



Photo: Joe McCarthy

# It won't ~~could~~ happen to me!

MAURICE MCBRIDE PONDERES THE INNER GAME OF UNDERSTANDING RISK

**A RECENT CLUSTER OF SERIOUS FLYING INCIDENTS AMONG LOCAL PILOTS HAS EVOKED MEMORIES OF THE EARLY PARAGLIDING DAYS IN NORTHERN IRELAND WHEN PILOTS SEEMED TO FLY WITH IMPUNITY.** Accidents happened in other countries but not here – a notion forming part of the protective bubble that kept me flying but one which, for obvious reasons, proved all too transitory.

The first dent in that bubble came at Robin Young's Hill near the Antrim coast when a canopy collapsed and the pilot plummeted to the ground. I missed the brief descent but my mother-in-law didn't – I had brought her along to witness first-hand how safe this game really is. She, my wife and I watched an ambulance bob across uneven fields, carting off the unfortunate pilot with his inevitable back injury.

Of course a bubble can't really be dented, so as soon as the causes of the incident were determined I satisfied myself that I wouldn't similarly be caught out (cobblers!). The personal protective bubble I needed inside my head in order to enjoy worry-free flying swiftly reformed.

## A lesson from road safety

A strapline in a recent road safety advertisement on the telly ran something like, 'If you don't think you're likely to get killed on the road ... you just increased the chances of it happening.' Research shows drivers are more likely to blame unexpected events than their own (human) error. The campaign targets drivers who are complacent or over-confident. We must share the roads with them but, I hope, not the sky.

Mind you, BHPA statistics often suggest pilots with hundreds of hours airtime suffer more accidents than less-experienced ones. No doubt the reasons for this vary widely, but among them will be

the complacency of having done it all before. After all, who needs to double-check a regularly performed procedure?

One victim of this might be Jonathan Orders, a Canadian commercial tandem hang glider pilot, who in 2012 failed to clip-in his passenger when someone distracted him during his pre-flight checks. The pilot had a good safety record during his sixteen-year flying career but, like him, we will only stay safe if we maintain a safe clip-in routine for every future flight (paraglider pilots are of course equally vulnerable in the event of unsecured leg straps). The hundreds of previous clip-ins performed by the pilot were of no consolation to the passenger who fell to her death.

It is inevitable that we will all be distracted at some stage, whether during pre-flight procedures, the flight itself, or approach and landing. It may be only



Photo: Ollie Chitty

We will all be distracted at some stage

when distraction and overconfidence are combined that the chances of an incident rise. Some pilots will have switched off on reading the previous sentence; their internal protective bubbles unable to entertain the notion they might suffer from overconfidence or complacency (concepts which connote blame even if none is intended).

Blunt use of language can indeed be a real turn-off. I mean, who on earth is going to admit to being over-confident? Safety warnings can be littered with similar innocent-sounding terminology that can be processed in unintended ways. For example, when the cause of an accident is summarised (glibly, in some cases) as 'Pilot Error', certain recipients of that information will immediately regard the incident as irrelevant to them, so certain are they that they won't be making errors. For that reason I feel the term is over-used.

## Protective bubbles

So, for those still reading, over-confidence is not an issue (phew!). As pilots we simply absorb information about flying over a period of time and a resultant attitude forms inside our heads. Assuming we all want to say alive, it would seem a safe bet that within our sum of flying knowledge exists a protective bubble; a set of personal rules to which each of us fly. However, as alluded to above, there exists a strong possibility such bubbles can evolve agendas that are anything but protective. Is

my own protective bubble serving to protect me ... or does it merely justify my intention to continue flying?

The mental images we harbour of our place within our chosen sport must range as widely as human personalities. Protective bubbles, depending on their constituent parts, may well instil safe practice, for example by imposing a conservative maximum wind speed in which to fly, or declining to fly in the heat of the afternoon when abroad. While most of us will have a protective bubble filled with such goodies, less beneficial personality traits impose themselves surprisingly quickly. How do you get a rational, usually conservative pilot to haul on deep brake in order to stall in from 15ft agl? Answer: hold an accuracy competition and watch at least one pilot succumb to over-competitiveness.



Photo: Steve Sorsa

Only pride and a prop maybe, but ...

For good or ill, protective bubbles include an individual's knowledge of all things flying, for example: aerodynamics, the particulars of flying sites and conditions, air law and available kit to buy. This last includes the safety/performance rating of wings, which alone seems enough to derail a small percentage of us. The list is long and includes the performance of our peers – from the pinnacle of their achievements to their doziest mishaps.

We notice other pilots having accidents from time to time, but somehow the memories of these events get pushed aside. When someone smacks in hard because of a canopy collapse the inevitable response flashing through one's mind is, 'That could happen to me!' but it rarely impinges for long because of the processes at work inside our heads.

In short, we have already decided to continue flying, and our brains work overtime to provide us with the cosy environment required. Causes of flying accidents are quickly found; we each pass them through our cerebral filters and take a view. Your granny's filter causes her to say, 'Well, that's the end of that flying lark.' Whereas we say, 'With that crazy approach he was always going to land on that tree. It'll never happen to me.'

## Statistics

Though hang gliding had existed for some time by the early 1990s, paragliding was completely new. A growing handful of paraglider pilots joined the existing hang gliding community. A few pilots began flying both kinds of glider, allowing

paraglider pilots to mix with high air-timers. Unsurprisingly, because it was a new sport paragliding had little accident history, just the odd tale in a magazine. It was all too easy to mistake a lack of local accident history as a sign of safety. The golden days of zero paragliding incidents in Northern Ireland never existed of course. We were merely waiting for statistics to catch up with us.

Statistics can usefully be applied to studies of similar and numerous objects or events, but become unreliable if the sample quantity is small. Toss a coin three hundred times and odds are it'll be heads on half the occasions, give or take a bit. Toss the same coin only three times and get three heads and it would be easy to conclude the coin will always show heads. Only because we know this not to be true is it obvious that the sample is too small for the application of statistics. Less obvious, but equally unreliable as the foundation of a personal safety bubble or mindset, is the safety record of local fliers.



Photo: Chris Bere

No-one hurt ... but it doesn't always turn out that way

My club, the UHPC, typically has 65 members. The BHPA has at least 6,500 members, so as a statistical sample the UHPC is one hundredth the BHPA's size. Equating all UHPC flying activity to three coin tosses might be an analogy too far, but it is clear that safety statistics would be more reliably deduced from the BHPA (or an even larger sample) rather than the safety record of one's flying mates. Just because the three pilots chewing the fat with me on the hillside have never had an accident doesn't prevent one from happening. I try to keep that in mind to prevent complacency contaminating my preparation and flying routines.

## Two groups of pilots?

Some pilots have suffered serious flying accidents – not near misses. They did not 'get away with' the dodgy moves the rest of us pull from time to time, or perhaps the

vagaries of the air just went against them on the day. Their physical injuries were serious enough to burst their personal protective bubbles. Those pilots now know what can happen when free flight goes wrong, and their priority shifts firmly in the direction of preventing a reoccurrence. As a result some give up flying. Others persevere but find they derive less enjoyment from it. Only a minority continue unaffected.

These notional observations, made over 20 years, are based on the outcomes of approximately ten serious accidents (UHPC pilots or events) including a fatality. The accidents befell pilots whose flying experience spanned expert to novice.



Photo: Andrew Williams

At this height one is a hostage to fortune - don't let your protective bubble blind you!

Intact mental bubbles still shield the consciousness of the second (accident-free) pilot group, leading some pilots (but by no means all) to maintain the view that 'it' won't happen to them. In life we are accustomed to learning for ourselves rather than trusting the say-so of others, but there is a time and place for everything. For those who have not yet suffered a serious flying accident, learning from the mistakes of others is surely vital to avoid repeating those same mistakes. The sooner all pilots realise they are members of the same group the better.

## Accident reporting

The more numerous the reports the easier it is to pick out the accident trends we need to avoid. Accident reporting is so easy you could be forgiven for thinking all occurrences are documented. Unfortunately this is not the case. Although we urge other pilots to report accidents we are not so keen on reporting our own, to the extent that unreported accidents undoubtedly outnumber those we read about. Nothing to do with protective bubbles this time, just plain old embarrassment. Someone once said no one ever died of embarrassment; let's hope that's true for the sake of the next pilot coming along.

## The punch line

There is no snappy ending. This piece is just a reminder to myself that, despite the superb nature of free flight, people are getting hurt out there and I should take care and remain alert for the sake of my own health. I acknowledge that the people getting hurt are just as capable of flying as I am (gulp) – *therefore I am at risk.*