

Safety Alert

ASW15, ASW19, ASW20, Pegase, and Blanik series Airbrake Control Confusion

This alert is to inform you about a succession of recent accidents. In just 15 months, since August 2009, 4 gliders have been badly damaged after their pilots used the wrong control as airbrake lever.

Four different types were involved – Blanik, ASW15, ASW19 & Pegase – but in every event the pilot's actions were remarkably similar. Each one fell into the trap set by the manufacturer so many years ago when the undercarriage or flap lever was designed to be near, and similar to, the airbrake.

Despite getting totally the wrong result when this wrong lever was pulled, not one of these pilots realised why. Each one simply kept their left hand in the same place and flew a hair-raising path to an eventual crash: terrifying.

Doubtless, many other pilots make the same initial mistake, but simply realise and sort things out with no further ado. We shall never know how many get it right, of course, but these 4, in such a short period of time, are enough to give everyone cause for concern. A look further back through the accident record shows a broadly similar picture, with many of the accidents occurring to ASW15s, ASW19s, ASW20s, Pegases, and Blaniks.

We cannot change this fundamental design feature of such lovely aircraft; our focus must be on pilots and what they can do about it. First step is awareness, thus this letter. You will want to share it with all the pilots who fly your aircraft.

Learning from each other can be a great help. Here are a couple of ideas that have been successful:

1. Include, in your normal routine on your diagonal leg, identifying and taking hold of the airbrake lever. Life can be a little less stressful at this stage of the circuit than when on the approach. (One of these accidents occurred at the end of a final glide. Different circuit shape, of course, but does illustrate the care with which final glides must be planned and flown)
2. Some sort of tactile reminder. The example below is from one of the BGA's SREs who flies an ASW20.

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“That plastic clip lives on the UC lever, getting in the way when the time comes to raise it, so I move it to the airbrake handle, where it stays for the flight.

On getting ready to land, after lowering the gear, I can move the clip back to that handle.

If, instead, I go for the airbrake with the clip still attached, it reminds me to get the gear lever into the right place.

Once the gear is down, and clip attached, it gets in the way should I go for the wrong lever.

(My very first wheel up landing came from a ‘Half undercarriage’ approach in a different ASW20. The type’s fabulous flaps ensured that I did not notice the lack of drag)

THIS IS NOT FOOLPROOF, but it certainly is effective, cheap & the batteries never go flat (it is even EASA compliant). The picture also shows that I have thrown away the original chunky grip – the one that was identical to those on both airbrake and flap levers - another tactile reminder.”

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