

Learning from the Past



Adapted by APF Technical Officer Kim Hardwick from an article originally written by Jim Crouch, Director of Safety and Training USPA.

German political philosopher Karl Marx once said, "It is not worthwhile to try to keep history from repeating itself, for man's character will always make the preventing of the repetitions impossible." Sadly, his observation is as true for skydivers as it has proven to be for most every other demographic. In spite of all the efforts to educate skydivers of past problems that have led to injuries and fatalities, some of us never seem to get the message and ultimately wind up injured or killed from an entirely preventable accident.

Skydiving has been described as inherently risky by some, and those who choose to ignore our accident history only add risk to every skydive made. We should each learn from the mistakes of those who came before us in an effort to avoid those same errors. Just a few simple precautions go a long way toward eliminating many of the accidents we continue to repeat. Just as you can minimize risk while driving by following the "rules of the road," the same pretty much holds true for skydiving. Following the rules and guidelines set forth by the APF and your local drop zone can help substantially lessen the chance of an accident.

Amazingly enough, skydivers repeat the same type of accidents year after year. Looking at the accident reports over the past decade, they break down into a handful of broad categories to consider:

- Canopy control
- Freefall safety
- Equipment
- Emergency procedures
- Aircraft and exit procedures
- Rules and recommendations

Interestingly, these same six subject areas make up each category of the Training Operations Manual. Students trained receive in-depth training of new information and later a thorough review in each of these subject areas, reinforcing the basics while introducing new training and information in detail.

For many years, the largest issue with canopy control was the infamous "low turn into the ground." Skydivers have slowly learned more effective and safer techniques for performing high-performance landings, but these landings are still risky maneuvers, resulting in numerous accidents each year regardless of the jumper's experience level. In a somewhat new trend, canopy collisions are on the rise over the past few years, worldwide.

While separating high-performance landings from jumpers flying standard landing patterns goes a long way toward reducing the chance of a canopy collision, everyone needs to fly defensively and look before making any turns to ensure the airspace is clear.

While freefall collisions are rare, they can happen to anyone. For starters, sticking to group sizes appropriate for your skill level can help keep you out of harm's way. Progressing to more difficult freefall skills with the help of a coach or experienced jumper leading the way can also help you advance while keeping the risk of a collision as low as possible. Used as an effective backup device, an automatic activation device can help ensure a jumper's reserve deploys if he loses track of altitude during the skydive or is rendered unconscious as a result of a freefall collision.

Our equipment is safer than ever before, but it doesn't matter how well the gear is designed if it is packed poorly or isn't maintained as it should be. Loose closing loops have led to several jumpers being extracted out of an airplane prematurely by a deploying main

canopy. Without enough tension on a closing pin, it can easily become dislodged in the airplane. If no one catches the open container before the jumper climbs out, the main bag tumbles out the door, the lines unstow, and the canopy inflates. Sometimes the canopy clears the airplane without incident, but often the canopy or jumper will strike the horizontal stabilizer, sometimes with fatal results. Keep your gear well maintained, and make sure that your main pilot chute pouch is in good shape and that the main closing loop is in good condition and short enough to hold the container flaps tight. Your rigger is a great resource for help with learning more about your gear.

Because of how reliable main canopies have become, jumpers are now making thousands of jumps without experiencing a malfunction, making it easy to become complacent. Practicing your emergency procedures frequently can help ensure that you act appropriately in the event of a malfunctioned main canopy. Use a training harness regularly, and take the opportunity to pull your cutaway and reserve ripcord handles when it's time for a repack.

Internationally there have been several recent airplane tail strikes that occurred as jumpers exited an aircraft still in a climb, which has its tail in a lower position than its nose, making it easier to hit the tail after exit. Some of the accidents proved fatal, while others resulted in serious injuries. Talk to your pilot to learn the specific procedures for jump run and exit for the plane you are using. As a general rule, only exit an airplane that is flying straight and level, as jumping out of a climbing aircraft is asking for trouble.

Each jumper must adhere to APF's Operational Regulations that pertain to skydiving as the minimum safety standards for our sport, which helps reduce the chance of a skydiving accident.

Common sense, careful preparation and proper training all go hand in hand toward keeping you as safe as possible during your skydiving career. Learn more about your gear, and get training before trying something new. In spite of man's character, we should do everything we can to learn from our past and avoid the errors of those who have come before.

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Note: The APF web site has many on-line educational articles and publications. A useful one is the **Safety Checklist**, which can be found at: <http://docs.apf.asn.au/index.php/Information>. Skydivers can benefit from more frequent and thorough equipment checks, emergency procedures practice, and enhanced canopy control awareness.

This checklist was produced by the USPA as a result of one of their national Safety Days and is reproduced on our web site with their permission. It has been modified by the APF Technical Officer to suit Australian Specifications.

It includes such areas as:

- Equipment – maintenance, packing and the gear check
- Aeroplanes – getting on, getting up and getting out
- The Skydive – falling, fleeing and landing
- Emergencies – malfunctions, collisions and other dangers
- Under Canopy – planning, avoidance and landing