

# Towlines

The Newsletter of the Albuquerque Soaring Club

July 2007

**The Albuquerque Soaring Club lost our mentor, our inspiration. We have dedicated this issue of the Towlines to the memory of our friend-AL Santilli, May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1914-June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2007**



Al Santilli is dead. Long live the legend. For a good portion of his life Al made his home here in the Albuquerque area and was a long term member of the Albuquerque Soaring Club.

Al's huge contribution to soaring will not be remembered by his contest performance, nor by his development of new gliders. Al will be remembered for his lifelong love of the sport and those who are in it. He was also an SSA Hall Of Fame member.

His participation in the sport goes back to the mid-19 30s, where he was a fixture at national soaring contests held at Elmira, New York. His involvement in the aircraft instrument repair and development, prior to World War II is less well known, but equally interesting. Wartime service to the nation was directed toward understanding of our enemy's scientific and technological progress. This theme of understanding technology, science and nature was a lifelong passion for Al, and those of us who knew him well benefited greatly from this passion.

The more you learned about Al, the more impressed you were of his incredible talents, his wide range of interests, his love of soaring, and his deep and abiding love of his fellow mankind. Al was always there to help explain some obscure or even basic concept of our sport, correct a hazardous procedure or help a glider student understand an advanced mathematical concept that had no bearing on the student's flying. This dedication to the Albuquerque Soaring Club was total, hardly any aspect of the clubs operation escaped his ever watchful eyes.

Al was known to monitor the performance of glider pilots in the pattern while he orbiting the field several thousand feet above. If displeased he would radio to the pilot telling them to stand by till he landed so he could critique their performance. Building up tow ropes and making creative modifications to equipment to correct minor problems, were his forte. Al flew his beloved open Libelle all over this area for over 30 years and his Utu before that and was invariably the last pilot to come down after a long day of flying. He was actively flying until less than year ago and took his glider out of the hangar, pulled it down to the launch area flew it and put it away all by himself at the age of 91. We should all hope to live to be so active at such an advanced age.

Almost every member of the Albuquerque soaring club, who had even a brief acquaintance with Al has a story about how he helped, harassed, critiqued, but always cared. These stories will keep Al's memory alive for as long as pilots sit around and tell stories. I think that will be for a very, very long time. And so even those who never knew Al will hear of this legend of our sport. Rest in peace Al-**Robert Mudd**

Al always went out of his way to teach the Juniors at the cross- country camps something; truly a remarkable individual. **Orion Kingman-DV8**



"To fly west is a final check ride we all must take" –Unknown

Once not long ago while I was helping Al get settled in his Libelle for the usual late afternoon flight, he rustled for his lap harness then paused. I laid his straps across his shoulders then asked "what's wrong Al"? He smiled (you know that smile) and said "at my age you just have to be careful because a fart may not be what you think". I wished someone would have been there with me to hear that! I about cried. As I wrapped up his little canopy string and tucked it behind the seat I laughed so hard he must have thought I was choking. **Jim Cumiford**

I remember the first time I went up with Al in the 2-33 in June of 1971. In the first turn during the tow he suddenly started counting: "One, two, three, four..." and stopped. After a few seconds, he started again: "One, two, three, four, five, six,..." and stopped. Having gotten my grand total of 5 hours in sailplanes at Sky Sailing in the San Francisco Bay area, I was used to absolutely smooth air on tow and was too busy trying to follow the Cub in the "crazy" NM air to try and figure out what he was doing. "One, two, three, four..." When I got to about 1200 feet I finally took time from manhandling the tow to ask him what he was doing. He said, "I'm counting the number of seconds you're out of position before you notice it."

One in a billion...**Coby Blogett**

Al Santilli is a member of our glider club who was an FAA designated examiner, glider pilot, lover of flight and also loved to teach about flying. Al's pilots license was signed by one Orville Wright and was the 243rd private pilot certificate issued in the United States. If you went through and had him ad

your examiner to get your ticket, it meant that you were only one generation removed from the Wright's. Al loved to fly, and would talk about it non stop. He would instruct at any moment, trying to convey not only the skills, but the love it took to fly. At the age of 92, he was still flying his glider. He weighed maybe 100 pounds, but he would get it out of the hanger himself, tow it down to the line, and precede to stay up longer than anyone else could...Even if there were no thermals to be had, he would still be airborne for 2-3 hours. We swore he was part bird...And probably was. Today, at 3 P.M. MST, Al Santilli died at the age of 93. So tonight, raise a glass to the West, and toast another pioneer who has left this earth to begin to learn to fly in earnest in the "Perfect" place. **Mitch Hudson**

Al was a wonderful person who taught me much about flying, instructing me, and giving me all of my glider check rides: private, commercial, and instructor ratings. Of course the most important thing he taught me was that safety always comes first in flying. He never once let an opportunity go by to bring up a safety issue with me, usually accompanied by some tough questions that I had difficulty answering. For me it was always a learning experience.

Perhaps the best stories, I could tell about Al involved the check rides I took with him, that is after I survived each of his 4 to 5 hour orals. The best challenge came during my commercial practical test. Al had already exhausted me with 5 hours of oral examination when he cheerfully announced that he and I were finally ready to go flying, thank goodness. Of course, I was a bit nervous about flying all these precision maneuvers to standards. However, when we got airborne in the venerable 2-33 on a very light thermal day, he instructed me to find a thermal. I did, but the thermal ranged somewhere between 0 and 50-100 feet/minute of lift. He said to roll the wings to 45 degrees, keep the turn coordinated, and do not stall, which we did for an unbelievable 45 minutes. After 45 minutes, Al calmly announced that the test was over and I could land. If I was exhausted before, I was now a sweaty mess from hanging that plane on a wing and prayer. But as a result, I discovered the skill that allowed Al is stay up so long in virtually no lift, just as if God was blowing puffs of air under his glider. The aviation community was blessed by having Al Santilli with us. **Harry Saxton**

Al was a dear friend of my family. He taught my wife and my two sons how to fly. He even let me fly a little during my many biennial reviews with him. Al will forever be a legend taller than any of the rest of us. We loved him; we miss him; the Moriarty glider port will never be the same without him. **Carl, Rhonda, Nick, and Kris Ekdahl**

Every pilot, student or long-flying professional, whose life was touched by Al Santilli, came away from the experience with more knowledge, and usually better flying. Every time, in my many times with Al, in check rides, discussing a student's progress, or just in casual conversation about the day, I learned something valuable.

Al had a photographic mind: Susan and I still have a fond and vivid memory of a blustery day at Moriarty , when I had taken some Japanese visitors flying; we were in the ASC clubhouse "talking": the halting English of the Japanese, and hand-gestures augmenting my non-existent Japanese. In walked Al, extending a hand, and speaking *in Japanese* to our visitors. Al then commented on the structure of the Japanese language, illustrated with diagrams he drew on the blackboard. All this, no doubt, from Al's experience with the USAAF in the Pacific Theatre, WWII.

If we were put on this Earth to enrich the lives of others, Al fulfilled his task in full measure; he gave lift to our wings.

In fondest memory, **Ash Collins**



Al was a master of many languages. During the summer of 2006, Holger Weitzel and his wife Corrine, were traveling across the USA from Hamburg, Germany, flying Holger's motor glider. During Holger's stay in Moriarty, I introduced him to Al. Imagine my surprise, when Al interrupted me in mid introduction and began talking to Holger in perfect German . Who knows when the last time Al used his German, but Holger told me Al talked to him just like a native. **Bob Hudson**

When I was looking at the Club for membership I took two demo rides and three weeks later I showed up at the field with application and check in hand. Al was the instructor that day and one of the students did not show so he took my paper work and found three board members and voted me into the Club and away we went. The first flight was very memorable for me as he talked for 59 minutes with out stopping. That was my intro into soaring. **Jim Wier**



Al was my instructor when I met him, but he became much more. I discovered how generous and understanding he was long ago, when my fiancé died, and I was pretty shaken up. Al took me up in the 2-33 to scatter her ashes, flew some gentle wing-overs as a salute, and then took me to a quiet lunch to just "be there" for me. He became a true friend in every sense. Living out of state, I haven't seen Al for many years, but much of him flies with me every day.

He was teacher, a mentor, and a friend to me. He instilled attitudes that have kept me flying safely for 30 years, and that I have tried to pass along to my students in turn. I can't begin to count the number of decisions I've made (whether while airborne or deciding whether to become airborne), where I heard his voice in the back of my head, and made the wise choice because of his influence. If I could say one last thing to Al, it would be "thank you, old friend." **Jon Stark**

Al is a very talented individual and we discovered that we have many common interests.

Al was proud of his engineering degree from Brown University in Boston. He was a professional engineer and took annual continuing education classes in his 90's to maintain his license. He was observant and he noticed that a concrete tilt up wall was not erected at 90 degrees on a Klinger project. He was curious as to what happened. As it turned out it was an architectural design but it did not look good to an engineer.

As a hangar mate I watched him ingeniously design mechanisms to compensate for his changing physical abilities. He designed and built all his ground handling equipment. He learned how to move the stubborn hangar doors without assistance. All of his solutions were practical, simple, and cost effective. I had at least two lengthy sessions on making weak links with Al's special technique. It appeared he considered the position of each fiber.

During the 1993 Regional Soaring Contest at Moriarty, Al's job was to painstakingly review and validate all the turn point photos. As you might expect he was very thorough. However he had a significant distraction---a hernia. About every hour I would observe him changing his position and adjusting his lower intestines. He was tough and he got the job done.

He enjoyed sharing his aviation knowledge and experiences with young people. He was the ASC Science Fair judge for many years. Our son Tony interviewed Al as a mid school project. Tony came back quite impressed. That is when I learned that Orville Wright signed his ticket.

Al served in the Signal Corps during WW II and was stationed in the Philippines. He was a HAM (Amateur Radio Operator) and preferred Morse code. He was certified at a fast 40 words per minute.

Al was featured in the November 2002 Fly Low newspaper. He signed the article with the words, "Hi Don-I'll never look like this again-happy soaring, Al S". The article had his photograph taken in 1932 as part of his Class B Glider License, No. 114.

The AS hanger space south of mine will "never be the same". **Don Kawal**

Early in my time as an ASC member, we had a Saturday Club meeting that was to be followed with a lecture by Al on tow ropes. Being a new guy I fought my way through about thirty individuals, to get to the front, to listen to Al's lecture. Al started the lecture with the history of rope. After about forty minutes we were up to the explanation of hemp. I could see that this was going to be an all day speech, so I started looking for an exit when I noticed that I was the only one in the room...everyone else had snuck out the back. I was forced to sit through over two hours of rope technology, but I have to admit it was interesting and very detailed. Ask me about hemp. **Bob Hudson**

My longest checkride ever, but I wouldn't have had it any other way. **Rob Divine**

The best day of flying I ever spent was with Al. I think it was in 1992. The two of us flew up and down the Estancia valley for hours. Watching him pull straight up entering a thermal, and point straight down leaving was a beautiful sight. The thermals were tight that day. He would lead, then I would lead. I felt like I was one of the few people Al would actually follow. As the thermals waned, we noodled for the better part of an hour in near zero sink. He actually landed before me (Al always liked to be the last one down). He taught me well. Though he was 40 years my senior, on that day we were two children playing in the park. When the day was done, I wrote a poem (which I can't seem to locate). I gave the poem to Al the following week, since I didn't know if we would ever do anything like that again. We never did. I will miss my paisano. **Rob Vitello**

One weekday at the airport, I saw Al's car at the clubhouse, so I stopped to say Hi. As usual, he was doing something for the club. In this case, it was towrope maintenance. He tried to get me up to speed on splicing a loop into the end of the rope for the tow ring, but I just wasn't getting it. (I'd definitely flunk Sailor Skills 101).

Finally, he snatched the rope away from me, held it behind his back and completed the splice without looking. I was humbled, but he made a comment about age and treachery vs. youth and inexperience and we were buddies again.

Out of curiosity, I asked him about the "legendary license." He proudly showed it to me, and sure enough, there was the signature of Orville Wright. Only later did I realize what an honor it is to get MY license from a man who got HIS license from a man who DIDN'T HAVE a license! **Mark Mocho**

Al Santilli and I have been close friends for over 30 years. We first met in the Albuquerque Soaring Club when it flew off the dirt on the West Mesa (the old Albuquerque Airport that was used by TWA).

When I joined the ASC they had decided to move to Moriarty and needed a hanger to establish themselves at the Moriarty location and satisfy the conditions of the lease with the city. The club which operated at West Mesa had to find a new location because the owners of the old airport needed to shut down all flying activity to market the real estate. The club was not starting the training of any new members until the backlog in training was trimmed. I made a deal with the club officers that I would design and supervise the construction of the Moriarty hangar in return for them working me into their training schedule.

As a result of that deal my training was conducted in the evenings after work with Santilli as my instructor and John Davis as the tow pilot. My training progressed to the point of being ready for my first solo. My solo flight was made at the new Moriarty location.

Those training flights with Al will always remain in my memory as we soared and trained in the cool evenings with late day convection and twilight shadows and the color of the impending sunset. The setting for this flying activity was just too overwhelming for both of us and we ended up spending much to much time enjoying the scenery and soaring conditions to totally concentrate on just the training drill. I am glad that we shared those magic evenings together. This experience with Al bonded us forever.

I could relate many experiences with Al involving retrieves from off field landings, training flights, contest situations and service, etc. but the evenings we spent together in the beginning of my flying experience are the ones that are special to me because it could have happened only once and only to Al and me.

He later was the instructor for our son Brian who went on to become a career USAF F-16 pilot and Al enjoyed being the instructor for two generations of our family. Brian and I both carry a copy of Al's student pilots certificate signed by Orville Wright in our log books and proudly proclaim the we "learned from the man the learned from the man". **Ken Harper**

Al was unfailingly cheerful and optimistic. I think this was his great strength. He looked at everything in a positive fashion, did not criticize, but offered suggestions. His basic view of the world was very technical; his understanding of soaring weather and equipment were based on study of the physics and engineering involved, and he seemed to never forget a detail. Over the years, Al contributed continuously to the ASC in many ways. His last contribution was his reliable supply of properly made weak links so that ASC always had the right weak links and, as a consequence, the club almost never had a rope break. This was a major contribution to safety that hardly anyone even noticed. He just took on that chore for himself and did it reliably. From a young boy in the 1930s Al loved soaring and he contributed to the movement throughout his life, flying in and helping with contests, delivering talks on meteorology to the SSA conventions, instructing, providing licensing for new pilots, safety

officer, and helping with numerous chores around the club. Al was a little elf with a smile. He will be missed. **Kathy Taylor**

In 2005 I recorded a long interview with Al, which formed the basis of the profile of him that I included in my just-published book *In Love with Flying*. (It was the Post Office's return of the copy of this book I sent to Al that triggered my concern.) If the ASC has a newsletter for members, maybe you could mention my book in it, since it may contain information about Al that not everyone knows (such as his one unplanned parachute jump and his general fear of power planes, which have engines that can quit). Also some references to my own flying with ASC when I lived in Socorro. **Ken Ford**

In my twenty-eight years of military flying, I took a minimum of two check rides a year. When I flew fighters the average check ride lasted about an hour of ground brief, followed by an hour to an hour and a half of flight time. My check ride with Al lasted nine hours and forty-five minutes, twenty-three minutes of that was actual flying. He would ask me a question and then half way through my answer I would get a lecture. Every minute around Al was an educational experience. **Bob Hudson**

When it was time for me to take my checkride, Al and I only had one particular Friday available on our schedules, and I already had an appointment early that morning to have my nails done. I had heard rumors of him taking all day for the checkride so I decided to be smart about it and told him that I had a "medical" appointment that morning. We agreed to meet later in the morning, around 11:00 or so. I thought I'd managed to get around the eight-hour marathon typical of Al's checkride experience, but boy was I wrong. Long after dark that night, he still had me trapped in the clubhouse, grilling me at the blackboard!

The evening that Jim and I went out on our first date is a story that involves Al. It was a Saturday. I was there all day, as was Jim (as Ops), his glider partner Steve (as tow pilot), and Al. Steve was trying to help set us up (Jim and me), but Jim wasn't getting it. Steve asked him, "Are you seeing anyone?" Jim said, "No - why, are you interested in going out with me?" They were bantering all day. Finally, a number of us were in the clubhouse and it was late. I was kind of hanging around waiting for Jim to appear after Ops before I went home, knowing that Steve had been talking to him. But before Jim arrived in the clubhouse, Al spied me loitering there and captured me to carry on a long-winded discussion of the engineering aspects of flight and landing, complete with pictures and parameters on the blackboard. While Al was deep in lecture mode, Jim walked in and went over to the cabinets. I thought he was going to leave before Al got finished because Al was just winding up and getting started. It was going to be a long discussion. Finally, not being a very patient person, I interrupted Al (a rare thing because we all respected him so much), walked over to Jim, and asked him if he wanted to go to dinner. He said, "Yeah, where is everyone going to meet?" I said, "It's not everyone, just me." He looked shocked and said, "Really? Oh!" Al was so focused engineering principles that he missed the whole undercurrent, and jumped right back into the lecture as soon as I stopped talking. It was pretty funny.

I have learned so much from Al, and will always think of him when I fly. When I'm low or otherwise dealing with a tough situation in flight, I can hear his voice talking to me, telling me what to do from long-ago lessons. **Leslie Cumiford**

When I was finishing my power rating the examiner, Lewis Jameson, said he and Al had flown to Oklahoma City together to get their examiner certifications. They were flying in Lewis's airplane. I don't remember what year that was or the kind of aircraft. He had said he would get the plane trimmed out straight and level and every time Al tried to fly it the plane wouldn't be straight and level anymore. Straight and level isn't something glider pilots are too concerned with too often. That's about all I remember from that story.

The oral part of my exam with Al went so long I had to come back the next day to do the check ride but I wouldn't have had it any other way. I'm sure Al will always be with us all. **Bob Carlton**

One thing I remember about Al was how fiercely independent he was. He had his setup and routine for getting out the Libelle by himself and he resisted any offers of help. Especially from me.

He was tenacious. Once he decided on a course of action nothing could deter him. I remember one time I locked my keys in my car at the field. I had already called Ernie to bring me another key, but Al refused to leave until I was able to get in my car. He spent the better part of an hour working on that lock, but he finally did get it open.

He was active and vigorous right to the end. Last year he went to his reunion at Brown University. Not only did he fly across country alone at his age, but he spent an entire afternoon walking around town revisiting his old haunts.

I hope I am half as physically active and mentally sharp as Al when I am his age. Hell, I hope I'm half that robust when I'm sixty. **Connie Buenafe**

2 July 2007-For those of you unable to attend, a very nice tribute to Al was held today at the First Baptist Church. There was a wonderful turnout of almost 100 family and friends and the ASC was very well represented. There were numerous tributes to Al and several ASC members including: Mark Mocho, Ken Harper, Jim Miller, Jimmy Wier & George Applebay had some great memories to share. Al may be gone, but his legend will always remain. His spirit will forever be with us at Moriarty. – **Renny Rozzoni**



**Al, we will miss you. Right now there are millions of Angels all in a tight turn...soaring.**