

# BIG-WAY

## Safety

From break-off to the bar



### **The Summit is Only Halfway!**

Smart mountaineers have a saying that when you get to the summit you're only halfway. You still need to get down safely. In fact, the descent can be the most challenging part. The same philosophy can be applied to big-ways – there you are flying your slot in an amazing record formation, you think it's complete, your buddies are squeezing your wrists and there's magic in the air – job done, you're on the summit. Woo hoo! Well you're only halfway, now let's get back down safely. Kate Cooper's articles in the February and April Mags expertly covered the skills needed to get to this point, now this article covers getting down safely from the big-way so you can savour your success in the bar.

### **Break-off**

Often big-ways separate in a number of waves – you must know what altitude you should leave and what the break-off signal is (often leg kicking or a deployment in the centre). Also make sure you know what the break-off plan is if the formation isn't complete or has funnelled. I generally set my audible 500ft higher than the first wave's assigned break-off altitude. When it goes off I know the signal is about to come and concentrate on looking for it. Also if I was still approaching the formation and the beeps went I would stop my approach immediately, knowing that the outer wave will be turning to leave in about two seconds.

If you go low, the standard brief is to move from beneath the formation and keep working to get back up until the first wave breaks off. When it's your turn to go don't hesitate, make a lifting turn to face away from the centre and go. Better still, don't put yourself low in the first place! Flare out slightly early from your dive with a little altitude as insurance and don't go flat to the formation too early. If you keep working the 45° approach angle as Kate advised, you won't ever go low.

### **Tracking**

The correct tracking direction is outwards on a line from the centre of the formation to your slot. Just doing a 180° turn may not be correct and could put you on a collision course. Cup air to lift as you turn and start your track with just your legs, leaving your arms forward in a mantis position. This avoids tipping too steeply at the start. Then slowly bring the arms back. Keep looking around – left, right, forward, back between the legs, up to the right, up to the left and pick a line maximising separation from others. You need to track flat. If most people are higher, you are diving too much, push down with the arms and suck up the stomach to gain more lift.

Track all the way to your assigned altitude regardless of where you are over the ground. Even if you realise it's a bad spot and you are tracking away from the airfield, keep going. The priority at this stage is separation on opening. Use your audible and/or check your alti to ensure you deploy at your assigned height. You may wish to set your audible 500 ft higher than your deployment altitude so you know when to stop tracking. If you flare out to look at your wrist-mount alti too early you have already messed up the separation plan.

### **Deployment**

You need to open within 300ft of your assigned altitude – so know how long it takes you to wave off and deploy. Keep looking around as you wave. If at this stage your tracking and observation has failed and you wind up alongside somebody, you need to use your wits to ensure you don't both deploy simultaneously – in this scenario separation is now more important than your assigned deployment altitude.

As you deploy keep your hips and shoulders level, keep your eyes peeled and be prepared to use your rear risers to take avoiding action if needed. Keep your canopy flying away from the centre for at least 10 seconds to continue the separation.



## Canopy Flight

The first part of flight safety begins on the ground with your choice of canopy. If yours often has long snivels, opens off heading, or is highly loaded then it's not really suitable for big-ways. Find one which is.

Under canopy, leave your booties on and fly conservatively. Save your spirals, CRW or swoops for smaller loads. Keep your head on a swivel the whole way down. Decide promptly if you are going to make it back to your designated landing area. If not then make an early decision on an alternate landing area and spend the rest of the time scouring it for signs of hazards. (The most serious injury on World Team 2006 was caused by hitting a power line during an off landing.) Be aware that others may also be homing in on the same area so try to join or set a pattern.

You should aim to extend the stack of canopies. If you're open higher than most of the pack, then sit on brakes and stay up longer to free up some airspace. If open lower than most, then use 45° front riser turns to motor on down and clear the air for those above. In a busier sky than you may be used to, be aware of the burble behind other canopies – especially close to the ground.

## Landing

Know the landing direction in relation to the sun or some other large distant object (eg, coastline or mountain range) before take-off. Formation loads occasionally mistime exits and dump everyone off the airfield. Know your assigned landing area and the pattern for landing and stick to it. Don't make the most basic mistake of trying to land closest to the packing area. The mission is separation so find a quieter part of your assigned landing area.

Often in light variable winds a landing direction will be set before the jump. If this is the case, stick to this religiously even if it's downwind. It is better to

land a bit faster than usual than meet a canopy going in the opposite direction. Land straight-in if possible. If you must turn, do no more than a predictable 90° having checked for traffic beforehand. Someone may be approaching faster than you from behind.

## Walk Back

After landing, immediately turn around and look up to check others coming in to land. When clear, collect your canopy swiftly, and vacate the landing area for the people above you. Keep your wits about you walking back to the packing area. This is especially hard to do if you're all excited as you've just built your largest formation – but being hit by someone surfing in would really ruin your day! If the DZ hasn't implemented a post jump checking-in procedure then buddy-up with someone on your aircraft and look out for each other after every jump.

## The Bar

Now you made it back safely, mine's a pint!

Gordon Hodgkinson (plus Pete Knight and Craig Poxon)  
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*[Gordon wrote this article after watching Kirill Samotsvetov (3 times world record holder) land hard after catching the burble behind another canopy on the first jump of the world record sequential attempts. Kirill died in surgery later that day. Just a fortnight earlier two world record holders died in a canopy collision on a big-way in Georgia, USA.]*

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