



NTSB RECORD OF CONVERSATION

Adam Gerhardt
Air Safety Investigator
General Aviation Accident Investigation Division, AS-20

Date: 10/17/2015
Person Contacted: Christopher Giacomo (Pilot in Command)
NTSB Accident Number: GAA16CA016

Narrative:

The following is a written statement provided from the pilot in command:

PART I - Synopsis

With the exception of the higher levels of moisture in the forecast, the day looked to be a very strong wave day, with the mountain-top wind speeds dipping down to 37mph directly out of the west, with a very favorable wind gradient starting around 1800Z that seemed stable all the way up from a mid-level tow to 35 or 40k feet. The early morning forecast seemed to dim that prediction, but by 1530Z when the club Puchaz reported that the ridge was working strong, I figured it was certainly worth a try.

By 1630Z I was in position and ready to launch, and the weather seemed to be clearing a bit, with a visible Foehn gap appearing behind Mt. Adams, where I have had significant luck in the past catching a reliable wave. Although this was the first time in a while that I have attempted a zero-flap takeoff, the launch was arguably one of the best I have had in a while, with minimal deviation from centerline and a smooth transition into flight behind the tow plane. The turbulence on tow (1630-1635) was quite substantial, and arguably the most challenging I have faced in this location, and maybe more so than I have faced while flying out in Colorado. I released at 5000 ft, just behind Mt. Madison, and headed immediately towards a Foehn Gap that seemed marginally stable, but rather small. Upon arriving at this smaller window, I decided that it was too risky to attempt to climb up in this area, as the gap appeared to be already closing. After putting in 30 degrees of flap to descend back safely below the cloud deck, I moved slightly farther down the valley in zero sink to the much larger and better defined primary window, where I was greeted with a fantastical climb to 17,500 feet in under 20 minutes (1640Z). As I was nearing FL180, I was forced to move out of the stronger lift, and so I pushed upwind in order to maintain 17.5k until the airspace could be opened (1700Z). At this time, there were still multiple open holes that I could have descended through, as well as the entire east behind me was still open.



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While waiting in this stable configuration, I began to hear reports on the ground of precipitation moving in, as well as the cloud deck thickening and beginning to close the window. For the first several minutes, I figured that at my current altitude I would be more than able to stay aloft and avoid any issues, provided that at least a few options remained open, but as the radio calls began to increase and I was warned that the primary was closing, I decided it would be best to retreat down through the last two remaining holes in front of me and then jump back onto the ridge until conditions improved (1710Z-1716Z).

As I dove for the hole, with sink rates averaging around 20kts and peaking at over 30kts, the primary window I was aiming for closed completely, and I was forced to divert to the last remaining window, which was farther south. Once arriving at the last remaining window at 8400 ft, I found that I was able to vividly see the NH foliage at the bottom of the environmental toilet bowl I was spiraling down, with very little gap between cloud base and the southern slope of Mt. Washington. I then confirmed with my Oudie flight computer that I was indeed several miles south of the peak of Mt. Washington and would be unable to reach a land-able spot if I attempted to go out the bottom of this gap. For roughly the next 10 minutes (1719Z), I attempted to climb out of the cloud bowl that I was in, but soon became disoriented as to the upwind and downwind sides of the quickly closing gap, and was soon unable to maintain VFR flight (1724Z). After entering IFR conditions, my first reaction was to utilize the flight computer to aim my ground track vector north and east, so I would travel back into the lowest part of the valley (1725Z). Knowing that with no instrument time and no instruments available to confirm my orientation my chances of keeping the glider straight and level in a several thousand foot thick cloud cover was next to nothing, I decided to put the aircraft into a 90-degree flap benign spiral so that I could descend through the cloud deck. The HP-14 had no issues maintaining this condition, and performed three stable spirals that allowed me to descend an additional 2000 ft down to 6000 ft MSL (1726Z).

As I crossed through 6400 ft MSL without seeing any sign of the cloud base, I determined that I was far more likely to spiral directly into the mountainside than I was to come out from under the cloud base with any safe exit options, as I was not below the peak heights. I then decided my safest option left was to bail out of the glider while I still had enough altitude for the canopy to open (1727Z). Prior to exiting the aircraft, I put on my survival backpack (with my log books and registration) backwards on my chest and grabbed my LX Nano flight recorder off of the console, considered what I was about to actually commit, placed my right hand on my parachute D ring, and then jumped, arched, and pulled.

The canopy opening was far less dramatic or painful than my previous 5 jumps at the Air Force Academy, with a distinct lack of pain normally associated with being jolted upright by a strap between your thighs. In this case, however, I had dropped rather low in the harness, and was taking most of the weight and pressure on my upper arms, making steering the canopy right difficult, and left nearly impossible.



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In my canopy ride to the ground, I was able to determine that I was now about 2 miles west of Rt 16 and about 3-4 miles south of Mt. Washington, and began attempting to steer the canopy by pulling on the right riser. By sequencing this tension on the riser I was able to make better use of the wind, and ended up shortening my walk back to Rt. 16 by over a mile.

I ended up landing in between two trees, about a foot from one and three feet from the other, with no hope of freeing my canopy from the top branches, so I was stuck about 30 feet up in the air (1730Z). I was able to shift my position slightly by kicking the closer of the two trees to swing myself out and around in in order to grab on to one of the conveniently located branches. From this point I was able to wriggle myself out of my harness and hold myself up on one of the straps, while freeing my emergency bag with the other hand and tossing it down on the ground. I was then able to carefully slide down the tree, gather my belongings, and first call 911 on my emergency backup cell phone (my primary phone didn't make the trip with me).

After discussing my location with the 911 operator and them telling me that I was about 5-10 miles from my actual position, I headed down the slope slightly more than a half mile to Rt 16, where I exited at Mile marker 95.8. At this point I called 911 again, and told them I was out of the woods and on Rt. 16, to which they responded that there were no emergency services personnel available to pick me up, so I hitchhiked back to the Gorham Airport with the help of a wonderful local Doctor and his daughter.