

From the Rear Seat

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Kiting on Tow

If you look through the NTSB database, as far back as the records go, you will find that the US loses a tow plane pilot every few years. The official reports use phrases like “loss of control”, “upset”, “divergent”, or “kiting”. I am not going to be so polite. What they really mean is that the glider pilot allowed his glider to get too high on tow, and his inattentiveness resulted in the death of a tow pilot.

Some of these tragedies happen when a glider pilot gets distracted by an unlocked canopy flying open, unlocked spoilers sucking out, or in one tragic case when the pilot was fiddling around with a GoPro camera. Some of these accidents just happen when a distracted pilot just isn't trying hard enough to keep in position.

When a glider pulls up at a high angle of attack, it produces a huge amount of lift. With a 200 foot moment arm from the tow rope, the force is much more than the tow plane's elevator can match. Once the glider gets high enough, it very quickly kites upward, pulling the tow plane's tail up and pointing the towplane almost straight down at the ground.

In the 33 years I have been flying with PGC, we have never had an incident where a glider pilot has gotten high enough to overpower one of our tow pilots, until this year. It has happened twice this year. We were very lucky that both times the tow pilot was able to recover.

In the first instance, the tow pilot released quickly and was able to recover at a very low altitude. The second incident occurred at 3000 feet. Both the tow plane and glider released the tow rope, but not before the tow plane was pointed straight down. The pilot lost 800 feet in just a few seconds. Obviously, he would not have been able to recover if this had happened during the first few moments of the tow.

I don't think there is some trend that caused us to have two kiting incidents this year, but I do believe we need a special training emphasis to make sure this never happens again. Surprisingly, both of these incidents occurred with student pilots who were learning to fly the tow, (which is probably the hardest thing for a new glider pilot has to learn) and in both cases the flight instructor failed to guard the controls closely enough to keep things from getting out of hand.

Our tow pilots put their fates in your hands every time they launch you into the air. If you kite up, or lose sight of the tow plane, you **MUST** release immediately. It doesn't matter if that means releasing at a low altitude and placing yourself in danger landing straight ahead. Your mistake has placed the tow pilot in danger, and you must save him.

Now I do not want the pendulum to swing too far back the other way. I do not want us to start having incidents where glider pilots are releasing from tow and landing in the trees. What I want, what I need, is for each and every one of us to keep our focus. Stay directly behind the tow plane. Keep his wheels on the horizon. Tighten up our tolerances and never, ever, ever get out of position enough that anyone is in danger.

Obviously, we still need to glance around at the rest of the sky. We need to spot and call out any conflicting traffic. As we prepare to release at altitude, we need to clear the airspace to the tow plane's left, and to our right. But we need to do this with short glances. We must never look away from the tow

plane for as much as a second. It may take a couple of glances to clear the airspace in each direction, but just like you glance at the rear-view mirror for only a fraction of a second in busy traffic, your glances need to be quick so you can keep behind the tow plane.

I want to start a new habit at PGC. The last item on our Pre-Take-Off checklist is “E” for Emergency. At this point we picture, think about, and talk about what we would do if the rope breaks at 5 feet, or at 50 feet, or at 100 feet, or above 200 feet. I want us to add a new emergency to think about during the tow. I want us to remember that we need to stay right behind the tow plane, and, if we climb too high, or if we ever lose sight of the tow plane, we must release immediately.

As you can tell, I am taking this issue very seriously. That is why I expect the following from every member of this club (students, licensed pilots, and CFIGs):

1. Please go back to the beginning of this paper, and read it again.
2. The FAA hosted a very good WINGS program on just this topic. You can find it at <https://youtu.be/wAAVOZla-qU> . Some of their graphics are very good. Please set aside 90 minutes and watch this presentation.
3. Once you have done that, please send me an E-mail certifying that you have watched the video. I will update your signoff to keep you off of the NO-FLY list.
4. Please make “If I get high or lose sight of the tow plane I will release immediately” the very last thought of your pre-take-off checklist.
5. Please up your game, and concentrate on staying in position behind the tow plane on every flight. Your tow pilots are depending on you.
6. If I have made you uncomfortable, or if you have any questions, please give me a call. I don't want to scare anyone. I just want to protect our friends.

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