Skydive Lodi Parachute Center under investigation

Yong Kwon, 25, of South Korea and Tyler Nicholas Turner, 18, of Los Banos fell to their deaths when their parachute failed to open during a tandem jump Saturday morning. Turner was a first-time skydiver whose mother and other relatives were there to watch him jump. Kwon was serving as his tandem jump instructor.

Ed Scott, executive director of the United States Parachute Association, said Kwon was not a certified tandem instructor. After determining late Wednesday that Kwon did not hold the proper certification, the association suspended Dause’s individual membership and his instructor rating pending the outcome of a full investigation, Scott said.

The suspension does not prevent Dause from operating the parachute center, but it does prohibit him from personally instructing new students and jump instructors, Scott said.

“This means he is no longer able to teach first-jump students himself and he’s not able to supervise others who might teach first-jump students,” Scott said. “Those are privileges that a rated instructor can partake, but he is no longer a certified instructor by the USPA.”
Dause declined to comment when approached at the parachute center Thursday afternoon. He told The Sacramento Bee that Kwon was certified before hanging up the phone. During a second phone call, Dause was asked where Kwon received training.

“I’m not sure about that. You’ll have to ask him,” Dause told The Bee before hanging up a second time.

On Saturday, Dause told The Record that Kwon was an experienced skydiver who had made more than 700 jumps. Dause added that Kwon might have “done things out of sequence,” saying he “didn’t pull the right handles at the right time.”

Scott flatly rejected the assertion that Kwon held the certification required under FAA guidelines. Scott outlined the requirements certified instructors must meet and said there is no indication Kwon achieved any of them.

“There are three qualifications that must be met by anyone who is a certified tandem instructor, and he has met none of these,” Scott said.

The mother of the teen who died Saturday said she was “extremely angry” when she learned her son’s instructor was not properly certified. Francine Salazar Turner said she would have told her son to wait for another instructor had she known, she told The Associated Press on Thursday. She called for an investigation.

“We’re going to get to the bottom of this,” Salazar Turner said. “How could they operate like this? Why wouldn’t they tell us? Why wouldn’t they let us know?”

Scott said the USPA and the FAA are conducting separate investigations into the parachute center that could take weeks to complete. Scott said one of the focal points for his organization is whether the parachute center has used other uncertified instructors.

“With this accident and the fact that there was a noncertified person being used as an instructor, that’s a huge red flag,” Scott said. “The operator, who should know the FAA regulations and should abide by them, in this case did not. He did not check to see if (Kwon) was certified. That makes us wonder if other instructors there have not been certified, and, frankly, we’re digging in deeper to see if there are other FAA regulations that are being ignored as well.”

Scott said when the FAA completes its investigation, it could suspend or revoke Dause’s FAA certification and rigger certificate. It could also recommend civil penalties of $11,000 per violation, fines that could add up quickly, Scott said.

“For instance, if the FAA found there were 10 tandem instructors who were not certified, and those 10 instructors each made 10 jumps in one day, then it would be an $11,000 fine for each instructor for each jump,” Scott said. “We expect that the FAA would take such violations seriously and apply the full measure of its authority.”

This is not the first time Dause has been investigated.

In November 2009, the FAA launched an investigation into the parachute center after a twin-engine Beechcraft King Air veered off the runway during departure. The FAA determined that the landing gear collapsed. No one was injured.
In October 2010, the FAA recommended more than $600,000 in fines against the parachute center for flying an unsafe airplane between March 2008 and November 2009. The FAA alleged that the parachute center failed to replace critical parts on a de Havilland DHC-6 Twin Otter aircraft, saying the plane was flown 2,121 times over that 20-month span without an inspection to check the wings for corrosion.

The Record has documented at least 13 deaths at the parachute center since 2000, including three this year.

Skydivers who were willing to speak at the parachute center Thursday were not concerned about the facility’s safety record or potential violations of regulations.

“I just make sure I’m safe no matter what,” said Cody H., who refused to give his last name because, he said, he is on parole and not permitted to leave Southern California.

Hector Maxwell, who lives in Alaska, said he has been coming to the parachute center for about two years because “it’s one of the awesomest, most cheapest places in the world to jump.”

Mike Fuller, an Orange County resident, said he logged his first jump at the parachute center Monday and has been impressed by “the professionalism of everyone here, from students to instructors to pilots.”

Maxwell said it is common knowledge that the parachute center is not one of the nation’s 240 USPA certified drop zones. Scott confirmed that, saying Dause has been an individual member of the USPA but his business is one of about 10 parachute centers nationwide that are not USPA affiliates.

Scott said that distinction does not mean Dause and his parachute center do not have to abide by FAA regulations.

“As an individual member, Bill Dause had an obligation to respect and abide by our standards,” Scott said. “But even though his business isn’t affiliated with us, he still has an obligation to meet FAA regulations, especially those applying to certification of tandem instructors.”