

4/11/2011

Tow Accident Statement

By: Peter Pfoertner
[REDACTED]
New Castle, VA

Tow Plane Information:

Type: Callair A9, Serial Number: 1018

Registration Number: N9615Z, issued 2/15/2005

Owner: Blue Ridge Soaring Society

Time of the Accident: 2:45 pm, Sunday 4/10/2011

Location: South of the gliderport (VA85), over the Hunt Club grounds.

- I was the tow pilot for the day, and pulled up in front of the glider for my 4th tow this day.
- Weather conditions were no factor, wind around 8mph from the south, clear skies and good visibility
- Everything felt normal during ground roll and take off.
- Shortly after takeoff, I noticed that we were no climbing as expected and experienced on previous tows that day. My instruments did not show any engine problems.
- The glider was way out of position behind the tow plane, and I noticed that the spoilers were open. I could see the red paint of the spoiler baffles.
- Immediately I made a call over the radio to alert the glider pilot, but no response.
- By that time, the glider was well below and off to my left side and pulling my tail down into a closed to stall angle of attack.
- Looking over my left shoulder, I could see that the spoilers were still open.
- I came close to cutting the glider off, to maintain a safe flight for me.
- Decided against it and kept dragging the glider further south over some emergency landing fields at the Hunt Club and alongside Rt311.
- Again, I felt a huge pull on the tail of the tow plane and this time tow rope broke.
- I lost sight of the glider and cleared the area to give him room to land.

Attachment: My handwritten statement made on 4/10/11 at the site of the accident

Recollections on the glider accident April 10, 2011

Situation:

I was flying the club LS-6 glider to get current for carrying passengers – this would be my third and last flight to become current. Lift was bad and like the flight before, this was a short one. I was heading back to the field and was approximately 1300 ft above the runway when I began watching the takeoff of the Blanik L-33 "S4" behind the Call Air towplane. I began watching because I heard the towpilot announce the takeoff, and I was in the vicinity of the traffic pattern, so it was important to keep an eye on their progress as they climbed out.

The Accident:

As they were climbing out, I noticed the glider far to the left of the towplane. This looked really unusual – the glider should have been directly behind the towplane, but was way out of position. I got very concerned about what I was seeing because the glider was so far out of position, I assumed he had released the tow rope and was flying freely. This would have put him in a position that would make a safe landing difficult. I watched as the towplane and glider turned to the right – the glider was still so far out of a normal tow position that I was sure he was no longer connected to the towplane. The glider and towplane continued to fly along in an erratic pattern – appearing to both oscillate left and right, like an "aerial ballet." I noted to myself that it was unusual that the glider was still airborne – it seemed that he would have crashed by now due to a lack of energy. I had a very bad feeling about the whole situation – like this was definitely going to end up with an accident. I heard the towpilot transmit something with urgency – I don't know what he said but there was clearly urgency in his voice.

After about 20 seconds of maneuvering from the first turn to the right, the towplane distinctly pulled away from the vicinity of the glider. At this point it looked like the glider was slowing down slightly. I still was unaware that the glider had been on tow, connected to the towplane the whole time, and when the towplane pulled away this was apparently the moment that the tow line broke (as I learned after talking to the tow pilot). I watched the glider clear a row of trees that I thought it would not get over. Then the left wing dipped down and the glider entered a distinctive spin entry. The nose of the glider fell and was pointed vertically downward and the aircraft impacted the ground with no horizontal motion. I estimated the distance to the ground to be around 75 ft. I executed an expedited landing, met up with the tow pilot and another club member (Dave Willis), and we drove to the accident scene. We called 911 on the way to the accident, but they had already been notified. Upon arrival, I was the first person to see Meir. I yelled at Meir to get his attention, but he was unresponsive, bleeding profusely and contorted from the impact. Dave Willis checked for a pulse but did not find one. Within about 5 minutes, the rescue squad arrived.

Kevin Kochersberger

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
rec'd 4-12-11

STATEMENT OF OBSERVATIONS
APRIL 10, 2011

At approximately 2:35 P.M., I walked north along the airfield at New Castle, approaching the glider launch area. I observed the CallAir towplane land and return to hook up to glider S4, a LET Solo piloted by Meir Schneller. Chuck King did the hook up and ran the wing. I was standing to the west side of the flight line facing the east talking with Whit Gravely who was sitting in our golf cart facing south. The glider began its launch as Chuck King walked toward Whit and me. I was speaking to Whit when I heard him exclaim as he was looking south. I immediately looked south and observed the Solo in an extremely low position, above the tree line between the pond at the south end of the field and the trees further south, at the end of the open area. The towplane was to the right and well above the glider. My immediate sense was that the glider was off tow and flying straight and level an estimated 30 feet above the tree line. I did not observe any open spoilers – at that point, the glider was flying straight and level, directly away from me. After observing it for one to two seconds, the towplane appeared to be turning slightly to the left and as he did so, the glider pitched up abruptly to the right. I was able to observe the full top planform of the glider and, as he kited upward, realized that he was still on tow (given the angle of climb, the glider pilot would have quickly lost sight of the towplane.) The glider continued upward on the right hand diagonal until it was slightly above the level of the towplane and to its right by approximately 30 feet, then the glider very abruptly leveled. At that point, the towplane moved away and to the left of the glider and it was clear that the glider was off tow. Upon release from the towplane, it was my clear sense that the glider had sufficient altitude to return and land north on the airport. The glider was flying straight away from me, began a gentle left turn for approximately 20 degrees, then turned right at the same rate, passing through its original heading and continuing on to the right. Almost immediately, the right wing dropped and the glider disappeared from view behind the tree line, in a stall – spin departure from controlled flight.

At that moment, Lanier Frantz was driving north toward me in his pickup truck; I ran to the truck, jumped in and told him we had a glider down at the south end of the field. We turned and drove past the south end of the field, but quickly realized that the glider was on the west side of Craig Creek. Due to high water, we were unable to cross the ford, so we went to the main entrance to the gliderport, went south on Route 311 and turned into the driveway to the Hunt Club property, arriving approximately 3-4 minutes after the crash.

On April 30, I was the tow pilot for the day and as I was returning from a tow, on final approach landing north, I flew over the crash site at the minimum altitude allowing me to see the spot where I was standing at the north end of the airfield and noted my altitude as being 200 feet above the field elevation.

John T. Molumphy, III
[REDACTED]

Cox Paul

From: Morley.English@faa.gov
Sent: Monday, April 25, 2011 9:00 AM
To: Cox Paul
Subject: Meir Schneller accident

Paul, here is another statement.

Morley

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----- Forwarded by Morley English/AEA/FAA on 04/25/2011 08:59 AM -----

From: Gary Naber [REDACTED]
To: Morley English/AEA/FAA@FAA
Date: 04/25/2011 03:58 AM
Subject: Meir Schneller accident

Dear Mr. English,

As you requested by phone last week, I am providing the following information regarding the Meir Schneller accident on 4/10/11 at Blue Ridge Soaring Society, New Castle, VA.

Our club requires every member to fly with a CFI at least once a year, and update the approved pilots list - our Red Book. On Sunday, 4/3/11, I flew with Meir in a L-23 SuperBlanik, 2-seat glider for his club annual. Meir had completed his BFR with another club instructor a few months prior, but didn't update the Red Book, so this flight was a formality.

I evaluated every aspect of the preflight and flight. During the tow to altitude, I had him demonstrate boxing the wake, where the glider pilot maneuvers the glider in a slow, deliberate square pattern around the outside of the wake generated by the tow plane. Meir performed this maneuver in an above average fashion, and I told him so. During the rest of the flight, he worked with some weak thermals over the ridge, and displayed good situational awareness, airspeed selections and speed control, as well as maintaining coordinated flight. We returned to the airport for a normal traffic pattern and landing. His pre-landing checklist, radio calls and traffic awareness were good. Total flight time was :20 min. After the flight, he and I updated his club Red Book page, where I signed him off as an approved pilot in the club's L-23 SuperBlanik and L-33 Solo gliders.

You also asked me to comment on open spoilers on tow, as witnesses

reported Meir's spoilers being open and the glider flying erratically on tow prior to the accident. Towing with spoilers open is not a serious problem by itself. I have personally failed to lock the spoilers closed during my pre-flight inspections on single seat gliders, and have had them open during the initial tow twice before. Once in an L-33 Solo, and once in a Discus c/s. They will open partially as soon as lift is generated by the wing. Once, I had my hand on the spoiler handle, as is usual, I felt the handle move, then pushed them back closed. The other time, I wasn't aware they'd opened initially, but noticed that something felt and sounded different, and that we weren't climbing as usual. A few hundred yards past the end of the runway, I realized the situation and closed the spoilers. Neither time did I have any problems controlling the aircraft in steady flight behind the tow plane.

As a glider instructor, I often sneak the spoilers open on students during various portions of the tow. Open spoilers never cause any disruption in the control of the aircraft by them self. I've also been the tow pilot on over 1175 flights, and have towed gliders with spoilers inadvertently open multiple times. This creates extra drag and greatly reduces our climb rate, but is not an emergency itself. The glider pilot eventually realizes the situation and closes the spoilers.

We also teach and practice simulated rope breaks on tow during primary training and often on other instructional flights, including club annuals. We will surprise the student at various altitudes - 5', 200' and 600' during the tow, and unexpectedly release the glider from the tow plane. The most common altitude for is just above 200' agl, and 1/4 mile or more past the end of the runway. In the glider, we are trained to immediately recognize the slack rope and the tow plane leaving us behind, then lower the nose to maintain airspeed, and turn towards a landable field - preferably the airport. At 200' and above this exercise is a non-event.

I have been a CFI-G for 8 1/2 years, during which time I've instructed in gliders over 325 hours and more than 770 flights. For 2010 and 2008, I've been recognized by the Soaring Society of America as the most active instructor in our region.

If you have any other questions, please contact me by email or phone
[REDACTED]

Respectfully,
Gerald "Gary" L. Naber
CFI-G [REDACTED]