

# Danger and Poetry



Joe Karam

Pilot in Command

# Danger and Poetry

One Glider Pilot's First Hundred Hours

From Flight School to Rescue Mission



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SOARING WEST

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

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Published by Soaring West in Los Angeles, California  
info@soaringwest.com  
www.soaringwest.com

Interior typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro  
Spine and front cover typeset in Futura  
Cover photo credit: Joy Pierce

First Edition  
ISBN 978-0-9973553-0-7 (paperback)  
978-0-9973553-1-4 (e-book)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016905821

Boarding any kind of aircraft carries inherent risks. Prospective fliers, whether pilots or passengers, should assess these risks for themselves before and during each flight, taking responsibility for their own safety, performing due diligence wherever possible, and applying good judgment in light of their personal limits. This book discusses only an incomplete subset of all the risks involved with gliders and related aviation, and should not be used as the sole basis for determining behavior. In particular, the points of view expressed herein should not be construed as advice on whether to engage or not to engage in the practice of flight. All provided information is intended for educational and entertainment purposes only, and under no circumstances shall this book or any of its contents be considered a substitute for proper practical training from a certificated flight instructor, without which operating an aircraft should never be attempted.

*To my flight instructor Charlie Hayes, a gentle soul and a master artist.*

*To aspiring or fledgling aviators torn between fear and desire.*

*To anyone who hasn't stopped dreaming and daring.*



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# Preface

If your curiosity led you to look inside this book, you might be just where I was in the spring of 2010: fantasizing about flying, still knowing very little about aviation, yet also actively researching what it takes and what it feels like to become a real-life pilot. You've been daydreaming about it a bit more seriously than everyone else; you might have already started taking concrete steps toward that lofty goal and taken an introductory flight or two; perhaps you've even recently earned your certificate.

No matter exactly how far along you are in your budding aviation career, this book may be for you if your relationship with the sky has ignited in you an unquenchable battle between fear and desire, and if, wondering which of these two formidable opponents will ultimately prevail, you are beginning to suspect that perhaps neither of them should, for the sky is filled with both danger and poetry—danger worth fearing and poetry worth desiring. You might also be sensing that for you to both thrive and survive as a pilot will require an equal measure of heart and mind—heart hungry for poetry and mind ready for danger—for without heart, there is no takeoff, and without mind, there is no landing.

What this book therefore celebrates is the story of an inner battle with no victor other than the protagonist serving as battlefield. The conflict at hand being eternally cyclical, its sole resolution is the gradual transcendence that surreptitiously emerges from the ebb and flow of the struggle, much as a glider flying in seemingly repetitive circles may in fact be soaring.

## *Preface*

You may find this didactic memoir more intimate than a manual yet less so than a novel. Indeed it is neither; it aims for the factuality of a manual but not for its completeness, and for the humanity of a novel but not for its fantasy.

Furthermore, a manual, more concerned with danger, would censor aesthetics; and a novel, more concerned with poetry, would censor technicals. Our story censors neither and liberally draws from both aesthetics and technicals as the pursuit of truth calls for, oscillating between the two as authentically as the pilots by whom and for whom it has been written actually do in practice. To our humanistic brand of aviators, aesthetics is no more dissociable from technicals than takeoff is from landing, for aesthetics motivate our takeoff and technicals enable our landing.

To better visualize this duality, take a look at the glider pictured on the front cover and compare it with the one on the back cover. Here are two representations of the exact same event, perceived through different lenses: the hyper-realistic front cover showcases my first solo takeoff in a Schweizer SGS 2-32 behind a Piper Cherokee tow plane on runway 31 at Hollister Municipal Airport; the impressionistic back cover reveals the first time I spread my wings and took to the skies. Neither representation is more truthful than the other. One may be more concrete, technical, and useful, and the other more abstract, aesthetic and meaningful; one may more suitably adorn a manual, the other a novel; one may reveal what is captured by the mind, the other what is gleaned by the heart. Yet together these two images constitute a single diptych. Painting both sides in alternating brushstrokes is how I chronicle the story of my first hundred flight hours, believing that this approach will most honestly and viscerally convey what it was really like for this glider pilot to romance the sky.

# Danger and Poetry



# First Fright

Three thousand feet above the ground and climbing. The clear California sky was a cold December blue and the wind was calm, but engulfing the mind of the glider pilot was only thunder and lightning. My attempts at maintaining the Schweizer SGS 2-32 in formation flight behind the Piper Cherokee towing it skyward were increasingly desperate. Gone was the memory of the tow plane's silhouette neatly superimposed over a level horizon, its tail stabilizers forming a crisp plus sign straight in front of me. What had started as small deviations from that equilibrium had degenerated into ever-greater oscillations, first along one, then two, then ultimately all six degrees of freedom of motion.

The glider suddenly started shaking and buffeting in a rumble of turbulence; I had let it descend too low below its target position, miring it into the spiraling airflow of the tow plane's propwash. I hastily pulled back on the stick, reemerging above the turmoil but soon drifting too high and too far left, with the tow plane swinging too low below the now-tilted horizon. I pushed the stick forward and to the right, pitching the nose down and momentarily reducing the gravitational force inside the glider, simultaneously raising the right aileron and lowering the right wing. This initiated a sideways dive back down toward the propwash, with the wind howling louder and louder as I gained air-speed and closed in on the tow plane.

The glider was flying forward faster than the tow plane was pulling it, and slack was developing in the 200-foot rope connecting the two aircraft. I managed to avoid the propwash by pulling back on the stick, soon enough but too

abruptly, and as the extra Gs were pushing me down against my seat, the glider was slowing down too fast, removing the slack from the tow rope at an alarming rate. Frozen, I watched the rope tighten like a giant whip, bracing myself for the jolt. As it straightened, the rope yanked the glider's nose and the tow plane's tail parallel to one another, absorbing some of the shock. Had the two aircraft been more closely aligned, the rope likely would have snapped.

This whole sequence repeated itself over and over, each time becoming more dire as I was losing my grip on the situation. Pitching, rolling, yawing, shifting up and down, left and right, forward and back, the glider seemed out of control, and I started envisioning how this was going to end: with glider and tow plane swirling around each other like violently hurled nunchaku, spiraling down into the ground with horrifying elegance, as empty fields, mountain ridges, blinding sun and infinite ocean cycled furiously around us.

"I've got the glider!" boomed a merciful voice inside my headset, filling the tiny cockpit with instant relief. Certificated Flight Instructor Charlie Hayes, sitting directly behind me, was back at the controls. My first day in a glider wouldn't have to be my last.

Half an hour later, Charlie brought my introductory lesson to a close with a perfect landing back at Hollister Municipal Airport. We hoisted ourselves out and manually pushed the glider off the runway to make room for other traffic, then continued pushing it onto a taxiway toward its assigned tie-down spot.

To be exact, Charlie was the one pushing against the glider's nose the entire time, rolling the aircraft backwards,

while I was merely walking a wingtip. I offered to switch places at some point, but Charlie insisted on doing all the pushing himself, explaining half-jokingly that this was what kept him out of the gym, which judging from his sturdy physique I was inclined to believe.

This gave me a chance to relax after the most stressful day of flying of my life, a far cry from my prior aerial experiences as indolent passenger on commercial airliners. I began thinking about whether to return to the world of adventure I had just glimpsed. There was danger up there. There was also poetry. Whether I'd choose to come back or not, one thing was certain: the sky would never again look quite the same.

It felt good to be back on my feet and on solid ground, though N87R ("Eight Seven Romeo"), the glider, might have felt very differently, for a glider on the ground suffers great indignity. Like most other gliders, Eight Seven Romeo has only one main wheel, with smaller auxiliary wheels in a configuration that offers neither longitudinal nor lateral balance: the fuselage either tilts forward onto the nose wheel or backwards onto the tail wheel, and one of the wings drops onto its wingtip wheel while the other wing awkwardly remains high. Having no internal power, Eight Seven Romeo cannot taxi on its own and needs to be pushed by humans or pulled by a golf cart at the speed of a pensive walker. As for leaving the ground to reach the sky, it must further rely on an engine-powered tow plane or some other ground launching mechanism.

When I first opened its canopy earlier that day and peered into the wobbly cockpit, noticing the quaint smell of a bygone decade and the lifeless instruments, Eight Seven

Romeo looked less like a marvel of human engineering than like a flying sarcophagus. Yet highly aerodynamic gliders like it are also referred to as sailplanes for a reason. More efficiently adapted to pure flying than any other aircraft, a glider is as helpless on the ground as it delicately dominates the sky once it releases from tow. What airplane can, with engines turned off and in complete silence, glide for thirty to sixty feet of horizontal distance while losing only one foot of altitude? What organic bird, after millions of years of evolution, even comes close? And what other aircraft can replenish its fuel supply indefinitely in mid-air, as a glider does every time it gains altitude by soaring with rising air?

Charlie and I finished tying down the glider amid rows of colorful aircraft, mostly gliders and single-engine airplanes, as well as, here and there, multi-engine airplanes, helicopters, and the occasional warbird or navy jet. We walked past a few hangars, exited the airfield through a tall metal fence sporting warning signs and an access code keypad on the other side, then passed a few administrative offices, the airport diner, and the parachute operations warehouse. At the far end of the gravel road where my car was parked, right by the airport entrance, was the glider operations office known as Hollister Soaring Center.

Inside, we entered a cozy carpeted room whose walls were covered with aeronautical charts, posters of gliders in flight, newspaper clippings, whiteboards, and instructional graphics. After some additional ground instruction using a miniature model glider and tow plane connected by a length of yarn, Charlie gave me my very own log book and filled out an entry for the first two rows, one for Flight #1 and another for Flight #2. The remaining eight rows on the page

were still blank, as were all the pages that followed. I was staring at the chance of a great beginning; pages of unwritten adventures, with one of those later rows possibly harboring sudden tragedy. The choice was mine.

We were only days away from the winter solstice, and the afternoon sun was getting low. Charlie set his aviator sunglasses on the desk between us, revealing conspicuously lively brown eyes that contrasted sharply with his late-fifties wrinkles, whitening hair, and reserved temperament. Ruggedly distinguished, he bore a passing resemblance to actor Jeff Bridges, a trim grey beard barely cloaking his dimpled smile, and low eyebrows enhancing a gaze filled with mischief and kindness.

“How dangerous is gliding, really?” I asked candidly.

The eyes of the venerable craftsman stopped smiling. “Well, I’m not going to sugarcoat it for you,” he started gravely. “It isn’t safe. It’s an intense, high-concentration activity. It’s not something you can do casually or ever become complacent about, and it may never feel as second nature as driving a car. It’s an extreme sport, about as dangerous as riding motorcycles. You have to fly regularly to stay proficient. You have to be disciplined with your checklists. You have to remain alert and maintain situational awareness at all times. You need to know yourself and your limits, and know when to stay on the ground. If the weather conditions are beyond your skill level, you shouldn’t fly. If you’re not well-rested, well-hydrated and well-fed, you shouldn’t fly. If you’ve got worries on your mind, you shouldn’t fly.”

I nodded quietly, suppressing a flurry of conflicting emotions that it was too early to heed. Keeping my focus

on information gathering, I pressed Charlie further. Personal acquaintances of his did lose their lives in gliders. Somber as it sounded, this wasn't entirely surprising to hear from a man who had spent most of his life in the aviation community, and it was heartening that he, for one, had withstood over 8,000 flights and some 10,000 hours in the air, including countless episodes of saving dangerous beginners like he'd just done an hour earlier.

I asked whether there were any wrong reasons to want to learn to fly, whether there were particular personality traits or attitudes that didn't belong up there, and whether, amid the cold calculations required to survive the unforgiving laws of physics and the unpredictable chaos of nature, there was any room left for instinct, passion, and emotion.

"There is..." Charlie replied to that last question, his eyes smiling and twinkling once again.

*End of Sample*