SAFETY FIRST

The Gray Hair Department

by JOSEPH M. ROBERTSON, *Chairman*
SSA Safety and Flight Operations Committee

In the past year and a half, which includes all of 1960 and 1961 to date, there have been a series of sailplane accidents resulting in fatalities. Considerable speculation about the basic safety of the sport of soaring has been aroused by these accidents which have, unforunately, received wide publicity in the press. Six of the accidents in the past year and a half have resulted in seven fatalities. However, it can be shown that the fatality rate is not increasing at an inordinate rate but is in fact, within the limits of previous years whereas the exposure rate has increased due to the growth of the sport.

Following is a yearly breakdown of soaring fatalities according to the records:

1948 — 1	1953 — 2	1958 — 4
1949 — 1	1954 — 2	1959 — 2
1950 — 3	1955 — 1	1960 — 3
1951 — 6	1956 — 1	1961 — 4
1952 — 0	1957 — 3	

Summaries of the 1960 fatalities follow. The 1961 fatalities will be published at a later date.

Zada Price and a passenger in a TG-1A were winch launched to approximately 725 feet altitude. The pilot made a normal release then turned left to fly a normal pattern around the field. A second left turn followed the first. After proceeding downwind to a point opposite the take-off, the TG-1A passed through a weak thermal at about 500 feet altitude. The pilot made a 180 degree turn, proceeded a short distance back, then initiated anothed left turn. At this time the sailplane stalled and went into a violent left spin. the pilot attempted a recovery by pushing the stick full forward and to the right. The pilot's action on the rudder is not known. After approximately 1½ turns of the spin, the sailplane made a partial recovery then re-entered the left spin which continued into the ground. The pilot received fatal injuries and the passenger was hospitalized.

Discussion: The gross weight of the aircraft was within allowable limits but, due to the relative weights of the pilot and passenger, the center of gravity was 1.57 inches aft of the allowable limit. This tail heavy condition made spin entry from a stalled turn more probable and spin recovery extremely difficult. Application of full right stick during the spin markedly increased the drag of the left wing thus further increasing the difficulty of spin recovery.

Cause: Inadvertent stall at low altitude followed by a spin into the ground.

Robert Whitaker took off in a BG-6 on airplane tow for an attempted Silver C altitude gain. Everything proceeded normally until just before the release was to take place. At that time the sailplane underran the tow plane to the left, causing slack in the tow rope. The rope draped to the right of the canopy, trailed back over the top of the fuselage and fell over the leading edge of the left wing. Then the sailplane further underran the towplane and moved to the right in such a fashion as to cause the rope to pass up the right side of the fuselage, across the top of the canopy and from there behind the left aileron to the towplane. When the slack came out of the rope. the tow pilot felt a strong downward pull of approximately 2 seconds duration followed shortly thereafter by a strong upward jerk, followed by release of the rope. At time of release the sailplane was observed to be approximately 60 degrees above the normal tow position. The rope damaged the aileron and failed the left aileron bellcrank. It also caused damage to the canopy and the trailing edge of the left inboard wing.

After release from the towplane, the sailplane assumed a 45 degree nose down left turn which continued into the ground. No apparent recovery motions were observed however the pilot's safety belt and shoulder harness were found to be unfastened, thus indicating a bail out attempt.

Discussion: This was the pilot's second flight of the day. The first was normal in every respect. The pilot was proficient, current and properly certificated. The reason for the deviation from the normal tow position is not known.

Cause: unknown.

Herbert Puschel and his instructor took off in a TG-2 on airplane tow for a local soaring flight. The flight was normal until the final stages of the approach were made for the landing. At this time the sailplane was about 250 feet in the air, 600 feet from the end of the runway and to the right of the runway. The instructor advised the student to turn left to line up with the runway then directed his attention to verifying the sailplane's position with regard to the field. Upon entering the left turn the sailplane spun quickly and violently to the left. The instructor immediately attempted a recovery but was unable to overcome a severe resistance to his efforts. The sailplane made approximately two turns before striking the ground. Puschel, the occupant of the front seat, suffered a broken neck and the instructor received severe facial injuries from the aileron tie rod.

Discussion: The weight and C.G. were within allowable limits. The wind was 15-18 knots and rather gusty at the time. Shoulder harnesses and seat belts were in use but it would appear that both shoulder harnesses were not cinched up tight.

Cause: Inadvertent spin at too low an altitude to allow recovery.