

“THERE I WAS” by Tom Dixon

This flight started the late morning of September 8, 1979 at the Friedman Memorial Airport (aka Sun Valley) Idaho. I was flying my SGS 1-35C and had a total of 55 hours solo and dual time to date. From the get go I had heard, been told, reminded and instructed some very important safety items about flying. Things like; fly the glider, accidents are usually the end of a chain of events, do not let outside factors compromise your decision making, no interruptions while assembling and flight preparation, plus others.

To set the stage, I arrived at the airport later than originally planned and found lots of activity with gliders starting to grid. These guys were all flying hot ships and talking big flights for the day. I was the new guy in the ‘metal beginner’ sailplane and a bit out of the in crowd. My plan had been to get there early, be ready and launch about the middle of the line so I could benefit from watching and flying for a while with them until headed out on course.

Right off the bat that plan was history, I started to get ready and was rushing, hoping to launch while some of them were on our house ridge and still get to trail for a while. As I was preparing, a couple of people came over and started asking questions. Yes, I spent too much time answering their inquiries and showing my ‘extensive’ knowledge about soaring.

OK, can you start to count the little events that were adding up; late, rushing, interrupted, original plan gone, there would be more.

Rushed to the tow while listening to radio chatter, talk of the conditions and where they were. Towed to the house ridge glanced at my altimeter and guess what, forgot to set it. What else on my check list did I not do???

From experience I was familiar with the tow and had a good idea about the altitude of the release point so set the altimeter. Heard the other guys were out near Triumph Mine, one of the local identifiable areas and a usual source of lift. On the ridge off tow, I was a bit frustrated that it was not working as well as I hoped and I really wanted to get out there where the gang was. This should have been an important bit of information, ridge not working well, the group was only at Triumph and not moving very fast. My decision at this point was to head out, leaving the ridge lower than normal, (altimeter not set before takeoff, how high was I?), heading to Triumph and trying to find the lift the others were using.

At some point I should have noticed that the day was not developing as expected. The clouds were overdeveloping and shading the ground and the chatter on the radio from the others that the clouds were not working well and the best lift was in the sun. There was sun and west facing hills and mountains not far off to the west but that was not a quick way to catch up to the big boys. The area around Sun Valley has lots of mountains and narrow unlandable valleys, especially in a direct line from the Triumph area back to the airport.

About now, I realized that I had started out at too low an altitude. I heard the others talking about not finding much lift ahead of me, my current plan was not the best one. I also was getting pretty close to the tops of the local topography as my flight so far had been flown in sinking air.

Time to do something; turn back – GET HOME - !

As I turned, I noticed the sunny area to the west but if I went that way and could not find lift, I would not make it back to the airport. So, back the same way I had come in the same sinking air.

About now I heard one of the other pilots talking again about the better lift to the west. Hmm, that decision is gone as I am too low to get there, so I stay the course and head back the way I had come.

It is a lot darker now back toward the airport and I am really getting low. In fact I now have ridge lines level with both my wings and only one valley that opens towards the airport. I remembered there was a very small horse corral at the end of the valley.

Yes, I had accepted I was not going to make it back to a runway or any open fields nearby. This corral was going to be my hit the ground spot if I could reach it.

At the time I was doing one thing right, I was “flying the glider”. I was keeping my speed up even though the ground was coming up fast and the instinct was to pull back on the stick. Better to fly controlled into the ground than stall/spin.

I figured with the great flaps on the 1-35, if I could clear the pole fence and extend the flaps full while pushing the nose skid into the ground, I might just be slowed down enough to ground loop before hitting the fence on the other side of corral.

Things happened very fast, the corral was right in front of me and I was still going pretty fast, too fast to make my plan work. At the far side of the corral was a very

short mound and I knew a wheat field just beyond with a slope going down hill towards town. Fortunately, the ground was going downhill faster than I was sinking.

Ok, plan B, pull up over the mound, nose down and land in the wheat field. This went off as planned except as soon as I cleared the mound, I noticed a crop combine moving up the field in my flight path. I had just pitched the nose down and had a view of the operator ducking in the combine cabin. I pitched the nose up, just cleared the top of the combine and missed the truck driving next to it. I pitched the nose down again and landed. Basically, the ground came up to me, no flaps and no roll out. The airport was less than $\frac{3}{4}$ miles away.

Total time in the air just under 45 minutes. It was a while before I was able to collect myself and get out of the glider. I looked up to see the wife of the combine operator, who had been driving the truck and she asked me if I needed help or an ambulance.

I do not need to list all the mistakes that led to this ending, there were many I had a long discussion with my mentor and DPE, who had given me my check ride and coached me after that for many years. Forty plus years later, many hours more solo time and I have never forgotten this flight or the lessons learned.

This is a great account of one pilot's experience and some of the lessons that he learned. The Soaring Safety Foundation also wants to note some lessons learned from this experience: 1) Don't allow outside distractions, 2) Don't allow external pressures to influence your decisions, 3) Do use checklists 4) Do allow ample time for assembly and preparation and 5) Do practice simulated off-airport landings at your home field in the glider you're flying to acquire the necessary skills for such an event.