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A Flight of Fancy

Our intention, on that March morning, was to ski to the foot of the Aiguille Verte, climb the Couturier Couloir and, having reached the top, to 'take off' attached to the parachutes we had in our rucksacks. This form of transport for the descent had obvious attractions – no scary abseils, no jarred knees, and the convenience of 'floating' down to the valley base – easy! Why then, having wobbled, climbing boots on skis, to the foot of the climb, were we scared out of our minds? And why, as we approached the summit, were we getting more and more anxious, when normally anxiety levels decrease as one gets nearer to the top? The fact was, this was a gamble. Would we find an adequate take-off area? Would the wind be coming in the right direction? Or would we be blown backwards into oblivion? These questioning thoughts were in my mind as we bashed our way up the interminable couloir. The ice was hard and my mind was occupied. Half-way up we reached some unstable snow and detoured off to the right through the rocks, up narrow ice runnels, steeper but more interesting. Eventually we reached the top of the couloir and the angle relented. The climbing became tedious and my mind wandered to the events which had brought us to this situation.

I recalled, three or four years earlier, our first parapenting lessons. Our 'tutor' was an obsessed American sky diver who believed that you did not need to jump out of aeroplanes in order to fly, that you could take off on foot with a wind in your face, and that the chute could be made to come up above your head and fly like a kite. Then, as you advanced forward at a jogging pace, the canopy would assume a more rigid wing shape and develop lift, carrying you into the air. The lighter the wind, the more you had to run; and in a strong wind you might not need to run at all.

That was the theory, but for Paul Aubrey and me there was to be no gradual learning process. For our first lesson we were simply strapped into the harness and told what to hold on to as, with a fixed stare, we ran down the hill hoping that the bundle of rags dragging along behind us would assume a regular shape, float above our heads, and lift us off the ground. Steve, who must have been an 'adrenalin junkie', had provided some spicy obstacles: once airborne, ie five feet off the ground, we were asked to turn left to avoid a pine tree, change course again to avoid a hay rake and barn, and then land precisely in front of a house. Failure to do so would result in hitting the side of the house at about the ten foot mark. Paul executed his first flight amazingly well, miraculously (as it seemed to me) avoiding all obstacles. I have to admit that I declined this initial opportunity on account of my too fertile imagination. On his second flight, Paul twisted his ankle on take-off, his foot going down a rabbit hole.

Our next opportunity came some months later but we had, meanwhile, put much thought into how to learn more safely. We had spent days familiarising ourselves with the canopies by flying them over our heads like kites. The main

controls are by lines which go from each hand to the back corner of the canopy. You steer to the left or right by pulling down with the left or right hand. By pulling both 'brakelines' together you can slow down your forward movement but your descent rate increases. I discovered that the canopy was remarkably sensitive.

It was now winter and we wore skis for our next attempts. We started on small snow-covered hills; skiing into the wind the chutes filled easily and take-offs and landing went smoothly – too smoothly for Steve, who decided that we now needed 'big air' experience. Paul and I smelt danger but we too were getting hooked on the adrenalin that paragliding gives. We took a cable-car to the top of a peak and searched around for a slope with a moderate angle and a slight breeze blowing up it. Unfortunately for us we were unable to find a perfect location, so Steve chose one that was 'second best'. This was a steep slope of about 45 to 50 degrees. Steve assured us that our increased speed would inflate the chutes more quickly. I sincerely hoped so. A further complication was that we had to take off quickly in order to clear the cable-car wires that lay in our flight path. If they could not be cleared a landing would have to be forced on avalanche debris. I felt quite nervous as I embedded my ski heels into the slope, climbed onto my skis, strapped myself in, took hold of the cords – and looked down the 1000ft or so to the bottom. I set off at a remarkable speed with my eyes half shut, and immediately the chute inflated, pulled at my harness and lifted me into the air. I cleared the cable-car wires with a few hundred feet to spare and landed comfortably on the frozen lake below. Paul was less fortunate; he had not been able to clear the wires but had landed unscathed in the avalanche debris.

Having survived our initiation into parapenting we spent the next few years consolidating our skills and introducing other climbing friends to the sport. It didn't all go smoothly and I can recall many injuries and 'landings' into the top of pine trees. On one occasion, when coming in to land, I veered to avoid an unseen telephone wire and unavoidably went crashing through a tree, ending up suspended and looking down into the astonished eyes of a large group of people who, until then, had been enjoying a peaceful barbecue. With their wide eyes and toasting forks they looked slightly menacing. I broke the ice by saying 'bonjour', which only increased their amusement and my own embarrassment. All this was a useful learning experience.

During this time Paul and I were strongly attracted to the mountain tops. We enjoyed the whole process: choosing the mountain, the climb up it and the flight back down. But the game gradually became more serious and the pressure increased to take off when it would have been more prudent to retreat on foot. As we approached the summit of the Aiguille Verte the gravity of the situation was all too apparent and questions regarding wind direction and strength and suitable take-off sites loomed large in our minds. We had checked the weather forecast: blue skies, a light wind from the south-west, all should have been perfect. However, as we climbed the summit ridge above 4000m, things were quite different. The wind was from the north-east and was blowing strong and cold. The summit failed to provide us with the usual elation; our minds were too much occupied with getting down. We had hoped

to take off from a shoulder on the Dru side of the mountain, which would have been perfect with the wind from the south-west. Instead, we had a tail wind of about 20mph running straight down the ridge and making a take-off impossible. We decided to wait for an hour or so to see if the wind abated. The alternative to flying down was a cold bivouac and a descent down the Whymper couloir in the morning – not a pleasant prospect – and now it would be too dangerous from avalanche and stonefall.

We soon realised that the wind was not going to drop, so we would have to take off across it. We ascended to a levelling of the ridge and chose our take-off point. We had enough area to lay out the canopy on the southern side of the ridge while we ourselves stood on the northern side looking down the Nant Blanc face and into the void below. There was no room for a running take-off and no room for error. Two paces was all we had to the top of the 3000ft ice face. The wind was from the right. We talked at great length about what the wind might do to our canopies and we reckoned that, having pulled the chute up into the wind, the canopy would be twisted and slammed down to the left. We would then have to stand firm and pump the brake to bring it back up and, in a split second, make that enormous committing decision to go. Paul elected to go first and I would stand behind him roped up ready to grab hold of him if he lost control. We were prepared and outwardly in command of the situation, but inside my heart was pounding, my tongue was bloated in a dry mouth and I could hardly speak from nervousness.

Paul lifted the canopy into the air and it behaved as we expected – but it was moving really fast and as he pumped forcefully on the right brake the canopy came up above his head in an instant, and he turned and went! It all seemed to have happened in a flash and I could hear him whooping with relief somewhere down below. Suddenly I felt very lonely. I coiled the rope and put it in my sack; the wind seemed to get colder and my heart was pounding. I hoped that my canopy would behave in the same way that Paul's had – I did not dare to contemplate anything else. I was totally committed to jumping and the situation felt very scary. I tried to breathe slowly and move methodically as I strapped myself in. I checked that the chute was laid out correctly and that the lines were not twisted. Then, with a sharp intake of breath, I moved my arms and lifted the mouth of the canopy into the wind. It filled with a loud clap and pulled strongly to the left, almost unbalancing me. I released the left brake and pulled on the right, shouting at the canopy 'Come on, come on!' It came up above my head and I felt the upward pressure on my shoulder – I stepped and went, and in that instant saw the bottom of the face 3000ft below.

I whooped with relief and steered towards the Dru but now I was becoming aware of my cold hands and headed down to the valley. I circled above the sunny meadow in Les Praz and touched down quite close to Paul. We shook hands, aware of how much we had risked. The grass was warm and the early spring flowers were emerging. We lay there for a while feeling the warm sun while I waited for the hot aching in my fingers to subside. Then we went for a cup of tea and sat quietly contemplating the implications of what we had done. Yes, it could be a serious game, and one shouldn't allow it to take over. Since that memorable day in March 1989 I have had no desire to fly again.