

It's Time to Go

By Tom Johnson - SSF Trustee

Great soaring day!! You are almost ready to go. Your task is loaded and your gear is stowed. Now it's time to put the parachute on and get into the sailplane.

But wait! What is the purpose of the parachute you are strapping on? Is it merely a cushion or is it something that can save your life if needed?

Well obviously it is there in case you have to get out of the sailplane in an emergency. But ask yourself the serious question, "Do I treat it as such?"

Let's start with the parachute pre-flight. Hopefully you do one. Learn what specific items you should check on your rig. Establish a pre-flight routine of checking it every time. Also make sure you store your rig in a secure and dry area. And don't forget to check the repack date! FAR 91.307 allows you 180 days (not 6 calendar months) between repacks of emergency chutes. Water, critters, and children can do bad things to a parachute. The repack is always an excellent time to make sure your rig is still operational.

Make sure to hook up and tighten all of the straps when you put your rig on. Duh, you say? Well, I have personally watched a pilot fail to do this. He put the rig on and got into the sailplane and did not have the parachute straps buckled up. Trying to buckle the parachute straps on your way down is not something the experts recommend. Tighten the straps down as tight as you can handle for the entire flight. Injuries from opening shock with loose straps can be bad.

As you are getting into the sailplane, do you do a quick refresher of your emergency egress procedures? How do you get the canopy off in an emergency? How do you undo your seat belts? Do you have an oxygen hose or headset that has to be removed? Is there anything else particular to your situation?

If you have not done it, I highly encourage you to get in your sailplane, strap in, and with your eyes closed find the canopy jettison knobs, the seat belt release, and whatever else you have to remove. See how long it takes you to do these things. If you want some added realism, have someone shake the wings while you are trying to do this.

The reason you need to be practice this drill is simple. When the time comes, and you really need to get out now, it is not the time to be doing this drill for the first time. You will be amazed how much you remember, when the chips are down, if you have thought about and practiced the procedure.

When you exit the sailplane after a flight, get into the habit of releasing your seat belts, egressing the sailplane with your parachute on, and then remove your rig. Why? Because, the last thing you want in an emergency is to follow an ingrained habit pattern of unhooking your rig while seated in the sailplane and leaving without the chute.

Once the canopy is gone, how are you going to actually evacuate the aircraft? Aircraft control will obviously be an issue, otherwise why get out. You may be rolling, spinning, tumbling, whatever. Have an egress plan and practice it. If the aircraft is experiencing any positive "g", it may be harder than you think.

Once you are out of the aircraft, now what? You have to deploy the chute at some point. Generally, deploying the chute as soon as possible is the preferred method. However, if your situation dictates, you may want to delay the deployment. Wave flying is a good example. Whatever situation you are in, have a deployment plan and stick to it.

Do you know how to deploy your rig? Next time you go for a repack, put the rig on and pull the ring. Learn how much force it takes to deploy. Learn how to find the ring with your eyes closed. You may possibly be tumbling as you get out. Practice finding the ring and doing the deployment movement. You're training that muscle memory once again.

Once under the chute, do you know what to do and do you have a plan? Modern parachutes are very reliable, but do you know what to do if you have a line-over or other abnormality?

All of this is predicated on your decision to abandon the aircraft. Make yourself a list of situations and criteria for which you will get out. Review this list periodically. It may be different for different sailplanes.

In Naval Aviation, we learned that the decision to eject on a bad catapult shot is made in the ready room, not halfway down the catapult track at night. So it is with our sport.

You can play the odds that you will never have to use the rig. Or you can be prepared and put the odds more in your favor. The choice is yours.