

My Ocean PG Story:

If you ever have a choice of landing in the ocean or hitting a cliff, a boulder, a tree, anything else, hit the anything else. (Only acceptance to the rule is a flat bay with no currents.)

I have had 2 incidents with the ocean in my PG career, 10 years apart.

- 1- **Newer Pilot.** I flew almost every flyable day in the beginning but guess what at only 1.5 years I was still a newbie. I had lots of hours, but very few tools in my tool belt. I learned to fly in SF, the only P2 site after learning at that time was Pacifica, aka the Dumps. Therefore, my instructor repeated to us many times “if you ever have to make a choice between going in the ocean or hitting the cliff, always hit the cliff. It may hurt but we will come and get you and you have a good chance of surviving. Go in the ocean and you are on your own, only a few have ever survived that.”

So after a summer of galivanting around the west, hitting all the good spots including the big air places like Idaho. I arrived back at Pacifica. Ego inflated, I was a “great” pilot by now, I had been topping out the guys who taught me to thermal, I was a “bad ass”. If the boys could do it, I could too. Oh how wrong and naive I was.

- **Mistake 1:** I chose to fly.
Bad day, started strong N on a full west ridge site. Eventually it clocked around to the NW and calmed down a tad. The guys grabbed their gear to go try it out. I asked if they thought it was ok for me? Shrugs they knew me, but I now had all this mountain experience, so they did not want to judge. “Well rule of thumb, if you can kite it, you can most likely fly it.”
- **Mistake 2:** I believed that silly rule of thumb. Instantly after launching I was being pushed back. Out came the bar and the battle to get down began. I had a parking lot, houses, and powerlines looming behind me. I sat scared, on full bar in the ebbing currents of wind for a good 30min pointing west towards the ocean...
- **Mistake 3:** I chose to fly, or damn lack of real knowledge
Eventually I got low pointing west towards the ocean, I turned to the North which was now again directly into the wind. I was over the last road/lz. There was no beach at the end of road, so the road was my only option. I had a boulder garden to the west, that ended at the ocean, and the cliff to the east. Pop, pop I kept getting popped up, I was going to overshoot the road. I decided to make one last quick turn out towards the ocean to lose the altitude. Oops this was a horrible mistake. I banked it hard and fast, bringing my left tip down into that N wind. It spun me; I was now downwind with 5 seconds to make a serious choice.
 - Turn back into the wind, I will end up in the ocean
 - Lift my legs to get over the boulders and I will go into the ocean
 - **ONE OF THE BEST CHOICES OF MY LIFE:** I chose to put my feet down into those boulders and flare hard. I impacted feet first, at an estimated 40mph

into giant boulders, literally bounced second impact was straight on my head, feet in the air. Bounced again and crumbled into a pile in the rocks.

I had no feeling or ability to move in the entire left side of my body, so I used my right hand to unhook from the glider and throw the risers as far away as possible. I was not going to allow that glider to pull me towards the water, nor was I even sure in that moment that the glider was not already dancing in some surf. (It was not I had hit the highest part of the garden, as far from the surf as possible and completely out of any breaking waves)

I laid there and waited taking mental notice of what had happened and how my body felt. I could not move my left side; I knew I had the direct head impact which meant I very well could have broken my neck. I was not going to move any part of my torso or head, I was not going to walk away period from this one. I knew I needed to stay conscious and just wait for help to come. In extreme shock I needed support asap, I reached in my pocket and pulled out my phone and called my mother. (this is why I will never use my phone as a flight instrument) I briefly explained I was seriously injured, alone, and I needed her to keep me conscious. She did just that, what's my name, ext ext....

It took the all-star team who I was flying with a good 20+min to get down themselves to get to me. Nova, had a brief full stall scare, and thought he too was going down. Richard and Arnel were struggling with turbulence and strong lift as well.

An hour and half later I was in the ambulance. Dry but still freezing from being on the oceans edge at sunset. The guys had laid all their jackets on me as we awaited the ambulance, but between the cold air, wind, and extreme shock I was literally freezing. Once in the ambulance they wanted to pump me full of morphine, I refused and proceed to tell the EMT all I needed was to get warm again. I was past the shock and pain of impact, I just wanted blankets and to get warm. Another huge factor of refusing the morphine for me, was I wanted to stay conscious about what they did to me at the hospital. I was not going to have any friends or family support, it was going to be up to me to stay aware of what they were doing, and going to do.. Yes, I am stubborn as hell.

5 hours later in the hospital, full body scans, brain scans, you name it I had it scanned. Only confirmed injury was a shattered left foot. Seriously guys I chose the cliff/boulder, hit at a good 40mph and all I had was a shattered foot. I thought I was going to die, then I assumed at the very least, I broke my neck or spine. All the guys I was flying with thought I was dead or would be paralyzed. But no, I just had a shattered foot.

From then on, I have been very cautious when flying coastal sites. You can call me a wuss all you want; I had promised myself I would never put myself in that situation again. No bailout LZ, no thanks, I don't want to have that choice on my plate ever again. Both sides of that equation suck, so to me it's just not worth putting myself in a place where I have to make that choice again. (Now I will fly no bailout coastal bluffs If I am high and can easily make the glide to an LZ if the wind completely dies). We cannot trust the wind; it is a marvelous force of nature. I kite, I sail, I know the wind can pick up and dissipate in the blink of an eye.

Fast forward 10 years

- 2- **Makapu Oahu:** Light on lower, strong on upper. Typical Oahu great once you're in the air but you have to get there first.

Arrive 3-4 pilots in the air, calling smooth buoyant lift. 2 more take off and cut right, what you have to do to get up. There is no beach or any LZ this direction, just a rugged cliff, and giant boulder garden leading to the ocean which had pretty high surf that day. Despite it feeling lite to me, everyone turned right and poof they were up. Tricky launch, straight vert where the glider goes, and small 3 step platform for the pilot. Its always a blessing to have someone hold the wing from sliding down at this takeoff. I offered to let my companion go first as he had never flown there so I could hold his wing. (pilot had a good 15 years on my experience, so I trust he can make his own decisions, a student I would have said a clean no way)

Of course, I was still worried about him. It was lighter than any other time I had flown there. I kept checking in with the guys on upper they were still saying it's too strong to jump the rock wall on the tourist pull out above. My friend launches I cringe, I min later he is up fully in the lift band, I felt confirmation ok, it is working.

2 other newer pilots have now arrived. I offer to help them with their wings and warn its marginally light. They thank me, heed my words, and confirm as locals they have flown when it was this light they think, both take off and are fine.

Now its just me and one other guy who has come down from upper, turns out he had just arrived from Worlds where he took 2cd overall. We take turns preforming botched launches in the weak wind, with no runway to create the airspeed. We both botch 3 tries. He manages to nail his 4th try. Heavier pilot then me, he cuts right hits the lift band and goes up. With that I assume I will be fine if I can just get in the air, I am tiny and lite, I always go up.

- **Mistake 1-** I did not follow my rule, 3 bad launch attempts go drive or have a beer.
- **Mistake 2-** I chose to fly

4th try I nail it and am off... I turn right, but wait I am not going up, in fact I am sinking big time. Not this again, serious flash back going on in my mind. I look up as I try and turn to the left to get back towards the beach because my glider is not wanting to turn. I spot a tension knot on the left side. Argggggg I finally safely but very slowly bring the glider around, there is no way I can make the beach. Below me are giant boulders and 5'

waves crashing into them, higher up towards the cliff is boulders clear of water. Either way it's going to be a downwinder.

- **My semi smart choice:** I say that because had I been truly smart, I just never would have flown that day. But while waiting and watching on launch, I was thinking about what to do if you cut right and did not get up. I had been thinking about this plan for a while now. I also had a hell of a lot more tools/skills in my belt this go-around.

I had already chosen the giant flat rock about 7' feet out in the ocean. I had always wanted to top land that thing but could never find a smart reason to try it. But now, now was my time. It was 25-30' in diameter, and high enough that even these 5' waves were not even beginning to splash up to the top of this huge platform. On the right of it was open ocean, on the left and behind it was a tide pool of sorts that still had decent 1/2' waves coming inside it. There was also a little 5' boulder between the big rock, open ocean side, and shore. If I wasn't flying, I would feel safe to climb out to that thing, and that is saying something because I watched way too many episodes of Bay Watch as a kid, so I tend to steer clear of rocks where waves are breaking. But I had watched that rock and already told myself it would be a great bail out if needed.

I went for it, I was a tad high, so I would over shoot it on glide, and flapping would potentially take too long to work so I may still over shoot it. Again, this time around 10 years later I had more tools. I got to the top of the rock and did a Heli landing. I would never recommend this one, however it was the perfect landing spot for me, better than anything else, and I felt confident with my skill set to spot land it. Now if I went back 10 years in my skill level, I know for sure I would have made the same choice as I did at Pacifica and just taken the boulders/cliff high enough to say out for the whole surf zone.

Because if you have a choice between hitting the cliff or going in the ocean you are always go for the cliff.

While I landed perfectly fine on top of my rock, the lack of any wind and pretty much landing smack dab in the center, had part of my wing hanging over the right edge and I could feel a slight tug as that part of the glider would catch the top of the waves. I quickly lowered my body to relieve the tension and disconnected from the glider, and I let her go. I watched her wash away and get stuck on the 5' boulder I was going to use to get my gear dryly off this rock.

Of course, I was only at the beginning of my visit to the majestic island, so I decided to try and rescue the glider before it got trashed. I dropped my harness, helmet, and flight deck, leaving them in the center of my rock and jumped in on what I could now see was only a 3' pool. I crawled up on the back side of the boulder my glider was stuck on. When a wave from the open side would come, I would duck behind the boulder, when it was calm, I would reach around and try and untangle my lines off the rock. This process took quite a long time, I did not

expect any help relatively soon. Even someone on the beach would have a while to get across the boulder garden to this pool. Eventually the glider started to come around. I had hoped to bring it around on the shore side, but that was not possible. It was coming into the pool which I remind you still had small but strong waves. I did my best to try and keep my body clear of it, but that was tuff when I had to duck behind the boulder when the big waves were coming.

As the glider entered the pool, of course it was wrapping its way around me. I just continued to stay calm, although I remember a sarcastic “laugh” ha I am going to drown in 3’ of water trying to rescue some nylon. I laid back calm floating and began running my hands calmly down my legs to get free from the fabric and lines. I was extremely grateful when 3 boys from the beach reached me. They asked if I needed help. I said yes please, come over carefully on the sea side of me and hold my torso out of the water so I can get untangled from this thing. Once free, we let the waves push the glider to shore.

Then all 4 of us attempted to try and hoist the glider out of the water. Seriously we could not even begin to do this. I was shocked at how heavy it was. I have done SIV’s into the water and been on the boat when others went in. But there we let the glider fly and go leading edge down, so it stays full of air and floats. Here the entire thing was soaked inside and out the cells were each holding gallons of water/weight. So we just rolled it up the rocks, as the waves would come we would use them to push it up the boulders. Needless to say, this was where I got the bruises from the incident. As much as I would have played in this pool on that day had I not been flying, they were strong waves and as they hit and rolled the glider up my body was also rolling up across the rocks.

Out of the surf, we were able to dump the cells, and 3 of us carried the mess up the boulders to a place clear and free of the surf reaching us. I sat down and said my prayers.

I had made it out of this one without a scratch.

The beach boys brought me a couple beers and I just sat there staring at the ocean. How could I have come so close again, what on earth was I thinking. Sure, with no tension knot I most likely would have gone up and hit the lift band too. But that is not what happened, I had ignored all my normal signs that tell me to just sit this one out. So here I was thankful for my dedicated decade of growing my skill set. But ultimately disappointed I had allowed myself to get in this horrible situation again.

Glider= 18 broken lines, 4 hrs to untangle

- **Massive tares think ones was 18”**
- **Internal cells torn**

A huge thanks to Cloud Nine Paragliding’s amazing repair shop.

Yes I did spend the \$900 to reline and repair the thing.

My mementoes from my Ocean Story's. A metal foot with 26 screws and a metal plate, it constantly swells, and has a reduced range of motion compared to my other foot. A full-face helmet with a giant gash in it, a thing I think I will always keep as I believe it was that helmet that saved my life. And one of my favorite models of gliders with plenty of pink patches, perhaps one day I will turn into something else.

Point of this is to share what happens on the side of following a pretty good rule. If you have a choice between the ocean and a cliff, always hit the cliff. We can come and get you, you may not be perfectly ok, you made a mistake, but you will have a much better chance of surviving.

Looking back, I can also say in both situations I did not panic. I made a mistake, that was not worth thinking about in that moment. I allowed myself to stay calm so I could find the best solution to the situations I put myself in. I made conscious decisions, while in reality I had only a few seconds, those seconds are long moments of clarity where survival kicks in. I truly believe it's the remaining calm that allows you to make the smart decision. I don't waste my thought on well that might hurt, I jump right to survival, what do I need to do to survive this moment. I don't know if that is a gift, or something I have worked on due to my love of extreme things, and unusual life path. But I do know it's my key to making smart decisions. Whether in an Alpine situation, out at Sea in a storm, Paragliding, lost in the woods, or just driving a car. If you stay calm, you stay clear in thought.

1 common mistake:

- I chose to Fly

Both times there was clear signals It could be a good day to sit it out

A pdf would not have helped me, the only thing that could have changed my having to live through those experiences was my choice to fly.

One common thing I feel saved my life

- I chose rocks over ocean-

I survived, it may not always be so, but it's got better odds then a glider in the ocean especially a surf zone.

So my flock of freedom loving birds. Make smart decisions, THIS IS HOW YOU KEEP YOURSELF SAFE! Asses the risk is it worth to you, no one else matters this is your choice. If you take a wild leap, and if you know me, you know I do this on the regular in all aspects of life. Know your backup plan, know your options, and know what will keep you alive. Personally, the older I get, the longer I fly, the less I am willing to take big risks... While in the rest of my life I keep taking big risks. I believe in myself; I believe in living my dreams, but I don't believe I am invincible, and I don't believe I want any more close calls or hard impacts.

Please don't let the heartbreaking decisions of others put you into panic, over analyzing things, or a state of fear. Learn from their mistakes so they do not need be hard lessons you have to learn yourself. Assess your risk vs reward. Only you can keep yourself safe, happy and alive. You do not need to run out and by a PDF, you just need to know when and where you should fly.