

Added could be cheap mirrors for signal flashing and a batch of Fourth of July sparklers or auto flares. An entire kit of these items—even bought retail, could hardly cost more than a few dollars. At a fraction of the cost of searching for just one downed plane, every flying service in Colorado could be given such kits by the state. Line boys refueling transient planes headed mountainwards would be obliged to give the kits out—along with pamphlets explaining the rules for mountain flying. Like the beepers, the kits could be dropped off on the far side of the mountains at the end of that leg of the flight—or could be purchased at cost by planes continuing over more rough terrain.

Rocky Warren contends that “any competent pilot” should be able to make a successful forced landing in the mountains, particular in the winter. If he does, the next question is survival.

“We always carry a flashing mirror,” he says. “It really works if the sun is shining. We also carry a bright orange ‘glo-cloth’ which can be seen for miles, and special fire-building materials we know will work, even in a high wind.”

I feel that, in an effort to eliminate highland flying tragedies, a system similar to the dispatch system used for years by the airlines ought to be employed.

The airline dispatcher is a man who is an expert in his area of flight and its particular meteorological problems. The captain and the dispatcher both must concur that the particular flight can be operated with absolute safety before it can depart.

If this system were put in effect for general aviation, a number of Port of Entry airports would be designated. Operators at these airports (men who know their area) would be designated as dispatchers (on a fee-per-flight-worked basis) and would have to concur with the pilot heading for the mountains that the flight was safe before it could depart.

He would make sure the pilot had and emergency survival kit, a “see-me” kit and crash beacon aboard, check the weight and balance of the aircraft, the fuel aboard, the density altitude, the winds and weather, and go over the best route with the pilot, making sure he had current maps and approach charts, and was appropriately rated for the condition of flight, had operable radios and de-icing equipment (if needed) and a good knowledge of emergency field and radio frequencies.

There would be established, in Colorado and other mountain states, Mountain Identification Zones (MIZs) similar to defense areas where the pilot can fly only if he has met minimum equipment and flight plan qualifications.

For the pilot trained in mountain flying, a special “mountain rating” (a blue card, perhaps) could be issued that would make him his own clearing authority—not subject to dispatch restrictions.

The right of the state or federal government to require this type of control would be based on reducing the heavy cost to taxpayers for aircraft search and rescue operations. The government does not allow ill-prepared or indiscriminate flights into the Alaskan back country. There is no reason it should continue to allow something intrinsically more dangerous: the flying of small planes over large mountains, a practice which has proved more hazardous and more costly of rescue than flight into either the Arctic or over the Atlantic or Pacific.

Some time back I was sitting in the cockpit of a Boeing 727 at Stapleton, ready to call for taxi clearance, when a light plane with six persons aboard came into view, taxiing erratically.

The pilot had a problem: With all the passengers and baggage, the center of gravity was so far aft that the airplane kept tipping back on its tail. When this happened, he was unable to steer the plane (accomplished by turning the nose-wheel). It was apparent that if his airplane had that much of a problem on the ground, it would have more of a problem flying—and that, if he was headed west, his chance of clearing any hills, much less mountains, was poor, weighed down as he was.

However, neither the tower nor any interested spectator had the authority to stop him.

Too often an inexperienced pilot will resent any advice and go on anyway—carrying the people he loves most to an unnecessary fate.

A sensible legislative program will save the government a mint of search and rescue money—and many personal heartbreaks (and headbreaks) will be averted.

A glance at a map locating airplane crashes in Colorado since 1942 will quickly—and dramatically—delineate the problem.