

A little background on the accident: 1) I've been flying sailplanes (AKA gliders, see picture) for about 15 years. 2) It's said in the glider community that it's almost impossible to see a modern, high performance glider when it's coming right at you. 3) At the instant of the accident, my glider and the other glider were converging nearly head-on at some 200 feet per second.



The accident: The soaring forecast for Saturday, November 7th indicated excellent conditions for long soaring flights out of Byron, CA. There was a lot of chatter about the promising weather on my glider club's email group with several of us indicating we would come out to assemble our gliders and fly.

I arrived at Byron Airport Saturday AM to assemble my glider, one similar to the picture above. After assembling and talking with other club members, I pushed down to the launch point on Byron's runway 30. I was the third private pilot in line for a tow. I took off around 12:05, about 15 minutes after the previous glider which turned out to be the other glider in the mid-air collision some 40 minutes later.

The tow plane took me towards the hills west of Byron where I released under a cloud that had lift (column of upward moving air). I climbed by circling in that lift, then flew westward to get under a broad area of lift marked by many cumulus clouds. The lift in this area was very good allowing me to climb to about 5500'. I estimated the cloud base to be 6000'.

As I was climbing I saw that Mt Diablo, to the north of me, was now in a shadow suggesting lift over the peak, I headed in that direction. I circled over Mt Diablo a few times and then explored some "whispies" a mile or so to the north. I got in the vicinity of the whispies, but could not find any lift. I decided to fly southward towards Livermore, under a broad area of very promising clouds. I circled a bit over Mt Diablo and thought I might be able to fly to Livermore without stopping to circle.

A very few minutes after heading off towards Livermore another glider suddenly appeared out of nowhere less than a wingspan away from me on the left hand side. In my mind's eye, that glider was in a moderate bank to the right. The whole sighting lasted for much less than 1/2 second, one "visual frame" if that concept makes sense, followed by a violent crash. Immediately my glider was out of control pointing towards the ground. I made a snap decision to bail out and followed the "canopy, belt, butt, look at the D-ring" emergency sequence we periodically practice for bailing out. I pulled the two red emergency release handles and the canopy instantly flew off. As it fluttered away I thought to myself, "This is for real..." I then twisted the release mechanism on my seat belt. I guess the plane was somewhat inverted because as soon as I released the belt I found myself outside the plane, back towards the ground, in free fall amidst a debris field. I looked at the D-ring on my parachute harness, grabbed it, pulled it and the parachute deployed.

I estimate my parachute descent took about two minutes. I could see the parachute of the other pilot well below me. There are colored lines on emergency parachutes you can pull that are supposed to turn you left and right. On this, my first ever parachute jump, I gave them a try and they worked. After doing a “tour” of my options, I decided to face in the down hill direction of the grassy slope where I would be landing. As the earth approached I put my feet together and bent my knees. In the last few seconds I could see that I was coming down quite fast. I hit with my feet and, instead of tumbling forward as in the videos, I slammed down on my backside.

I was hurt. I rolled over to get out my cell phone and called 911. While explaining to the 911 operator that I had no idea where I was other than south of Mt Diablo, two men on horseback came up and took over the call. After laying on the ground for 10 minutes, or so, the pilot of the other glider, Paul from my club, walked up. His parachute had been caught in a tree and left him dangling close to the ground. Happily, Paul was not seriously injured.

I ended up being moved by helicopter to the regional trauma center, John Muir Hospital in Walnut Creek. X-rays, CT and MRI scans showed me to have compression fractures of my L2 & L3 vertebrae and a broken tailbone in addition to a broken toe and several scrapes and deep bruises. I spent five nights at John Muir followed by five more in Kaiser Walnut Creek. It seems the way this senior citizen ended up in the hospital made me a bit notorious. I told the tale many times.

Progress: As I write this I’m nearly six weeks into the 12 weeks that I will need to wear a body brace to keep my spine from bending/twisting as it heals. Joyce calls it body armor and I call it my “carapace”; see photo. Fortunately, I only need to wear it when I’m out of bed. Nurse Joyce is taking extraordinarily good care of me and I am truly grateful for her. Also, if there’s one reason I’m grateful to have survived, it’s for Joyce.



I seem to be making steady progress; I’ve graduated from shuffling with a walker to taking mile long walks around the neighborhood using hiking sticks with Joyce and the our dog Eski. With passing time I ‘m able to do more and more mundane activities with increasing independence. I was told that full recovery would take a year. However, my impression is that by the time I’m eligible for a COVID shot in the spring I should be physically able to do a broad range of activities.

For those of you who have already heard some details about my accident, thank you for all your kind wishes and prayers. It really matters. And for those of you who are surprised, please place Joyce and me in your prayers

Larry