

Flight PLAN

By
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I love flying my canopy!
Most of my jumps are hop 'n' pops.
In watching a lot of landings and coaching others in canopy flight, one thing that I consistently see is the lack of a predictable flight plan.

Today's parachutes come in many different shapes and sizes, and each needs to get to the ground safely. There are many more small canopies out there than there were just a few years ago, and a lot of pilots are flying more aggressively. With these big variables in vertical descent rates and speeds, it is more important than ever that we all follow a predictable flight plan.

It's a rare weekend that I don't cringe because of seeing a near collision under canopy. And when I do see a collision or near miss, I know that most or all of them would have been avoided if both pilots had just followed a predictable flight plan.

Other common landing accidents we see and read about are the results of a low turn. A lot of these are caused by avoiding an obstacle or by trying to turn into wind. By getting coaching and following a correct flight plan we can educate ourselves to avoid these situations. Knowledge and practice will give you confidence to safely deal with any situations that may arise! Remember, it is more important to land safely than to land into the wind. With coaching you will learn all of these skills.

Flight plans are a very powerful tool for improving canopy piloting. The best pilots in the world all use a very similar flight plan – why wouldn't you?

Benefits of a Flight Plan

- It helps improve your canopy skills – including your accuracy.
- It gives you confidence. For a lot of people, a canopy ride can be quite scary, so knowing your plan and other people's plans takes some fear out of it. You will be amazed at how much you will enjoy flying your parachute.
- It avoids low turns and collisions!

Making a Flight Plan

A flight plan (or landing pattern) is a plan for flying your parachute. This includes being in the holding area and having predetermined checkpoints on your downwind, crosswind and final legs.

Before each jump, assess the current winds and work out your flight plan. Prior to jumping, familiarise yourself with the aerial of the drop zone, your landmarks and the outs. If for some reason you can't make it back to the DZ to land, your plan can still be the same, as you can easily adjust it to a different landing location if needed.

Check the predetermined landing direction before boarding the aircraft. This is particularly important on low or nil wind days. Maybe your drop zone has a rule to follow the landing direction of the first person down. Maybe your load agrees on a direction before boarding. Perhaps the drop zone has a rule of landing in one particular direction if there are low or nil winds. Whatever it is, know the DZ rules, including how the landing direction is decided. Remember, it is much better to land downwind or crosswind than to turn too low to face into the wind!

Holding Area

The holding area is a large predetermined area that the pilot can use to safely fly their canopy until it is time to enter the downwind leg of their pattern. Once open, the pilot should proceed directly there. This area is picked beforehand – upwind of the landing target – and allows for a safe entry into the downwind leg of the flight plan.

There aren't any exact altitudes for the following checkpoints, approach it as a science project from the beginning.

Downwind Leg

This leg is parallel in the opposite direction to the landing direction. The starting point should be predetermined by the current winds aloft or a jump made just shortly before this one. You should have heights picked out for the starting of the downwind leg and assess them as you make your way to your crosswind leg.

You can adjust this part of your pattern. If you are getting there too quickly, make it wider, almost like a bow (green dotted line). If you are finding that you are taking too long then you can slightly move on the inside of your line so that you will be at a closer point to your crosswind entry (blue line). Of course, look both ways before doing this.

Crosswind Leg

This follows the downwind leg. You should have your predetermined checkpoints and assess how your flight plan is going. These checkpoints throughout your flight plan allow you to make small changes early on in the flight to prevent larger ones closer to touchdown. If you realise that you're getting there too early, widen this 90° angle on your turn. If you are to your crosswind point too late, slightly cut the corner. Remember to always check first for traffic, as you should do before making any turn.

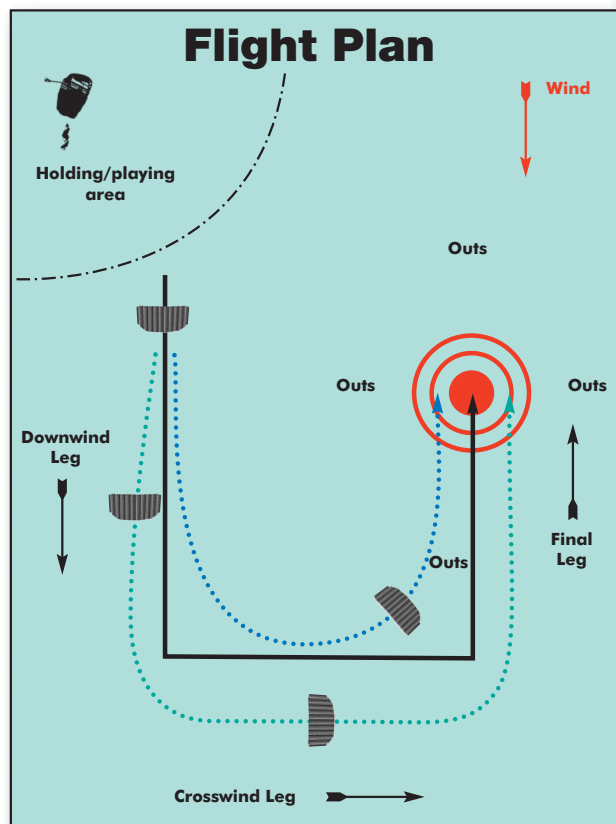
Final Leg

The final leg is your direction for landing. If it looks like you will overshoot your target and that it is clear of obstacles, stay on that flight path and land past your target. By doing this, you are not only making it safe for yourself and everyone else around you, but you are also improving your accuracy. By assessing your last pattern, learning from your mistakes and making the proper adjustments, your target landing accuracy will improve greatly.

When choosing a target **always** make it where there is a lot of room to both overshoot and undershoot.

Assess & Adjust Plan

When learning this manoeuvre try to do a couple of jumps, follow your exact flight plan for each jump and see where this puts you. You can learn a lot by simply assessing and **not** adjusting to make it to the target on your first jump. On the next jump you can make a new, improved flight plan from what you have just learned. When trying this, take a separate pass and make sure you have a large area to land in without obstacles.



A flight plan (black line) will help you land safely and accurately. Assess your progress and adopt a shorter course (blue line) or longer course (green) as needed.



High Speed Landings

If you are hoping to increase your speed by making a turn before landing, it is important that you also land in the same direction as everyone else around you, follow predictable downwind and crosswind legs and be extra aware of any other canopies around you. **You do not have right of way!** Try to account for the other canopies on your load (an easy way to do this is to fly an extra wide pattern so most people are on one side of you) and look for other canopies your whole flight, paying extra attention to your pattern. If there is too much traffic around you and there is a risk of not knowing where another canopy is going, abort your turn and choose to land safely. Most high level canopy pilots choose to do hop 'n' pops so they will have a clear traffic pattern. Take extra care not to hinder the safety of others – there will always be another time for you to swoop if you're smart about it!

If you are flying a different canopy or simply want to try something new, including your experiment with your pattern, give yourself the room to do it. You can either do a hop 'n' pop on a lower pass or open at a much higher altitude without all the traffic. It is far too often that we find ourselves with poor situational awareness when we are trying a new skill set; we are so focussed on learning one thing that we can't take it all in. But we are fortunate now to have more canopy instructors available than ever. Please go to them with any of your questions or concerns, no matter how silly you think they may be. Better still, invest in some coaching – it is your life after all!

Enjoy your journey! Enjoy your flight!

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