roll? What is the wind doing and how will you compensate for it? What are you going to do when you lift off, crab or slip? How do you transition from the level take-off to the climb?

The candidate and I then go through the entire flight in this manner.

I can hear the OMG's right now. You can't be serious?

You bet I'm serious. If you are with me, you are either an initial student, getting a local check-out, or doing a Flight Review.

If you are an initial student, I am trying to establish habit patterns of thinking about the flight.

If you are getting a local check-out or a Flight Review, I am making sure you understand what the club's expectations are with respect to safety and flight discipline. I am also trying to challenge your thinking processes, and demanding a specific approach to flight discipline. Not crashing is in the details. (As an aside, when candidates push back against this type of analysis, I remind them that the moon landing was a two step process: 1. Launch rocket; 2. Land on moon.)

People generally perform to the expectations demanded of them. People generally assimilate to the established culture that they wish to join. And soaring pilots generally tend to be detail oriented, achievement driven individuals. Use these attributes of human nature to demand high standards and that they participate in a vibrant safety culture.

The Soaring Safety Foundation has been advocating a Scenario Based Training (SBT) approach to all phases of flight instruction in our community.



SBT is playing what if. It is “hangar flying”. It is telling stories about how I learned about soaring or flying in general. And it is, most importantly, an approach to flying safely and fulfilling the advice “Don’t Crash”.

The Holidays are generally a slow season for our community. Many clubs and operations close the doors for a few months. Others have greatly reduced flight activity. It is a time when we all long for more soaring.

A great way to fill that longing is to think about and talk about soaring.

Get together with your soaring buddies and talk about soaring. Talk about the take-off and other phases of any flight. Talk about cross-country flight planning. Talk about off-field landings and what things you should be considering. Talk about patterns and landings. Talk about wind gradients and how to compensate for them.

Talk about it all.

Flight discipline and decision making skills are perishable commodities. Do not let them atrophy during the slow season.

So back to Mr. Einstein. If you do not think about soaring flight decision making during the slow season, and expect your spring check-out or return to flying to bring these skills up to speed, you are making yourself vulnerable to crashing. Try a different approach to the slow season this year. Try an approach that will lead to better results.

As you sit at the stoplight, mentally fly a take-off. Any time you have a bit of downtime, mentally place yourself in a flight regime and fly it. Train your mind to think the various phases of flight through. Think about it, would you rather contemplate soaring or something else? Use SBT to keep your decision making skills sharp.

So do something different this slow season.

Oh, and Don’t Crash.

