

## CHARLES SPRATT (1993) (~1943-2009)



Charlie's career in soaring began more than 40 years ago, when he showed up at the Chester, SC airport to take a ride in a 2-22. He was soon attending contests where he saw a need for his services at the start gate. His skill at that job made him a contest fixture and in time he graduated to the role of Competition Director, at which he excelled.

Along the way, his instinctive understanding of human nature and ability to command the respect and friendship of nearly everyone he met made him perhaps the best-known face in U.S. soaring, familiar to just about every active soaring person in the country (and many around the world). He served as SSA Director and Vice President for more than ten years.

A bio of Charlie is best expressed in his own words – taken from a letter he sent to *Soaring* magazine which appeared in the November 2008 issue of *Soaring* on page 5:

*“Rather than go into some detail I will just say that after 36 years of contest soaring I am out. Due to health problems I have been forced into an early retirement. After all I am only sixty-five years old and at the Senior Center I am considered to be a 'pup.'”*

*“For thirty-six years I was out there on the road traveling from contest to contest. At first I ran gates for contest starts, and as far as I am concerned those were the golden days. Those were the days of being young and tough. Sleeping in my old truck and later a van.*

*“I worked gates at the smallest of regionals and was lucky enough to be a part of the World Championships. Over a long (and amazing to watch) period, contest soaring went from a ground controlled start to in-the-air GPS controlled start.*

*“From there, I began to CD at more and more regionals, after all they were getting a first class gate operation and someone who would attempt to deal with all the pilots who showed up to race. It was much tougher than any gate I ever worked and my CD education was long and arduous, mainly because I am a slow learner. Because of politics and my 'I don't give a damn' attitude, I did not work my first National contest until 1991 in Littlefield, Texas.*

*“With my soaring life assured I could now enjoy what I love most about the sport. In all my other walks through life I have never met such wonderful people as I have in contest*

soaring. There is something about sailplanes that attracts great folks and I am so lucky to have found this tiny pool of humanity and have it wrap its arms around me for so many years.

*“I miss the tow pilots. They do a tough job and in all the years I have been in this sport I have seldom seen the job done poorly. It is always an honor to be invited out for a night with these guys. Maybe some barbecue and a couple of cold ones before a game of 'Liars Dice.’*

*“One of the greatest joys this sport has brought me has been the kids. I never had any of my own so I 'adopted' soaring kids known to me as "Ramp Cadets." They traveled with me and worked the contests, especially in the days of the 'gate.' I got to teach some much pampered brats a little bit of street smarts and you would be amazed at how fast they catch on.*

*“I miss the feeling of freedom I got every time I loaded up and headed out on the highway (sounds like an old rock and roll song). Many times with a sailplane in tow going to the next meet.*

*“I miss the thousands of times I've heard, 'Hey mister what's in that trailer?' I made up a thousand things it could be from a submarine to a bob sled and all the standards like alligator and bomb.*

*“There is nothing more beautiful than a sailplane loaded with water, taped and on the grid with 60 others waiting for the call 'first launch in 15 minutes.' The little shiver you get as the tow planes light off. I miss the string of pearls as the launch proceeds. I cannot really say I miss the low high speed finishes that were flown in the 'golden time' mainly because they were outlawed long ago but I still miss them.*

*“I have not been to a soaring meet in two seasons and I have this dreadful feeling that it is passing me by. I have made a place for myself here at home.*

*“If I get fixed, will I return? I SHALL RETURN some famous general once said and I am saying it also. Soaring is my home and I can't wait to stand on some sun blistered ramp and watch the show above me and hear the calls of pilots leaving on course.*

*“See you at the airport!” -Charlie Spratt*

Charlie did return but only in our hearts. He will be forever remembered by those who love soaring and especially soaring competition. Charlie was awarded the Warren Eaton Trophy in 1994, the Exceptional Service Award in 1980 and the Lincoln Award in 1990. He is the author of the book “See ya' at the Airport”