

Getting it wired

New is one of the most exciting words for a pilot. A new GPS or a new person to introduce to aviation adds to the thrill of flying. But new also can mean increased risk, and sometimes we get more of a thrill than we bargained for.

My aircraft partner and I had really enjoyed our Schleicher ASW-15 high-performance sailplane, but we felt it was time to move up to a more sophisticated aircraft. The Schleicher ASW-20 that we purchased over the winter was truly a thing of beauty. Sleek, smooth, and more aerodynamically clean than its predecessors, this single-place ship normally has a glide ratio of 43-to-1. It is also designed to the 15-meter class rules of international sailplane racing rather than the standard class that the ASW-15 belongs to. One of the changes this designation allows is the addition of flaps.

Glider pilots who heard about our new aircraft often said, "Watch those flaps." As a longtime powered-airplane pilot, I was used to flaps and felt these pilots had unnecessarily created an ominous mystique about them. I was more concerned about learning to use the sophisticated on-board computer. The stage was set for my comeuppance.

My partner Paul flew the aircraft first on a weekend that I was unable to come to the airport. His excitement afterward took my level of anticipation up a notch as the day approached that I would fly the new bird. I thought I was prepared.

As I sat in the cockpit waiting for the towplane to return for my first launch, I meticulously went through the checklist and scanned the panel. Paul leaned into the aircraft under the raised canopy and said, "Be sure you cycle through those flap positions over and over until you have the positions memorized. It's a bit tricky." I nodded absent-mindedly and watched the towplane

enter the pattern. Perhaps to mollify Paul, I cycled the flaps twice, but I didn't stop in any of the detents for either high speed (a negative flap angle) or landing (a positive flap angle, as on most powered airplanes). The flaps have two landing positions and the second one is quite extreme. It takes you instantly from a flat glide to an extremely steep descent—very handy for an experienced pilot trying to get into a small mountain pasture. But I didn't plan to use that setting on this day, so I didn't worry about it.

The rope was hooked up, the tow pilot was signaled, and off I went. About 1,000 feet into the tow I sensed I might not have the flaps set properly for the climbout. On takeoff, you start with slight negative flaps to make the ailerons effective earlier, and then during the takeoff roll you switch to slight positive flaps for the liftoff and climbout. A glider tow requires intense concentration to stay in the proper position, but I decided to steal a glance at the flap handle. In the best of circumstances, flying a high-performance fiberglass sailplane is like trying to conduct a symphony in a phone booth. It is tight in the cockpit—you might be said to wear the aircraft rather than occupy it. I wiggled and twisted to see the handle. It was in the proper position. When I looked back at the towplane, after no more than two seconds' distraction, I was well out of position on tow. This should have sounded a warning for events to come, but my mental alarm stayed silent.

There was good lift and I had a wonderful flight. Because it was a new air-

craft for me, I restricted myself to a one-hour flight so I would be fresh for the landing. At least I did one smart thing that day.

As I returned to the airport, I lowered the landing gear and mentally went through the landing. As I turned base, I remembered what my partner had said about not extending any landing flaps until after turning base. As I descended through 800 feet agl, I reached down and pulled on the flap handle.

Within a couple of seconds, my world dramatically changed. The flat descent angle of a sailplane was transformed to the spookily ballistic descent of a space shuttle. I was coming down fast! Somehow I had managed to get into the full-down landing flap setting. Judging my new—much nearer—touchdown point, I could see that my current path would not get me to the airport. Not even close. Between me and the airport were trees, power lines, and a house.

I struggled with the flap handle but could not get it out of its current slot. The power lines and trees were now higher than I was. I desperately scanned a stubbled cornfield underneath me to determine whether I could put down there. I was racing over it at 60 knots and had already used most of it up. Here come the wires! At this point, the scene took on the aspect of a video on fast-forward. There's a gap—shoot it! I struggled with the handle. Here come the wires! Go under them. They passed a few feet over the bubble canopy. Wait! What about the tail? Missed that, too, apparently. Here come the house and pole barn. There's a huge pile of wood between them. I'll never clear it. At this moment the handle freed and I returned the flaps to the neutral position. My new buoyancy felt good. I put the nose 5 degrees above the horizon and popped up into view for the airport spectators again. I passed between the house and the pole barn with very little room on either side of my very long wings. I was in the clear. My poor partner, watching his big investment go



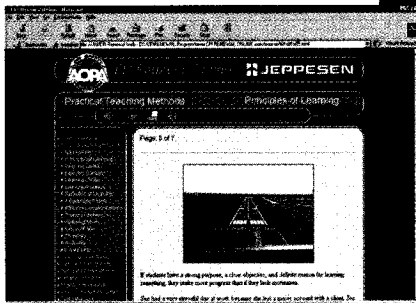
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through this barnstorming routine, finally breathed again.

I popped up to 30 feet agl, lifted my right wing tip over one final cedar tree, and touched down in the regular landing area. The entire episode lasted less than eight seconds.

The most experienced member of our glider club, and a veteran of fighter combat with the German Luftwaffe, had witnessed my spectacular arrival. He asked what had happened, and when I told him he extended his hand and said, "Congratulations. Today is your birthday."

I made three errors in judgment that acted in concert to produce this near-accident. First was failure to take the addition of flaps to the equation seriously enough. Having many hours in flapped aircraft lulled me into believing the transition would be easy and trouble-free. Second, I didn't spend enough time familiarizing myself with the flap actuator mechanism. If I had imprinted the operation of the control through a routine of repetitions and study of the mechanism, it would not have been difficult to free it from its "stuck" position. Third, I should have taken the flaps through their full operating range while at altitude. Uncovering the potential problem at 4,000 feet agl (the height of the highest thermal I worked that afternoon) would have been a minor annoyance instead of the dangerous threat it presented at 800 feet agl.

When suggesting I operate the flap system repeatedly, my partner had casually used the expression "wire it into your brain."

I can assure you it is now wired. **AOPA**

Steve Thorpe is a Web and publications editor for a jet engine manufacturer in Michigan. He holds a private certificate with single-engine land and glider ratings and has logged more than 1,000 hours.

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