

A FUN BUT SAFE INTRODUCTION

The BGA safety team looks at how we can ensure that first flights are as low risk as practical



Colin Haynes introduces a visitor to gliding at Wrekin GC

PREVIOUS 'FLY RIGHT' ARTICLES

The Perils of Distraction

(Apr/May 19)

Keeping Safe in Thermals

(June/July 19)

Why It Is Good to Think Ahead

(Aug/Sep 19)

The Effects of Wind Gradient

(Oct/Nov 19)

■ Clubs can obtain printed copies of Safety Briefings from the BGA Office.

WHAT do you remember about your first glider flight? Perhaps you were struck by the snug cockpit, and surprised to be seated in the front. You followed, but didn't fully take in, the pre-flight briefing. It was probably your first time in a small aircraft, quite possibly your first venture into the air. The launch was thrilling – either the formation flying of an aerotow or the roller-coaster of the winch – but the glider felt more secure than you'd expected as the ground quickly receded and the view

opened up. You were surprised by either the silence or the sound of the airflow, and pleased to avoid airsickness despite a slight queasiness in turns and bumps.

The calm instructor impressed you as s/he pointed out landmarks and explained the flight. Perhaps you were given control. Did the glider over-react to your movements, or did your cautious attempts have little effect? Surely the instructor was still flying really. With practice and prompting you

improved and could see how, in time, you might master this. But what relief when the instructor took over again. Astonishing how calmly and precisely s/he guided the glider back for the gentlest of landings. Who knew that gliders were capable of such finesse?

The intense experience was over too quickly, yet you felt you couldn't take in any more. But you had gained utter faith in the instructor, and were thrilled at the prospect of learning to fly yourself. In a calm debrief over a cuppa, you relived the flight as the instructor traced the route on a map, answered your questions and explained the next steps in your flying career.

You weren't at all disappointed the flight hadn't been longer, the manoeuvring more exciting, or the route more adventurous. You couldn't recall most of what the instructor had told you, and during the brief quiet periods had enjoyed just looking out at the

STRAIGHTEN
UP & FLY
RIGHT

view. And, while you couldn't wait to learn to fly, you felt you'd had quite enough time on the controls for a first flight.

First flight accidents

How would even a minor accident have changed your impression of gliding, your faith in the instructor, and your desire to learn to fly? Did you realise there was any risk involved? Every year there are a number of gliding incidents and accidents. Very sadly, our 45 years of statistics include a number of very serious accidents during first flights. We individually accept a degree of risk in sport flying, but we can't expect our temporary members to evaluate the risks fully. First flights should be the safest, most cautiously conducted flying we do [1,2].

Some patterns emerge from our 45 years of records. Fatalities have occurred from spins, largely after winch launch failures, and mid-air collisions. Other injuries resulted from stalling and from field landings – after either an aerotow failure or drifting away from the airfield. Undershooting, overshooting, landing and insecure canopies have all caused injuries and damaged gliders.

Poor or deteriorating weather has often played a contributory role, with strong winds, turbulence and rain adding extra hazards. Two new pilots had lucky escapes when their Full Cat instructors descended through cloud until the ground met them.

Underlying causes

Many first flight accidents stem from one or more of the following:

- Poor launch conditions, including airfield set-up, launch failure options, weather, ground crew ability and aircraft choice.

● **Distraction:** aerotow upsets have resulted from keeping up a commentary, and at least one landout a year since 2014 from drifting out of range of the airfield as the trainee practised, or instructor tried to soar.

● **Value for money:** attempts to give more than was sensible in the circumstances, or the instructor was fit to deliver.

● **Ambition and showing off:** aerobatics, competition finishes and adventurous soaring complicated subsequent flying.

● **Convenience and efficiency:** cutting corners to save time and glider retrieval.

All of these could be mitigated by a more cautious approach with a willingness to say 'no' and a focus upon minimising the risk.

First flights

Depending where you flew, your first flight could have been an air experience flight, an introductory flight, a gliding lesson, a glider experience, or a trial flight. The BGA has generally adopted the term trial lesson, to emphasise past legal constraints about what we could offer to whom. EASA's approach, adopted by the UK ANO, is less burdensome, with no need to include any instruction [3] – hence the recent introduction of the Introductory Flight Pilot endorsement [4-6]. You'll therefore see increasing reference to first flights – a simpler phrase that we hope signals that they'll be the first of many.

This minor 'rebranding' gives us a chance to emphasise that first flights need to be treated differently from normal club flying. Weather that might be fine for sporting flying and training might not be acceptable for a first flight; launch operations need special consideration; and the instructor's focus should be upon safety, not training value or entertainment, and margins should be more conservative. "This is a first flight" should prompt us all to reassess conditions and redouble our vigilance. We all have a part to play:

Club management

Clubs need to ensure that first flights are actively managed, with clear criteria for supervision, weather minima, crew staffing and operating methods that will often be more stringent than for other club flying. First flight pilots' expectations will need to be handled to avoid pressure to fly when conditions are unsuitable.

Launch operations

The launch crew needs to monitor carefully that the weather (visibility, cloudbase, cloud

cover, wind, turbulence, rain, low sun, canopy misting) and ground conditions (crosswind, launch performance, launch failure options, ground crew capability) remain adequate for first flight operations, and be prepared to intervene if not. The launch crew could be the first to spot when an instructor is unfit (illness, fatigue, stress, dehydration) or a canopy insecure, and able to replace a trainee winch driver, or postpone launching during a competition finish.

Instructors and introductory flight pilots

The priority is flight safety and instructors must err on the side of caution. Be aware of the risk of distraction when giving a running commentary or letting the student take the controls. Don't try to impress with heroic soaring, aerobatics or competition finishes; don't feel obliged to give 'value for money' or push limits for convenience or efficiency. Our records show that all instructor categories are similarly vulnerable.

We naturally feel an obligation to a potential new member who's made the journey specially. We wish to provide a memorable experience, and give good value. There's a sense of duty to our club, to earn club income, recruit new members and just get things done. We're probably happy to fly anyway, and we might be keen to impress a beguiling trainee.

Whatever our motives, it's important not to press ahead with a first flight until the conditions are suitable, and to ensure that the flight is as safe as reasonably possible. For the instructor or introductory flight pilot, this might mean the flight is dull routine, but for the first-time glider pilot it will be utterly brilliant.

Tim Freearde and the BGA safety team

FOR THE INSTRUCTOR THE FLIGHT MIGHT BE DULL ROUTINE, BUT FOR THE FIRST-TIME GLIDER PILOT IT WILL BE UTTERLY BRILLIANT

■ For more information about First Flights, see pp16-18 of *Managing Flying Risk* [1] and section 29 of the BGA Instructor Manual [2].

[1] BGA *Managing Flying Risk* <https://tinyurl.com/flyright1927>

[2] BGA Instructor Manual, section 29 <https://tinyurl.com/flyright1928>

[3] CAA Information Notice IN-2015/029 <https://tinyurl.com/flyright1929>

[4] BGA Operational Regulations <https://tinyurl.com/flyright1930>

[5] BGA Introductory & Passenger Flights Requirements <https://tinyurl.com/flyright1931>

[6] BGA Introductory Flight Pilot course booklet <https://tinyurl.com/flyright1932>



Leaving a legacy

Supporting people to progress in gliding is important. A gift to our charity "Launchpoint" will help develop the next generations of pilots, and you will be part of the future of gliding.

Please see <https://members.gliding.co.uk/leaving-a-gift-in-your-will>