



PADDOCK LAND

By Steve Care, Northern ROO

Steve Care is the Northern Regional Operations Officer. He has 1800 hours gliding and 130 hours hang gliding. He has been instructing since 1984. Like a lot of others he is passionate about gliding and particularly cross country flying. Steve is keen to see our safety record improve and New Zealand gliding grow rather than go backwards.

There have been 18 gliding accidents since January last year and nine of them involved paddock landings – that is 50%. We need to find some of the causes and do our best to reduce them. It appears that the guys that have been around a while are featuring far more than they should. Approx 52% of the total accidents involved pilots with more than 1,000 hrs.

Additionally if we look back over the statistics, there seems to be a common theme of seemingly non-normal decision making at very low altitude, however they all have very human factors that led the pilot to that point.

Skill

There is no question that with more experience comes more skill, but there is a point where all the skill in the world is not going to get you out of trouble. There is an old saying “A superior pilot is one who uses his superior judgment to avoid having to use his superior skills.” We often don’t know where our skill level is, until

we make a mistake and have to use it. If you underestimate it you might not achieve your goals and if you overestimate it, you might end up having an accident. It’s always better to lean slightly toward the side of caution. Keep in mind that your goal will still be there another time.

Knowledge

I chaired a short workshop at the Taupo Nationals on paddock landings and how we should be teaching them. Most participants thought training was an unusual topic at the Nationals, but what I wanted to get across was a discussion on the basics, as well as means to improve our training. If you have been around a while, you can end up forgetting the basics and just making up your own idea of what is important and what is not. In a group situation it’s harder to go against a clear consensus of safe practices. Some very good ideas came out of this session that are going to be very worthwhile for future paddock landing training.

Rules

I am referring to self imposed rules and rules that are generally accepted when landing in paddocks. If you have set up your paddock landing and you throw a 360 degree turn at 300ft agl, in my view you are stretching the boundaries of safe flying. If you have left your decision making until you are very low on the basis that you are experienced, you can end up making decisions that you would not make if you were doing a circuit and landing at your home airfield. Quite a few of the recent accidents have come



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about by pilots doing these things and then running into problems. Perhaps you have done it before and you have got away with it, leading you to believe that it is okay. Over time, it can change your whole attitude to what is safe, without you really being aware of it.

It's also human nature to want to tell others if you have had a low scrape and your superior flying skills got you out of trouble. This can lead others to also think it's okay. It's not.

Planning

In some ways cross country gliding is very much like a game of chess. You are trying to think a half a dozen moves ahead all the time. This means thinking about the 'what if's' as well as your planned strategies. It's very easy to become so focused on a particular task that it becomes too much effort to think of the possibility of any change in your situation. If you haven't thought of it ahead of time and your situation does change, it's then hard for you to then change your focus to a safer option. Time can then work against you to make rushed decisions that don't work.

Preparation

It's really important to be both physically and mentally prepared. Remember the acronym "IM SAFE" and don't compromise. Stress and fatigue can have a huge effect on your decision-making, as can that insidious enemy, dehydration. Have everything prepared: equipment, crew, task well before the flight and avoid taking any additional emotional baggage with you, such as job or family stress. Make sure you are current enough to tackle the task.

Stress

If you are doing a paddock landing, there should be a moderate but not a large amount of stress involved, and you should be nowhere near the point of being in terror. If you are experiencing large amounts of stress when you are doing paddock landings, then it could be a lack of preparation, technique or a past bad experience. Stress can rob you of clear thought processes, so it is important to keep on top of it. FDR said, 'We have nothing to fear but fear itself.'

He is right, but it is also important that you don't end up so casual that you don't consider the 'what if's'. A complete lack of stress will blind you to the possibility of anything going wrong, until it is too late to react.

Summary

Cross country flying is unbelievably satisfying and rewarding. For me it is what gliding is all about and I am sure we all want to promote and support it as much as we can. It doesn't need to be dangerous if you remember the basics and keep thinking all the time. None of us are immune from having an accident, but we can minimize the risk with good preparation, knowledge, planning and understanding of how our emotions and attitudes can affect the decisions we make.