

Share your Experience:


Not
focused
on flying

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Certainly, some people are wondering why one of the most experienced mountain pilots, who repeatedly lectures on safety in mountain flying and also writes about it here in our magazine, has an accident in the mountains. In our column „Share Your Experience“ Mathias Schunk reports quite openly about why and how his accident happened and thus prevent other pilots from making a similar mistake.

Right: View from the rescue helicopter with the possible flight path



Soaring is certainly anything else but a low-risk sport; unforgotten in this regard is Bruno Gantenbrink's lecture at the Gliding Day in Gersfeld in 1992, which is just as relevant today as it was then (www.dg-aviation.de/bibliothek/safety-comes-first/).  Mountain gliding is certainly a bit more risky. As competition gliding is also more risky than flying without competition stress should also be generally accepted. And if you fly competitions in the mountains, the risk increases! I have never flown a competition in the mountains (I mean serious ones like Rieti, Vinon or St. Auban and not the Königsdorf competition) because I thought it was simply too dangerous. Now exactly this has become my undoing, but in the end we are all only human...

In principle, I stopped competition flying seven years ago. Then in 2021 I was a guest and finally also a helper at the Grand Prix finals in St. Auban, where I really enjoyed the whole atmosphere. Last year the same scenario: first flying camp in St. Croix followed by a visit to the Grand Prix in Vinon. By chance I found out that there would be another South African Grand Prix and that it had been moved from Douglas to Worcester. When I spontaneously said, „Oh, then I'll go to the Grand Prix, too, because I've already been there several times,“ Uys Jonker, who was standing next to me, said he would organize a plane for me. But if he organized a plane for me, then I would also have to fly with him! Oops, now I was exacted!

I asked Tilo Holighaus (a good friend of mine and not only my aircraft manufacturer) if there was a Ventus 3 in South Africa. No, there isn't and he wouldn't want to fly a Grand Prix with a Ventus 2, of which there are a few. I asked him if he would terminate my friendship if I flew with a JS – he said, of course not, it doesn't matter what I fly, because in the

end a JS wins anyway, because only JS will fly.

Then I wasn't sure for a long time whether it was really a good idea to go over a line directly into the slope with 20 planes at the same time, because unlike Saint Auban or Vinon, where the field splits up until you get to the slopes at some point, in Worcester it's straight to the point. I had made up my mind that if I thought it was a safety issue, I would drop out of the competition immediately. Thank goodness we were only twelve pilots in the end and, contrary to expectations, it wasn't a real problem.

On the subject of Pavullo, the site of the Grand Prix final: here I had said from the outset that I would not go there, in case I qualified. Flying a competition at the end of August with lousy thermals in an area that is supposedly absolutely unlandable (there are probably three fields, but they can only be reached if you glide out 30 km at summit altitude) is definitely not compatible with my safety ideas. In this respect, I was not under any qualification stress in Worcester.

The third day of scoring in Worcester brought a task with a first turnpoint to the east and a second and final turnpoint 39 km southwest of Worcester. The turnpoint was a mountain top and was at an elevation of over 1600 m (Worcester is at 200 m MSL).

After the briefing, I analyzed that one would have to be at least about 1300 m high - that is, above final approach altitude - to be able to enter the turnpoint sector (which at the Grand Prix is only the 500 m radius and not a keyhole) at all. So I took this knowledge with me on the flight, and in doing so I was perhaps one of the few pilots who was aware of the problem in advance. Oscar Goudriaan, who was already a world champion and flew in ten world championships, asked on the radio during the

approach to the turnpoint, for example, how it was possible to get into the sector at all.

Oscar, Erik Borgmann and I arrived at the turning point in about 1000 m and started circling, climbing slowly. That's when I thought about how accurate the penalty point rule was. I knew that there were 300 penalty seconds for missing the sector, which was definitely less than it would take to climb here up to 1300 m. What I was no longer sure of was, how close you had to get to the turnpoint for it to be rated as achieved reached and for you to get away with penalty points – and that was despite the fact that I was aware of the problem with the turnpoint before the flight. Totally uncharacteristic for me to have approached it so unprepared and not analytically. Like all other GP special rules, I had explicitly written them down before the competition, but then, at the decisive moment, I didn't have them ready! As well as I had not checked again in the morning I thought that I could look this all up on the internet, but discarded this idea just as quickly as it had come, as the three of us were about to circle on the ridge – and looking something up on the internet in this situation was an absolute no go! I also discarded the idea to ask on the radio about the regulation, because I did not want to give the others the idea to take the penalty seconds and fly home directly in front of me. It was clear: Whoever flies off first here is also the first home, overtaking impossible, the remaining distance was simply too short for that.

So while I was circling on the ridge, my thoughts drifted elsewhere and I was just thinking: was it 1000 m, was it 750 m, or how much was it, as I flew around a corner completely without thinking, without paying attention to the wind, and didn't realize that I would be coming downwind here. I had correctly put aside the idea of checking the net, but the distraction in my brain was

enough!

I quickly noticed that it felt and looked funny and immediately turned away from the slope. However, I then quickly made contact with the ground for the first time. As you could tell from the IGC file via the noise sensor, this was over three to four seconds at about 100 km/h, but without acceleration values, so I was probably just sliding over the bushes downhill.

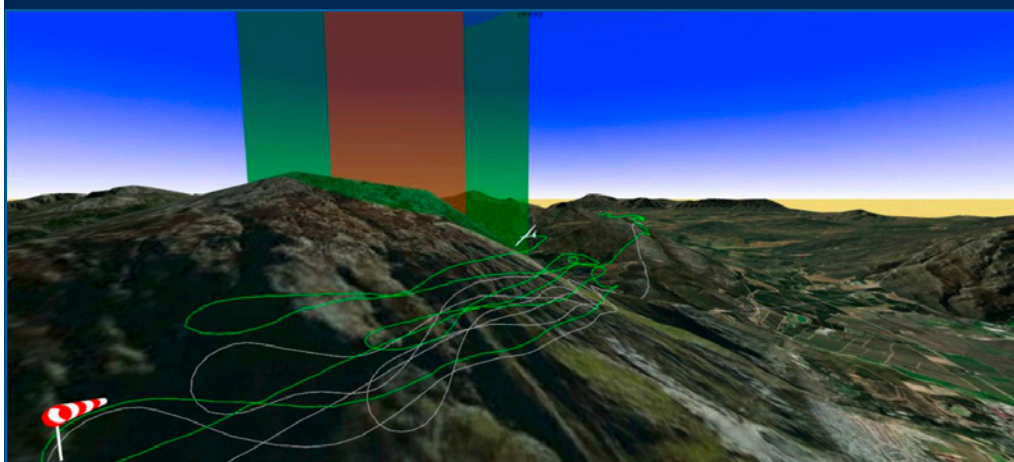
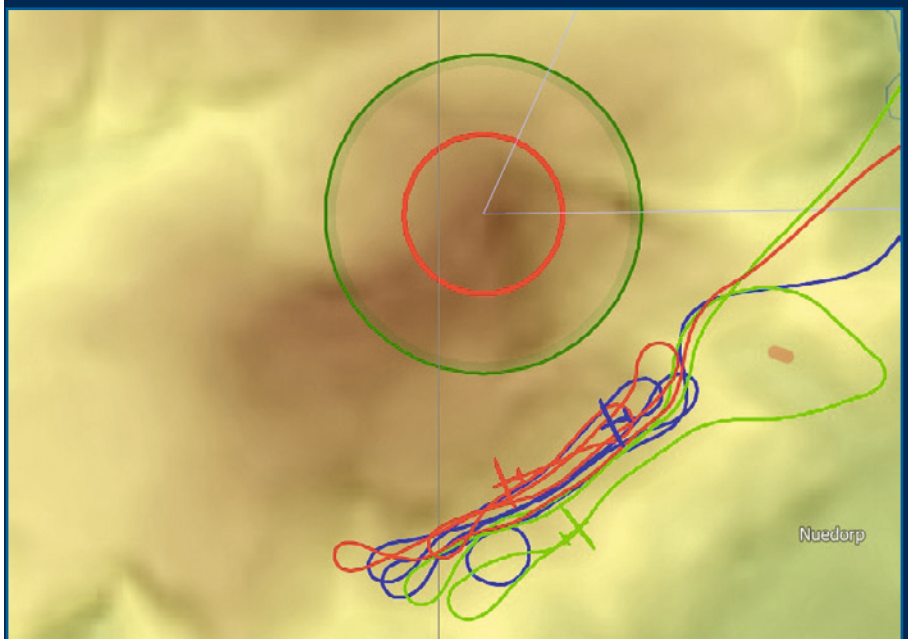
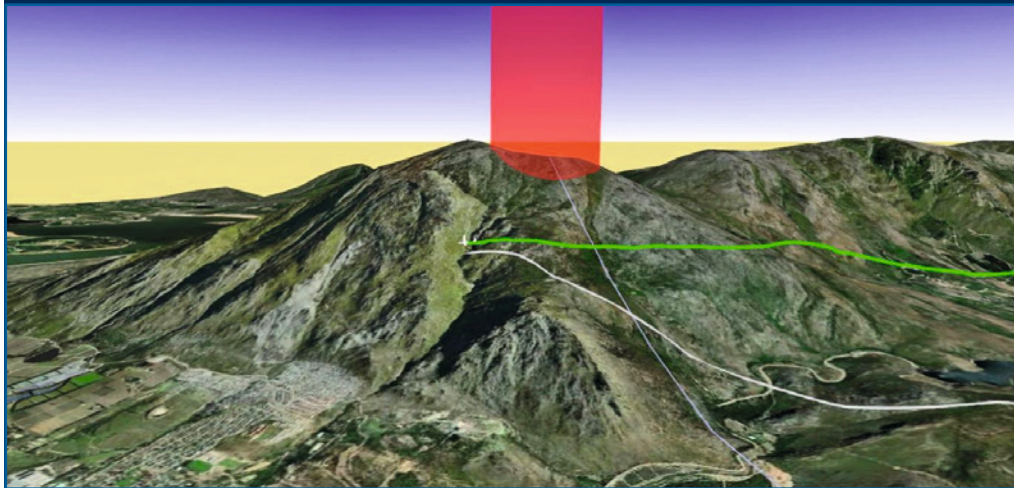
After that I went airborne again and was glad that the plane could still be steered. But I saw a small rib coming towards me and I was aware that it would be quite tight to get over there, respectively that it probably wouldn't be enough.

The next impact at about 80 km/h was, as could be read from the file, very loud, so that most likely the fuselage shell was bursting, which absorbed a lot of energy. The airplane flew again for a few meters, before it came at approx. 60 km/h to the final ground contact. Here, the no longer intact safety cockpit more or less completely crumbled.

A few minutes later I woke up from unconsciousness. I heard that the LX was still beeping and immediately sent a radio message because I knew the others were nearby; I got no response. I thought maybe the receiver was just broken and repeated the radio message that I was alive several times, which no one ever heard because the transmitter was broken, too.

Next, I reached for my cell phone, which I always keep handy in my thigh pocket for just such emergencies, and called my wife Pia and Markus Geisen at the airfield just seven minutes after impact. I was also sending my position via WhatsApp, although I knew that you could also see the position by spot. By the way, I had deliberately not triggered this, because I wanted to prevent a non-coordinated, double-initiated rescue operation.

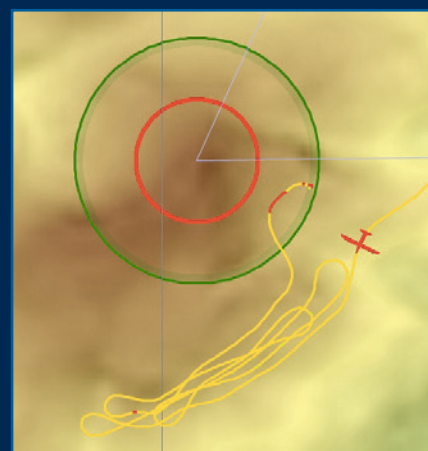
One mistake was that with my emer-



Above: The turnpoint sector (red) is only reachable at about 1300 m, below that it is simply inside the mountain. **Middle:** During ridge soaring in bad climbing I immediately discarded the plan to look for the corresponding rule on the Internet for safety reasons. **Below:** The 1000 m radius (green) would have been quite safely reachable even at this altitude, if one had known about the rule... The windsock shows the wind direction and why I got into the lee behind the corner



Above: The wreckage lies between numerous stones and rocks and it was pure luck that none of them went through the cockpit **Left:** The hard impact point where the fuselage shell broke and the aircraft afterwards took off again. **Right:** Based on the engine sensor you can see the different ground contacts on the IGC file well in red



gency pack, which I always have on the parachute, the attachment had broken here in December and I did not repair this, instead simply put the emergency pack in the overhead compartment afterwards. I thought, in a midair collision here you can't get out anyway and you might need it on the parachute. Now I was lying there knowing that there were painkillers just a few inches behind me, just for that one moment, and I couldn't get to it despite being in a lot of pain.

(Important side note: Anyone who should actually take painkillers in such a case must make absolutely sure that rescue team finds out about it. Especially if you are no longer conscious by the time they arrive, e.g. by holding the tablet or broken blister pack to show the rescue team which active ingredients have

already been taken and ideally in which dose, i.e. how many tablets have broken out of the blister).

The helicopter pilot who was recovering the wreckage was a hang glider pilot, so he knew the local wind systems well. While approaching, both, he and the two glider pilots on board agreed that there was ridge lift. When they landed, the wind was the other way around. Another glider pilot told me that he had also come into a completely unexpected strong lee in the Villiersdrop area where the accident happened. So maybe strange things happen at this mountain concerning the wind. Due to the special location of the mountain at the end of a narrow valley, before it becomes much wider and another range of hills begins

towards the east, this could also be a contributing factor, but it is speculative.

My luck was that I didn't have a single impact point and all the energy was removed at once. I slid down the hill, so to speak, with several points of impact. This is how the energy was removed piece by piece and luckily I didn't hit any of that many rocks and stones lying around.

If you look at the pictures of the cockpit wreckage (which I won't publish, but I'll show them personally to anyone who wants to see them), you wouldn't believe that you could get out of there alive. I couldn't believe it myself that I wasn't bleeding, everything was intact and I could move everything. Only the left foot had fallen asleep, which of course

worried me a lot in connection with the back pain. But this was due to a bruise, which bothered me for a long time. In the end, only the second lumbar vertebra, which had „crumbled“, needed surgery. A few more vertebral fractures, sternum fracture, as well as a small aorta skin tear and a spleen bleeding could all be healed conservatively.

The very good safety cockpit provided me with a chance of survival at all and I am infinitely grateful to all who were involved in making this the standard in glider construction! Beyond that, I was incredibly lucky, and a million guardian angels are probably not enough, because normally you don't survive such an accident, certainly not in one piece...

A small hint, which can be quite important: During one of the callbacks from the airfield, I was asked for my health insurance number, whereupon I said that there were probably more important things right now than this number, which I then even recited by heart. The background of the question was simply how much my insurance

would cover and where the rescue helicopter, which was with me about two hours after the accident would then fly me to: The best hospital or would they drop me off at the station mission! In this respect, it is important that not only the own spot link and the FLARM ID are known at the airfield, but also the health insurance, because especially in the case of medical first aid there can be big, essential differences. By the way, this does not only apply to South Africa.

My conclusion: In the end it was a flying mistake, caused by a carelessness, because I was busy with something completely different than concentrating on flying. If I had the said rule at hand, I would have already been on final approach when the accident happened and would have consciously taken the penalty seconds because they would have been less than it would have taken to climb there. By the way, the rule is that there are 300 penalty seconds between 501 m and 1000 m distance from the turnpoint. The wreck was just under 900 m and the nearest logger

point was under 700 m to the WP, so knowing the rule I would not have needed to fly downwind at all, but could have focused on a safe flight path.

So the competition flight was the initial trigger; in a „normal“ flight I am sure that this catastrophic mistake would not have happened to me. One would not have stayed so long at a mountain with bad rate of climb, but would have flown to the next one.

For sure, a certain degree of complacency also played a role in all this – „What could happen to me with my almost 9000 hours of soaring“ – a factor that probably played a role in many flight accidents involving experienced glider pilots. Or how else can it be explained that so many former world champions, national title holders or record pilots have accidents? Therefore, I would like to conclude by quoting Bruno Gantenbrink: **„If gliding is to become less dangerous than it actually is, then one or another measure is not enough. The basic attitude must change. And the fundamental attitude can only change at all if we realistically assess the danger we put ourselves in almost every day.“** ♦

Mathias Schunk, glider license since 1982	
Gliding hours before the accident	8988 Std.
of which in the mountains ca.	6000 Std.
in the previous 30 days	27 Std.
in the preceding 90 days	126 Std.
on the glider type JS 1	33 Std.

