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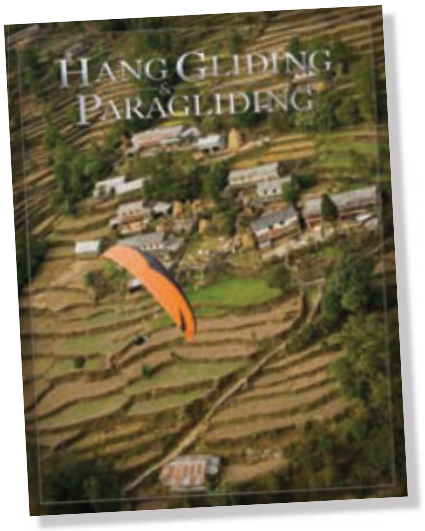

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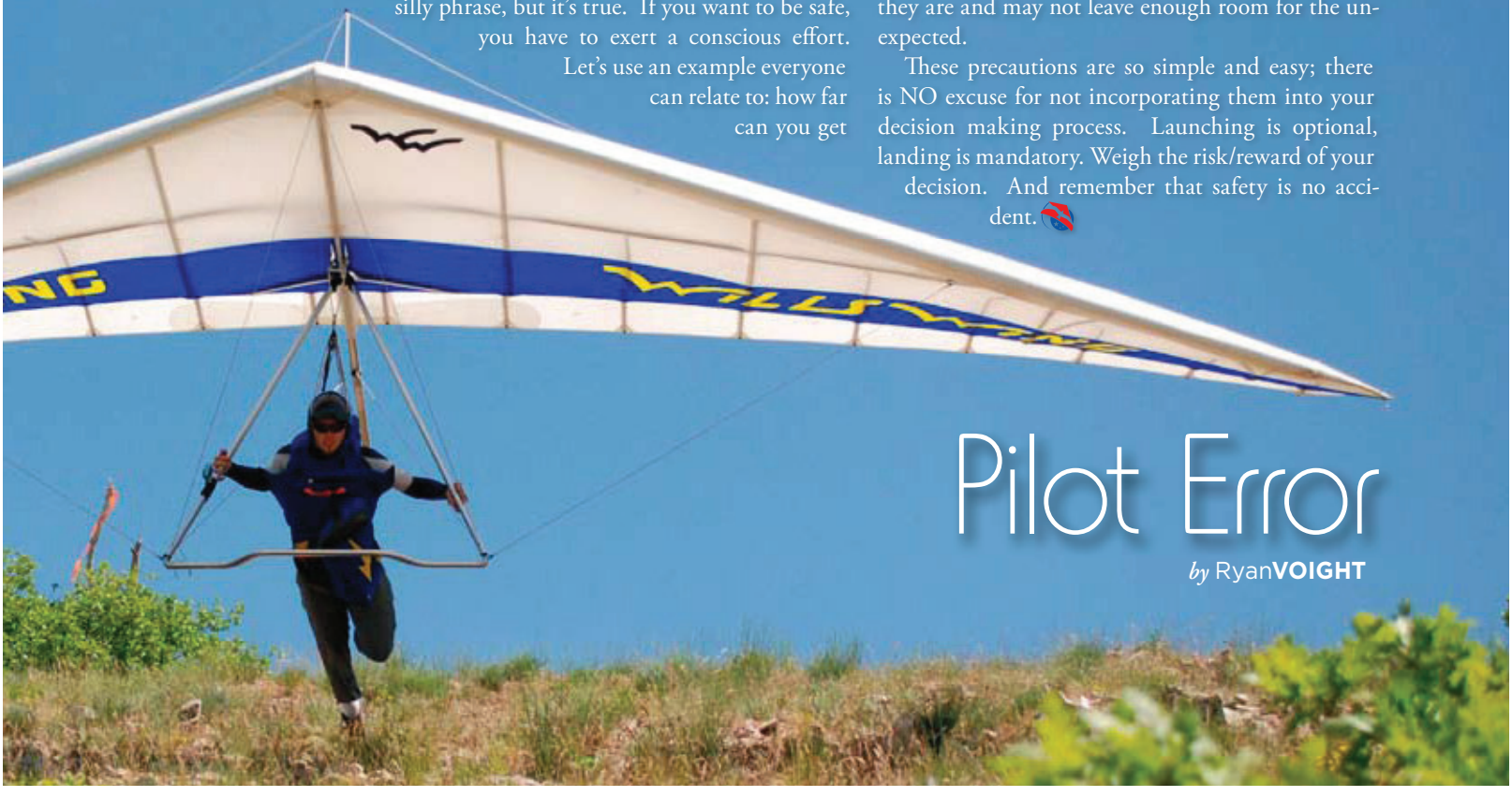
Human beings were, simply put, never meant to fly. We're not born with wings, and we lack the ability to think like a bird. Every time we launch, we could make a million mistakes, and most will hurt or kill us. Aviation is especially unforgiving of mistakes, and humans, by nature, are incapable of perfection.

So are we all doomed? The accident statistics say otherwise. The vast majority of aviation accidents are attributed to "pilot error," which tells me that it's not hang gliding or paragliding that puts me in danger, I put myself in danger! I'm writing this article to share some practices I've picked up over the years that make having a PERFECT safety record an attainable goal. (Some say that's impossible, but I assure you, it's not.) These principles are a collection of lessons I have learned, not by making the mistakes myself, but from other pilots who have. Find a local pilot who's been flying for 20 or 30 years and I'll bet they've learned some lessons the hard way. There's no reason newer generations of pilots need to repeat the same, "there I was, thought I was gonna die…"experiences.

First and probably the most important: Launching is optional, but landing is mandatory. Most hang gliding/paragliding accidents occur in the launching or landing phases of the flight when there's something hard to hit—the ground. I often see people launching in strong and rowdy conditions in which they would never choose to land. When you ask them their intention, the answer is always the same: "I'll fly all day and land when it mellows." But staying aloft in a powerless glider is difficult, even on the best days. The other unwise comment I hear is: "I'm an XC pilot, so I have to launch at 1:00 p.m. in order to catch the best thermals!"

Yes, long XC flights require flying mid-day, but that doesn't mean you have to LAUNCH mid-day. At most sites, conditions progressively ramp-up to the peak of the day, and then start to mellow-out. If you really want to fly in the mid-day stuff, why not launch EARLY, in safer conditions, so you're five grand over launch when conditions are booming (or better yet, 10 or 20 miles downwind already). When a thermal unexpectedly lifts your wing, would you rather be high above terra firma, or have your wingtip on the hill scratching to get up? I'll say it again because it's so important; launching is optional, but landing is mandatory. "Pilot error" can include choosing to fly in the first place, if conditions are not appropriate.

Here's a real life example: Pilots from all over the country (and world) visit the Point of the Mountain, and want to fly the South Side. All you ever hear about the South Side is how great it is, with glassy super-smooth-ridge lift to play in. So people roll in around 11:00 a.m. and see it blowing in. They set up and fly. They're surprised when conditions are really up-and-down, with strong thermals and gusts coming through. They haven't thought about the fact that the Salt Lake valley is a desert, and, by the time they arrive there, the sun has been beating down on the bone-dry ground for four hours. When you pull in to launch and see it blowing in, it's hard to curb your emotions and take the time to look for reasons NOT to fly.



Pilot Error

by Ryan**VOIGHT**

Which brings us to the next lesson: It's crucial to balance risk and reward. Often this is easy—it's blowing in, with safe and soarable conditions, so it's time to get your wing and go fly! But the line can get blurred fairly easily, too. The classic example is when you've got your harness on, wing set-up and ready, and it starts to lightly blow down. It's light enough that you could still launch, but strong enough that you won't soar. Is the risk of a blown launch worth the reward of a sled ride? I cite this example because I'm as guilty as anyone… so far I've been lucky.

Which leads to a third lesson: Negative reinforcement is a killer. For those unfamiliar with the term, negative reinforcement basically means that you're "lucky" or you "get away with it," but you don't realize it's because of luck. You think it's SAFE because you've done it so many times and nothing bad has happened. Even though I've launched downwind many times without a negative outcome, I can't trust that I can continue to do so without something bad happening. Negative reinforcement surrounds us, and we need to be aware of it. You need answers to questions, such as: How far can you get from a safe LZ and still make it back; how close can you get to the ridge while scratching to get up; and how low can you make your turn onto final and still level out and flair? We base nearly all of our flying decisions on past experiences, but there's no guarantee we'll get the same results as last time, and we need to acknowledge that. But if all of our past experiences are unreliable sources of information, how do we make decisions? The answer is simple, and takes me to my next point.

Lesson number four: Safety is no accident. It's a silly phrase, but it's true. If you want to be safe, you have to exert a conscious effort. Let's use an example everyone can relate to: how far can you get from the LZ and still make it back? Rather than risk not making it to a safe LZ, try to test yourself but still leave some margin for error—see how far you can go and still get to the LZ with 1,000 ft to spare. If you come in under 1,000 ft, you know that would have been a tree landing. If you come in at 1,001 ft, you know you wouldn't have been high enough to set up an approach. Repeat this exercise until you can do it in your sleep, in all conditions. And even when you get dialed in, always budget extra altitude in case you're wrong. Face it: making mistakes is human, so keep yourself in a position where making a mistake doesn't result in having an accident. My favorite saying is that really good pilots are skilled enough to fly themselves out of trouble, but really GREAT pilots avoid having to fly themselves out of trouble in the first place.

The last lesson: Watch out for the "intermediate syndrome." Here's how it works: When you start hang gliding or paragliding you know nothing, but you KNOW that you know nothing, so you're supercautious and therefore you keep yourself safe. As you learn more and progress through the rating system, it's inevitable that you'll start to feel more confident in your decision-making, and you'll let your margin for error start to slide (whether you know it or not), WATCH OUT! "Intermediate syndrome" affects nearly everyone at one point or another, and, despite the name, it can affect H4/P4's as well. Even pilots who have been flying 30 years or more can have a rude awakening if they don't leave enough margin for error. Obviously a H1/P1 will need more margin for error than a H5/P5, but anyone is susceptible to thinking they're better or more experienced than they are and may not leave enough room for the unexpected.

These precautions are so simple and easy; there is NO excuse for not incorporating them into your decision making process. Launching is optional, landing is mandatory. Weigh the risk/reward of your decision. And remember that safety is no accident.