

# DO NOT DISTURB

The BGA Safety Team compares interruption and distraction with other sectors

**T**he week before Christmas is a good time to fettle the trailer or learn how to set up the navigation computer. Sitting in a hospital bed waiting for test results is less highly recommended but that's where I was when I received an email from the chairman of the BGA Safety Committee. He suggested I wasn't quite dangerous enough to dodge an invitation to work on safety issues and I wondered what inspiration I could draw from medicine and nursing. I didn't have long to wait.

The ward sister was doing the drug round that evening, dispensing the right drugs to the right patients in the right quantity. My particular ailments required numerous different tablets, and she carefully assembled my portfolio of pharmaceuticals into a paper cup. Then I saw the tabard she was wearing. In big letters front and back

**STRAIGHTEN  
UP & FLY  
RIGHT**

were the words "Do Not Disturb – Drug Round in Progress".

Clearly someone in nursing had recognised the damaging power of interruption and was trying to prevent drugs being assigned to the wrong patients or in the wrong doses. You learn to do as you are told in hospital – it's worth keeping the staff onside so you get speedy service when you end up needing a pee bottle or (more importantly) a slug of liquid morphine to take the edge off the pain. So, it was much later when she returned with bedtime hot chocolate that I asked about the tabard and explained why I was interested.

I explained that in rigging gliders, as with dispensing drugs, letting small things get forgotten or leaving things unchecked can be catastrophic. So, I was fascinated by the use of the tabard to reduce interruptions. Did it work? "Not completely" was the response. People would still engage in conversation or ask questions even if the tabard made it clear this was unwelcome.

It seems this is a cultural issue in nursing

and probably elsewhere as well. Until people recognise that interrupting complex tasks is "not the way we do things round here", they will continue to do it. Tabards and baseball caps imploring people to not interrupt will be ignored while everyone else ignores them too.

In commercial air transport, they have introduced the concept of a "Sterile Flight Deck". At critical phases of flight, activities unrelated to the task at hand are banned – the US regulations [1] specifically mention ordering galley supplies and completing payroll paperwork as forbidden. This was introduced because complacency had allowed the distraction to become dangerous. Unlike tabards though, people take it seriously because it's the law (and also probably because of the cockpit voice recorder).



Author Paul Jessop models a drugs round tabard (Catharine Jessop)

**' IN 2024 THERE WERE THREE INCIDENTS THAT APPEAR TO BE LINKED TO RIGGING ERRORS '**



IMI-Gliding equipment

Interestingly, there are cultural issues here too – though sometimes in the opposite direction. Regulators found that people sometimes took the sterile flight deck too literally: a flight attendant avoided telling the pilots that a door latch had become faulty and the door had eventually fallen off because of the sterile flight deck doctrine. Under similar circumstances, on the British Midland 737 that crashed near Kegworth in 1989 [2], the flight attendants did not communicate to the flight deck which engine was on fire and the crew shut down the wrong engine.

Some flexibility in the rules is needed. It probably is a good idea to interrupt someone rigging a glider if a winch strop is about to fall on him, or the wingtip is about to fall off the trestle. And there should be no objection to the non-handling pilot asking when downwind for a field landing: “have you spotted the wires above the hedge on the approach?”. That may be an interruption but it’s worthwhile and might prevent an accident. Understanding of when to do this is a function of aeronautical decision making (ADM) [3] or, as we old folks call it, airmanship.

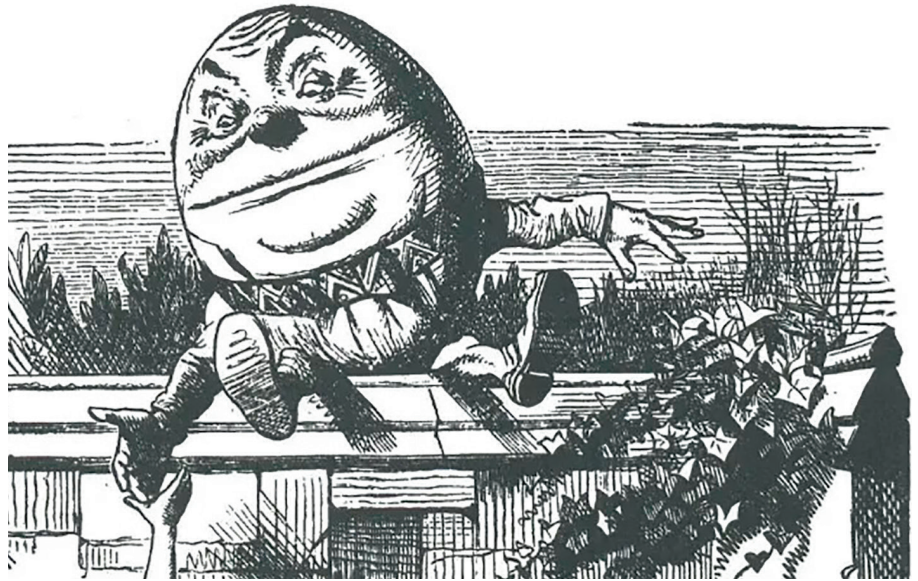
So, what critical tasks are exposed to interruption? Rigging is sadly shown by the accident and incident statistics to produce bad outcomes. In 2024 there were three incidents that appear to be linked to rigging errors. We have multiple lines of defence including: (a) stop the problem in the first place (the focus here) and (b) stop the holes in the Swiss Cheese [4] from lining up by adding extra slices. This second phase includes positive and independent control checks and a walk round before each flight [5].

If my nurse’s lived experience tells us that a culture change is needed, as well as simplistic slogans, how do we address that? I think we need to learn collectively that it isn’t rude to dismiss idle chat when rigging. It’s OK, and indeed a demonstration of superior airmanship, to say “Not now, I’m rigging” when someone tells you the toilets are blocked, or the airspace files are out of date in the briefing room. Say that again: “Not now, I’m rigging.” With a smile and an airy wave. Not rude, not dismissive, not patronising. Just lifesaving.

“Not now, I’m rigging.”

And when we have got people to believe it is OK, we can embroider it onto rigging aprons, fettling boilersuits and baseball caps. But not before.

**Paul Jessop and the BGA Safety Team**



## INTERRUPTIONS AND DISTRACTIONS

Humpty Dumpty had this right – “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”

Interruptions and distractions have similar outcomes – imperfect attention to important tasks. But so that we can communicate about these issues we are selective in the meanings we use. Distractions are things that take your attention away from the task at hand – noisy cockpit ventilation, concerns about being able to afford another aerotow, uncomfortable seat cushions. Interruptions are unanticipated tasks that require attention – questions about tonight’s committee meeting, getting rid of a software update message on a moving map, requests to hold a wingtip in someone else’s rigging.

The BGA’s bible on these matters is *Managing Flying Risk* [6] and it has good, detailed information about both.

This article is mostly about interruptions though we probably all know club members whose droning qualifies them as a distraction instead!

[1] FAR 121.542 Flight crew member duties  
<https://tinyurl.com/flyright2520>

[2] AAIB accident investigation G-OBME (1989) <https://tinyurl.com/flyright2521>

[3] FAA *Pilot’s Handbook of Aeronautical Knowledge* (2023), chapter 2  
<https://tinyurl.com/flyright2522>

[4] *Swiss cheese*, S&G, (Dec 2022/ Jan 2023) <https://tinyurl.com/flyright2523>

[5] BGA, Is your glider fit for flight?  
<https://tinyurl.com/flyright2524>

[6] BGA, *Managing Flying Risk*  
<https://tinyurl.com/flyright2525>

■ All previous ‘Fly Right’ articles are available from the S&G website. See: [www.sailplaneandgliding.co.uk/safety-articles](http://www.sailplaneandgliding.co.uk/safety-articles) which may be accessed using the QR link below.

