GRIM STATISTICS

Information available to SSA at the present time paints a very sad picture. During the past few months a series of soaring accidents have claimed the lives of nine people with serious injury to another pilot. Let's take a look at the record.

There have been eight different accidents, one with a very serious injury, five with pilot fatalities and two more in which both pilot and passenger were killed. In the majority of these accidents, the common denominator appears to be pilot error.

Five of the accidents, including the serious injury and five of the nine fatalities, were caused by stalls at low altitude. The ground is very unforgiving when we spin into it in a sailplane. Records for past years show that by far the largest number of accidents causing serious or fatal injury are the result of stalls and spins below 500 feet.

All the details of these accidents are not at hand at this writing. We may never be able to obtain all the factors involved, as the pilots themselves cannot explain their actions and motivations. However, it is readily apparent that many of these accidents were the result of several different errors in judgment, or mistakes, or lack of training. We can almost say that they just didn't happen, that they were caused.

It has been said that most aviation accidents are the result of several different things happening, the sum total of which finally exceeds the ability of the pilot to cope with the situation. SSA has always preached safety—be careful, take your time, keep the air speed up, commit yourself to land while you still have enough altitude to make a pattern, use a weak link if a tow rope or cable is too strong, use a belt and shoulder harness. Yes, SSA has preached these and dozens of other procedures to insure that soaring will be safe and enjoyable. The lesson on the danger of flying low and slow and making turns under such conditions is probably one of the first a new student learns when he joins the sport and starts to fly a sailplane. Evidently, from the record, it is sometimes the first lesson forgotten.

We often hear of highway hypnosis; perhaps now we are encountering soaring hypnosis. A sailplane seems relatively simple, particularly to a transitioning power pilot, and perhaps we become too enthralled with the beauty, joy and simplicity of soaring. We forgot that the air is an unforgiving medium and that the sport itself requires a great deal of self-discipline from the pilot. Actually, a sailplane requires a higher level of judgment than an airplane. There's no engine to stretch the glide into the field or to enable us to climb away from the rocks if we get in a tight spot.

None of these accidents occurred during competition, but all happened in our so-called week-end flying. I've thought about this a bit, being a competition pilot. We certainly have had our share of smashed machines in competitions during the past few years, however there does seem to be one difference between the week-end accident and the competition accident—the competition pilot may decide that he will risk his machine in order to win a contest. He may fly out over hostile terrain, knowing that if he doesn't find lift he will have to land with probable damage to the ship. Here's where the difference comes; if he has to land he does it with enough air speed so that the ship is still under control, he doesn't quit flying at 200 feet and start spinning. Yes, the ship may be damaged, but the pilot can walk to a telephone and call for his crew.

What can we do to prevent us from being a statistic in the future? The first and most important thing is probably a good heart-to-heart talk with ourselves. Let's review our flying knowledge, abilities, weaknesses, our good habits and our bad ones too. Let's admit the mistakes we've made and try to understand why we made them so that we can understand ourselves and our reactions, so we know our weak points and also our strong ones.

Careful thinking along the above lines can provide a double benefit. We will come to know our weak points and watch for them and thereby keep ourselves from becoming statistics and, if we make a little effort to improve our weaknesses, we'll also become better pilots and enjoy the sport more and more.

Perhaps we can take a lesson from the airlines. An airline pilot is always undergoing training and retesting. How many of us have had any dual instruction during the past year? The airline pilot is retrained every few months and completely retested (and it's tough) twice a year. No, it's not enough to merely go out to the field and fly a few week-ends a year. We owe it to ourselves and to our families and friends and to our favorite sport to do some studying and training and practice. One of the most interesting aspects of soaring is that it is a sport which can never be completely learned. There will always be a challenge, and we can always be a better pilot if we devote a little time and energy toward self-improvement.

What else can we do? Well, from time to time we've all seen unsafe operations—a winch cable without a weak link, a pilot about to take off without the proper check-out, operations continuing when the wind became a little too strong and gusty, a 360° turn at low altitude. Have we always had the courage to speak out, perhaps in the face of opposition, when we've encountered such things? An opportunity to make soaring safer and to eliminate a potential hazard should **never** be overlooked.

So, in addition to self-discipline in our personal flying habits and in our individual approach to the sport we should also insist upon the same in our club, our partners and from our commercial operators.

For many years we've been preaching that soaring is a safe sport. We've also told our friends that it's about the only form of flying left wherein we can enjoy relative freedom from regulation and control. Well, soaring **is** a safe sport unless we make it otherwise. We're not pioneers delving into unknown dangers. A sailplane is as safe as a tricycle unless we make it otherwise. And let's not forget our obligations toward the newcomer. We must pass along the lessons we've learned over the years. We mustn't think that once a new pilot is checked out in a sailplane that our duty is complete. We must continue to pass along knowledge and the benefit of our experience. It's our duty to do everything possible to preserve our freedom and the future of soaring. If we don't, we are going to be covered by tougher and stiffer regulations, for we will have demonstrated that they are needed in order to save us from ourselves.

The SSA Board meets late in January. I'm certain that safety will be an important topic on the agenda. If you have any ideas, recommendations or conclusions please pass them along to Miles Coverdale, Chairman of the SSA Safety Committee. The Board would like to have your ideas and thoughts on how to make soaring safe for all of us. Perhaps we need a new or different approach to the grim problem pointed out by these statistics. Please let us hear from you.

Someone always asks if there isn't some single easy thing which they can do. The answer is simple — THINK.

John Ryan

The proximity of the rocks over which this K-6 flies illustrates the message contained in the adjoining editorial, that for all its beauty and enjoyment, soaring has a background of potential danger which we must constantly keep in mind if we are to enjoy the sport.

Photo by George Uveges