

Flying Parker Mountain

It was a sunny day in July, and I was a new paraglider pilot heading to Washington to fly at Parker Mountain. Flying in the middle of a summer day can be dangerous because of turbulence and strong thermals. For that reason, I had only flown mornings or evenings up until then. That day, though, I planned to fly at 2:00 PM.

The launch went well. I brought up my wing smoothly, spun around, and ran west off the side of the mountain. I felt my wing lift me up and the magical feeling of free flight. When I passed the shoulder of the mountain, though, I was suddenly blasted by strong winds from the north. The right side of the fabric wing of my glider collapsed and folded under itself. I began to fall out of the sky. I leaned my body to the still-open left side of the wing, as I had been trained. After a few awful seconds, the right side refilled with air and popped back into place.



Word Wise

A *thermal* is a rising column of warm air. Soaring birds and glider aircraft use thermals to fly higher in the sky.



I felt myself being rocked and rolled in all directions. I was like a kayaker passing through whitewater rapids, only the river of air I was flying in was invisible. I wrestled with my wing with all my strength, trying to keep it centered in the sky above my head. I passed through a crazy-strong thermal that rocketed me straight up into the sky.

I love flying with all my heart, but I wasn't loving this. Panicking wasn't going to help me, though. My only hope was to stay calm and do what needed to be done.

I steered out of the thermal and immediately began sinking toward the ground. I fought to keep my wing above me in the gusty air. I wanted to land as soon as I could, but a thick forest of pine trees covered the ground below me. I knew there was a farmer's field beyond the ridge ahead of me, if I could just get over it.

I cleared the trees atop the ridge and made it to the edge of the farmer's field. I circled down as quickly as I could before landing roughly but safely next to a small creek. I had never been so happy to be back on the ground. My hands shook, and it took several minutes for my mind and body to calm down.

Pilots have a saying: "It's better to be on the ground wishing you were in the air than to be in the air wishing you were on the ground." They are right.