

Safety AirWaves



Hi << Test First Name >>

Have you completed the most important pre-flight check - YOU!

At last week's final SAFA Board meeting, I was asked to pen some thoughts on the pilot tragedies that have sadly occurred in 2019 and look at ways we can improve on safety in 2020.

This calendar year, we have seen accidents in our sport, leading to the deaths of nine people: seven of them SAFA members and, tragically, two of them passengers.

On top of that, there are a number of people who have suffered life-changing injuries. If you've had a bingle and you got away with a few bruises and a dent to your ego, you're lucky. Very, very lucky.

The first fatality occurred on February 23rd, a scant 5 weeks after I commenced in my role as Safety Management Officer with SAFA. The last (to date) was barely two weeks ago at the time of writing, on November 30th.

I think it is worth recalling the events and the people involved. Real people. Our people.

Bevan Taylor died when he impacted terrain while launching his hang glider in an aerotow during the WA State HG Championships in February.

Michelle Uildriks died when she impacted the terrain while landing her paraglider at Manilla in March.

Daryl Armstrong died when he impacted terrain after taking off in his weight shift microlight for a flight at Holmwood (WA) in April.

A week later, Des Hamilton died when he fell from a cliff edge on which he landed after snagging a tree while flying at Stanwell Park.

In June, the 20-year old female passenger of a weight shift microlight pilot drowned, trapped in the wreck of the aircraft after it impacted the lake surface and sank.

In July, Chris Tarry died from surgical complications following a crash on the mountain where I learned to fly, Babadağ in southern Turkey.

Hang gliding CFI, Neil Mersham, died in October when he fell and impacted terrain after failing to clip-in to his aircraft before launching.

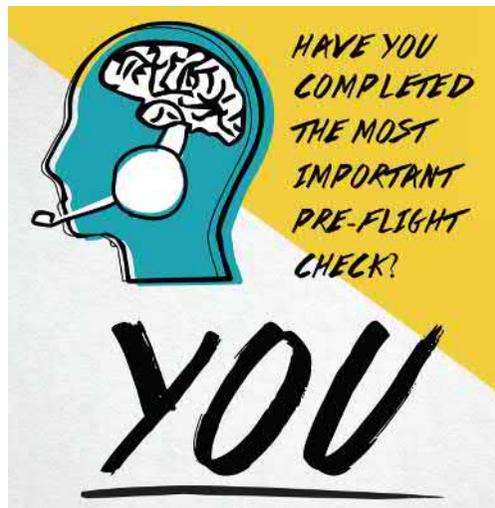
Finally, Alex Blanch and his passenger died when the weight shift microlight Alex was piloting impacted terrain returning to Maitland airport in NSW.

How does this compare with previous years? In 2018, we had two fatalities; in 2017, four. But one fatality in any year is too many.

Throughout the year, when a fatal event has occurred, I've asked myself, 'What could I have done to prevent this?' I work towards getting AIRS reports out to our AIRS Managers for review as quickly as possible. I'm working on improvements to our IT systems to better record what happens in events so we can extract better information and get the findings communicated to you in Sky Sailor. Peter Allen, and I are writing training material for our AIRS Managers, reviewing our training systems and working on updates that are long overdue. I'm also developing our organisational, club, and school Safety Management Systems. But it's not enough and it's too late.

Unfortunately, in all these fatalities, there is no single common thread that has occurred that we can point to, to say 'That's IT. That's what caused this!', and then be able to act on it.

And there really isn't. In each of the fatalities, there has been no evidence that mechanical or organisational failure has been a cause. It has all come down to pilots making decisions to fly and how they have dealt with the unfolding circumstances.



So I'm going to turn it around.

I'm going to point the finger to you all, each and every one of you and ask you this question:

What are YOU going to do to make sure I am not going to write about you like this next year?

Our aircraft are far more affordable and accessible than other forms. What other aircraft allows us to get airborne as easily as a paraglider? What other powered aircraft is available as cheaply as a weight shift microlight, other than a powered paraglider or hang glider?

This ease of use and accessibility has drawbacks though. Being simpler aircraft to fly, we do not have the more rigorous checklists, cross checks and error detection processes that comes with piloting of more sophisticated aircraft. It is still incumbent upon us to make sure that the checks we do make are undertaken and completed satisfactorily each and every time we choose to fly.

I believe that with our simplified aircraft, there's a lot of complacency out there about the dangers we all face when we decide to fly. We are playing with

gravity and a dynamic atmosphere. Every successful flight undertaken increases the confidence we have in our abilities. And with that little bit of extra confidence, we have a little bit more complacency and a little less fear. 'That flight went ok; the next flight will too'.

Phil de la Hunty, our NSW Board member, described the situation pretty well at that final Board meeting, when he said that as equipment has become better pilots are not properly afraid and are making decisions without being properly fearful.

If you haven't had your life altering moment of existential angst after pondering your own mortality, I would suggest that you really should not be flying.

So, let's be really plain here – the consequence of something going wrong is that you can die! Or even worse, if you are carrying a passenger, they can die!

I know it, because I had my moment of complacency on 7th June 2008. It, the dreaded IT, happened to me. I screwed up and I paid the price. Luckily, I survived.

Phil Hystek, of Paragliding Queensland, earlier in the year, shared with me his thoughts on what you need to survive an event in the air: altitude, speed and ideas. You can take one of those three away and still survive. Take two away, though, and you are really behind the 8-ball.

Impacting the terrain is not easily survivable. You need to have this knowledge with the fear for your own mortality and a huge respect for gravity and the atmosphere front and centre in your mind when you make the decision to fly.

Your next flight will not be the same as your last. Changes to the terrain are affecting the atmosphere that we operate in. The land is drying out, and not just in areas hit by drought. Clearing of forests and vegetation coupled with diminishing rainfall means that the ground is consequently heating sooner in the day, leading to sites becoming thermally active earlier. Bear this in mind and be prepared for more turbulence and aggressive thermals. There's research going on into increased turbulence and the effect on commercial aircraft.

It's not just thermic sites that are changing. We in Tasmania have noticed the increased strength and duration of the sea breezes at some of our local sites. One, in particular, used to have a reputation for consistent, lovely, after-work evening flights. These are now few and far between. Whether the loosening of restrictions on farmers clearing land has anything to do with it is speculation on my part. But there is a considerable increase in the amount of cleared land in

the interior and this has to increase the amount of heating of the bare earth.

Before you make the decision to launch, you must assess the risks presented of flying the site you are at, in the conditions as they are, and with the forecast ahead, versus the reward of doing so. If you are at all unsure or something does not feel right, don't launch! What have you lost? A couple of hours getting to launch.

What could you lose? Your life.

Please people, enjoy the holiday and fly safe.

Iain Clarke, Safety Management Officer, SAFA



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