

'HOPEFULLY' IS NOT AN OPTION

Mike Fox explains why it is essential always to have a contingency plan and not to expect that things will turn out OK

HEADING back to the airfield after a cross-country, I knew it was going to be tight. The ends of my fingers tingling I was so tense – complete attention fixated on the nearest end of the runway to the detriment of all else. I'll probably make it.

Is 'probably make it' a sufficient concept on which to bet your life? Are there landing options on the way back? In my case, for the last couple of kms, there were only two options – land on the airfield, or crash in the trees. I did make it to the airfield and no one was the wiser. But I knew that I had bet my life on the vagaries of the airmass for the last 90 seconds of that flight and I didn't feel good about it. I decided that I would never 'hope' to make it back again.



Fast forward perhaps 20 years and I'm in the back of a K-13 on an instructional flight out of Seighford. My student is climbing in a thermal as we are drifting downwind. I'm relaxing and enjoying the view as the climb rate starts to reduce. We stayed with that weak climb just a little too long.

Suddenly alert, I notice the situation and ask my student to straighten up towards the airfield. The view looks fine initially, but then there is a little drizzle – and sink. I recall that previous final glide, many years before, and remind myself that 'hoping' is not a strategy. I start eying up fields on the way back while flying the glider as efficiently as I can. I'm determined not to repeat my previous mistake. I ask my student if she thinks we might make it – she says 'no'. My reply is – well, I think we might, but might isn't good enough, so we are going to land in one of these fields to the right. We both scrutinise the field for wires and other obstructions, make a base leg and land.

I'm not proud that on an instructional flight, we ended up in a field. However, having made the decision early and planned for the possibility, the actual landing was a complete non-event. My field landing experience is fairly high (I have averaged one or two landouts a year for the past 25 years), and I have quite a bit of experience in K-13s, but it's still easy for any pilot to do the same AS LONG as you think about the possibility early enough.

Travelling hopefully

We are experiencing accidents, both instructing and in single-seaters, which are in the category of 'travelling hopefully' – a phrase coined by my old boss, Don Irving.

ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT NEXT YEAR?

Now is the time to book courses and expeditions to ensure availability

We are open most flyable days during the winter and offer second club membership to members of other clubs. We welcome expeditions and of course are always looking for new members who want to learn to fly or already can.

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Always ask yourself what happens if that ridge doesn't work (Mike Fox)

Travelling hopefully is when you simply hope that everything will work out despite the view out of the window! Getting lower and lower on the ridge? It'll be OK – the ridge always works here! Losing out on the glide home? There will be some good air ahead – it'll be OK! No field landing options here? It'll be fine – the turbo always starts! I was travelling hopefully during the last 90 seconds of that first glide back to the airfield, but I learnt from my mistake.

Gliders in trees, broken gliders with engines sticking confidently out of fuselages and even gliders in the sea in more than one case were all – in essence – travelling hopefully accidents. In one accident, the glider struck bushes on the boundary of the airfield – there wasn't enough energy to clear them. Immediately before the end of the airfield was a huge grass field. All they had to do was open the brakes and touch down in the field before. Such is that fixation on the airfield when there is no other plan in mind.

Don't travel hopefully!

Instructors – how can we teach students to identify the need to potentially use a safer option? Show students safe limits and set those limits when briefing solo pilots. Show students that if they get close to those limits they need to identify a potential safe option and use it if they are not sure of a safe outcome. ALWAYS display the safer option in your own flying and instruction.

Getting low in the circuit? GREAT OPPORTUNITY to show the student how to take the 'turn in early' option and stop travelling hopefully in the circuit. Getting low on the ridge? Point out the height you set during briefing as your minimum and

return to the airfield or a field. Local soaring? Set limits of height and distance to get students safely back to the airfield. Teach them a bit about field landings – enough to keep them safe if they must use those fields.

Solo and licensed pilots – if things get squeaky, tear yourself away from the possibility of travelling hopefully. Pick fields as you get lower along the ridge, so you have somewhere to go if the ridge gets really soft. Remember that if the ridge lift is poor enough that you descend below the top, it will probably get even worse the further you descend. If you have a contingency option, you are more likely to take it. If you have no plan, you are much more likely to travel hopefully.

Always ask yourself 'what happens if that cloud/ridge/wave bar doesn't work?' What's your plan? If there is no alternative plan, you CAN'T try the lift! You MUST do something else. That might mean turning 180 degrees and going back to reliable lift. It might mean returning to the airfield for another launch. It may mean landing out, but you simply can't try something where the only other option is to crash!

Above all – ask yourself 'is my life worth travelling hopefully'?

Mike Fox, BGA Training Standards Manager



■ Have you ever travelled hopefully in a glider? Have you learnt from the experience? Why not tell us your story – we can then all learn from your mistakes as well as mine!? Send them to us at mike@gliding.co.uk and we can print some of the best. Don't worry – we can make them anonymous if you wish!

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)
A Fun but Safe Introduction (Dec19/Jan20)
Stop the Drop (Feb/Mar 20)
Avoiding Upset (Apr/May 20)
Backroom Boys (June/July 20)
Cockpit muddle (Aug/Sep 20)
Safe rotation (Oct/Nov 20)
Cockpit remedies (Dec 20/Jan 21)
Covid currency (Feb/March 21)
Eroded margins (April/May 21)
A good lookout (June/July 21)
Trouble with turbos (Aug/Sept 21)

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

Below: Field selected after memories of travelling hopefully on a previous flight