

Doomed glider pilot did all he could, friend recalls

By Scott Powers
Dispatch Staff Reporter

Veteran aviator Mark A. "Doc" Savage appeared to be trying to regain control of his glider plane until the moment it crashed, killing him, tow pilot Tom Lusch said.

Lusch said that from the tow plane it appeared something went wrong with the glider's elevator system, which controls pitch.

Lusch watched as the glider's nose bobbed up and down quickly three times, then the craft went into a straight dive, crashing Sunday in Marion County.

"He was flying that airplane, all the way to the ground," Lusch said yesterday. "He was doing everything he could."

Savage, of Columbus, was 74.

A memorial will be held from 1 to 4 p.m. Saturday at the Med Flight hanger at Don Scott Field, 2827 W. Dublin Granville Rd., with a service at 2 p.m. Donations for a memorial fund are being accepted at Star Bank, 1991 W. Henderson Rd.

Savage helped build the glider in the late 1960s. He was taking it from the Marion

County airport to Port Columbus to donate it to the Ohio History of Flight Museum.

A National Transportation Safety Board investigation probably will take three to four months, said Bob Hancock of the regional office in New Jersey.

"From what we learned from witness reports, the glider entered into a series of pitch oscillations," Hancock said.

He would not speculate on what might cause that, but said, "Obviously, we are looking at the elevator system, among other things."

The key witness may be Lusch, a Port Columbus air traffic controller, pilot, and friend of Savage's.

Savage was well known among Ohio aviators. He was a World War II fighter pilot and longtime commercial pilot with stories for anyone who would listen — especially young pilots. He loved to teach, and to

promote flight, friends said.

Lusch knew Savage wanted to donate his glider but didn't know when — until he showed up at Lusch's door Sunday morning.

"This was a bittersweet time for Mark. In a way, it was a drag on the finances," Lusch said of the glider. "He felt donating it

was the right thing to do and a fitting thing. I thought it was great."

So Lusch changed his Sunday plans and drove Savage to Marion.

Savage was an experienced mechanic, licensed to do his own inspections.

Lusch did not see Savage inspect the glider but assumed he had done so Saturday. The National Transportation Safety Board obtained Savage's maintenance and inspection logs.

"He'd only flown it a couple times in the past year, but he had flown it for many years. He had full faith in that glider," Lusch said.

"If there was any reason to believe there was anything wrong, he wouldn't take it up."

At 12:40 p.m., with Lusch in the tow plane and Savage in the glider, they took off.

They rose to 1,000 feet. The glider remained in proper tow position. Lusch made a wide right turn. Savage stayed with him. Lusch asked Savage if he was ready to switch to a private radio channel.

"He said, 'Not just yet, Tom. It's a little bit turbulent, just slow it back a little bit,'" Lusch recalled. "I said something to the effect of 'Roger, let me know when you're ready to make the switch.' That was the last transmission."

Suddenly, the glider swung way to the right on the 200-foot rope. It pulled back, then swung to the right again, Lusch recalled. The glider was so out of position it was pulling the tow plane out of position.

Normally, the glider pilot releases from the tow rope. Only in emergencies does the tow plane release the rope, because that means the rope would snap into the glider.

"I never had to release a glider before. But I made the decision to release him. My hand was reaching, and then he was off tow."

The tow rope broke, at the metal ring connecting to the glider.

For a few seconds, Lusch lost sight of his friend. He radioed to the ground that something was wrong.

"But I'm looking for Mark. I acquire him visually, and he is just moving like a bat out of hell. He's fast, but he's darn near level. He's moving back toward the airport and he's just moving very, very fast."

The glider was at about 500 feet.

"Then I see a very quick maneuver where his nose pitches up and then down; I call it a porpoise maneuver," Lusch said. "At that point I'm thinking, 'Oh my God! He has no elevator authority, or it's not responding. Something is wrong.'"

"Then another rapid porpoise maneuver, up and down. Then the next one, up, and then down, and he never recovered."

It took only a few seconds. The glider hit "as close to 90 degrees vertical as it could possible have been. The aircraft splintered, like an explosion," he said.

"One thing I want to make sure people understand: At no time did any parts of the airplane come off while he was in the air."

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tow pilot Tom Lusch
recalling his friend's last moments