

TOW PILOTS – A TREASURE WE NEED TO PRESERVE

Whenever there is an accident or incident involving a tow plane there is one question I invariably hear. **Why didn't the tow pilot release?** Let me try to explain. First, it should be noted that, in most cases, the tow pilots are some of the best airmen on the field. In a majority of cases they are also sailplane pilots. In other words they know "both ends of the rope". One of the biggest fears of a tow pilot is releasing a sailplane before it is absolutely necessary. At low level the tow pilot is all too aware that releasing a sailplane may very well cause the sailplane pilot to crash. Hence, tow pilots don't want to pull the release. In addition, in many cases the tow pilot knows the sailplane pilot. Also, the tow pilot might even be part owner of the operation and, hence, part owner of the sailplane being towed. It seems that every variable tends toward encouraging the tow pilot to hold on a little longer before pulling the release.

Don't for a second think that the tow pilot does not know you are getting high. He can tell instantly that his tail is being lifted. When things start going wrong on tow the tow pilot believes that he can wait just a little longer, hoping that the sailplane pilot will get things under control. The tow pilot wants to help the sailplane pilot get out of the situation. He holds on. He knows things are bad, but he holds on just a little longer. In many cases the tow pilot holds on and the sailplane pilot does indeed get things back together. However, more often than we want the tow pilot holds on too long and then cannot recover.

There was some early misinformation on the Internet about the Genesis sailplane accident in Minden. Some people thought that the tow pilot released the sailplane. (It was later determined that this was not the case.). There was an outcry from some sailplane pilots about the tow pilot. "The tow pilot should release only if the tow plane is in jeopardy." "The glider pilot should be the one who decides when to release." This last statement is absolutely incorrect. There are two cases where the glider pilot must release. He has no choice. There are no decisions to be made. One is when the tow pilot rocks his wings. The second is when the glider pilot loses sight of the tow plane. I repeat, there is no choice in either of these situations. The sailplane pilot must release immediately. It appears to be the second situation (the glider pilot loses sight of the tow plane) that is causing some real problems. The latest being the death of a tow pilot in Washington State. Releasing after losing sight of the tow plane does not seem to be as automatic as it should be for glider pilots. There always seems to be an excuse. "I hit a lot of lift." "I was busy trying to close my canopy." "I was preoccupied with closing my spoilers." None of these are acceptable reasons for not immediately releasing if the sailplane pilot gets so high that he cannot see the tow plane. They are nothing more than poor excuses for not doing what you were trained to do. **IF YOU LOSE SIGHT OF THE TOW PLANE YOU MUST RELEASE IMMEDIATELY!** This means regardless of your altitude. If you are low that's tough. You still must release. Don't expect the tow pilot to pay the price for your inability to stay in position behind the tow plane.

Tow pilots are an extremely valuable asset in our sport of soaring in the US. Let's treat them that way. The next time you are at the field give your tow pilot a big hug and thank him for providing you with the opportunity to have **FUN** soaring. And then as you are walking away tell yourself that you are going to fly in such a way as to never endanger the life of that wonderful person.

FLY SAFELY,

Frank Reid