

Really, are you kidding me??
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Recently a well known and respected pilot videoed a low altitude “save” from 300 feet AGL. He posted it on YouTube and Facebook. As might be expected, there were many comments, both pro and con, as to the advisability of such an attempt and also how it might be perceived by the sailplane pilot community as a whole.

From a safety standpoint the Soaring Safety Foundation (SSF) has a long standing opinion about this kind of risky behavior. We strongly advocate that it is not the kind of behavior that we want to teach our pilots to do. We advocate that each pilot establish his own personal “hard deck” and adhere to that altitude. Hard deck altitudes in the 800-1000 foot range are considered safe altitudes where an unexpected event can be recovered from with a reasonable expectation of safety.

The pilot involved justified his position by saying that he was over a landable field at all times, flew at a proper airspeed and had proper coordination at all times. I know the trustees of the SSF and I DO NOT condone this kind of risk taking behavior which demonstrates poor judgment and decision making.

Here is a quote by the pilot, “I have reflected a lot about my flying over the last few seasons. I seem to be flying lower and lower - on purpose. Seems to be more and more extreme in flying the mountain's curves. It has been amazing but the risk level is clearly rising. Why am I doing this? I've been trying to avoid gliding getting stale to be honest”. He goes on to say, “I just want to say I am sorry that I offended anyone. Why did I turn in that lift? It was just for the pure joy of flying on such a beautiful day. I was enjoying the moment and I guess got carried away”. Really, are you kidding me??

If anyone out there is feeling bored with their flying and think they are becoming complacent, here's an idea for you. A way to beat complacency is to increase your skills. Why not become an instructor and teach others what you have come to love so much. We need good instructors in the soaring community and I know we would welcome you. There are many great 2 place sailplanes that one can fly cross-country and use your knowledge and skill to teach the art of soaring. I think you might also learn that a student can humble you in a matter of seconds.

I don't know, but I doubt, that most pilots have the skill or proficiency at recovering from an inadvertent stall from 300' in a modern high-performance sailplane. Things happen really fast from that altitude. The pilot argued that he was careful to fly at an appropriate airspeed so as to avoid a stall. However, there are wind conditions, both vertical and horizontal, outside our control. The last time I checked we cannot see the “wind”. I know of an accident where the pilot was flying in “calm” conditions, was on base leg turning final at about 300' when he encountered unexplained wind shear and crashed. In my opinion, he was saved by an all metal glider with a steel tube frame around the cockpit which absorbed most of the impact with the ground. He was severely injured with several broken bones including his spine. The pilot theorized that a thermal may have just started at the surface somewhere out ahead of the gliders position on final and caused a sudden tail wind shear which stalled the sailplane. I know I

have experienced this kind of phenomena while standing on the ground and feeling a thermal break over the runway. Those of you out west have seen these 'dust devils' pick up and destroy a glider that was not securely tied down. Thermals can be quite violent near the ground.

Thermals are usually made up of several "cores" which form at the surface and merge in the air to become a larger thermal. The edges of these thermals can be 'rough' with vertical shear. I know that I for one have been 'stood on my wingtip' when going in and out of these shear areas even with full aileron deflection. I doubt that I would have been able to recover from 300'.

A comment was made by another pilot who argued that we routinely fly our base leg to final at 300' AGL and think nothing of it. First of all I would hope that we are flying well above the thermaling minimum sink speed while on our approach (i.e. approach speed is trained to be 1.5 stall speed plus any wind corrections above that speed). Using this extra speed lowers our risk factor of stalling when flying close to the ground during the approach. I would also point out that more than a few have stalled during this turn and crashed even with this extra speed probably due to lack of understanding of load factors and proper coordination and how they influence stall speed. Many of these accidents have been fatal.

We also need to be mindful of some of the aeromedical factors that a pilot can be influenced by when in this situation. Stress, hyperventilation, dehydration, spatial disorientation, and fatigue are but a few. I know several well respected pilots who have crashed and after further analysis it was determined that they were stressed, dehydrated and fatigued.

This kind of risky behavior also screams of hazardous pilot attitudes, which can develop over time and lead to accidents. Anti-authority, "You can't tell me what to do"; Invulnerability, "It won't happen to me"; and Macho, "Watch me do this" are the ones that immediately come to mind. Sometimes we don't see the risks we are taking and sometimes we don't want to acknowledge those risks.

The pilots who fail at this low altitude maneuver are not here to 'weigh in' on the advisability of such a maneuver. I suspect that they would say that the risk was not worth it. Their spouses, children and friends all have to share the grief of losing that person for the rest of their lives. I personally have lost 3 friends who were caught by attempting to thermal at a low altitude. They were all above average pilots. I still miss them. As the saying goes, "There are old pilots and there are bold pilots but there are few old and bold pilots". Fly safe my friends....

Authors note: Since I wrote this article the pilot involved and I have exchanged numerous emails. In one of those emails he shared the following. "My personal hard deck's lowest point is 600' but that is only under ideal conditions when I have good landable fields below and the weather isn't exciting. What I mean by hard deck is my wheel is down and even if I hit a thermal I am done trying to save the flight. I am landing. It may be 800'-1000' in other instances where the weather is bad or the landing site is extreme.....This 300' save was a controlled experiment I don't plan on doing again". This is in line with the recommendations that the Soaring Safety Foundation makes about low altitude thermaling. I want to thank the pilot for our open exchange of thoughts and ideas concerning this important safety topic.