

A Distance Obsession

Chris Atkinson

PARAMOTORING, FOR MOST PILOTS, IS ABOUT FLYING CLOSE TO THE GROUND IN STILL AIR ENJOYING THE BEAUTIFUL SCENERY. THIS IS SAFE, NICE AND GREAT FUN TO DO. IT TOOK A YEAR OF REGULAR MOTORING BEFORE I STARTED TO LOOK FOR SOME NEW CHALLENGES. ALTHOUGH I STILL ENORMOUSLY ENJOY THE MORNING FLIGHTS ON THE BEACH OR FLYING WITH THE DUCKS OVER THE SUGAR CANE FIELDS. THE TIME HAD COME TO LOOK UP HIGH AND AT THE HORIZON FOR A NEW CHALLENGE – DISTANCE. A CHALLENGE MUCH DIFFERENT AND GREATER THAN I HAD EVER ANTICIPATED.

Not long after that Andrew Polidano and Mark Kropp had set the mark at 56km for the Australian distance record. I was already flying longer distances, but this helped me with the motivation needed to get started. I looked harder into details required to do an Australian paramotor distance record.

It took several attempts and a big learning curve for me to understand what the wind would do at high altitude, finding the right launch, studying VTC maps to avoid airports and possible flight restrictions, communication with the ground crew for pick-up, and of course how far I would get before I was too low on fuel and had to look for possible landing areas on the way.

The first two attempts had to be cancelled due to weather conditions. There I learned the lesson between the fine lines of being highly motivated and pushing too hard. Despite all my pre-flight checks, I managed to overlook a twisted riser. This forced me to abort the flight and top-land in high dry grass over uneven ground and left me with a painfully fractured ankle. I decided not to get a cast for my ankle as this would see me on the sidelines for an



Flying high test performance



Chris Atkinson and Herbet Hobiger standing beside Kangook paramotor on launch table

extended period of time. Strapping would have to do. I knew I could break this record if I only got off in the right conditions.

We arrived in the early hours on Sunday, 15 August. The weather was chilly but it looked promising, perfect conditions with the sun rising from the east. The surrounding mountains seen

from Barney View are a spectacular sight, and I really looked forward to get in the air. My ankle was strapped as it had only been a week since fracturing it. I chose the steeper launch to avoid having to run too far. I had no problems, with a near perfect take off considering my injury. Luckily they don't give stupidity awards. In hind sight I will not take such a risk again. I headed straight NNE to avoid a large patch of forest, flying past Mount Maroon with its impressive cliffs to the west and nearly in line with the road to Boonah. I made great progress. Herbert and Tina had taken my truck, following me on the road. We lost radio contact pretty soon as they couldn't keep up with me flying in a straight line aiming for Esk. The goal of just over 100km looked well within my reach.

Passing between Laidley and Gatton to avoid Amberley airfields and heading straight N, it looked like I had a winner. Later in the flight my fingers started to freeze while I was texting Herbert my positions, but I saw my goal within reach and that kept me going. Atkinson Dam became visible over the horizon. With it came and increase in the strength of the head wind I had been battling since shortly after take off. This forced me to lose altitude in order to keep reasonable penetration heading towards my goal.

My ground crew had soon caught up with me. I now had to battle on several fronts. While there was headwind slowing my progress, flying at a lower altitude made it a rather bumpy ride as time progressed with the first thermals of the day. Turbulence of the nearby ranges plus the cold started to take its toll on me. To top off the situation, just before Esk I encountered a small but very inquisitive aircraft doing laps around me. This was fine at first, until he decided to do a head to head pass at less than 50m above me. I was already flying in rough air and was awaiting a low altitude collapse from the turbulence of his aircraft. The pilot not only broke the law flying so close to another aircraft but had put my life at risk. Luckily I avoided a collapse.

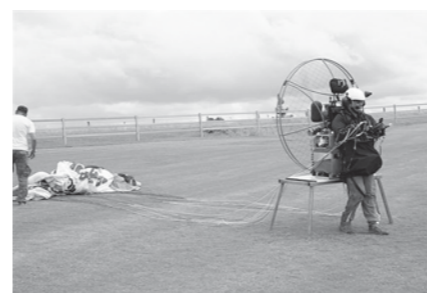
Flying over Esk, I noticed my tank was pretty low but not yet to the point where I would have to land. I knew the record was mine but, regardless to difficulties I encountered, I would battle on as long as I could do so safely. Finally I made it to Toogoolawah where I had planned to land on the showground. With very little fuel left in my tank, I saw my intended landing field. There were horses everywhere. I knew that under no circumstances could I land there with a



Fuelling up the motor



Flight preparation



Ready for the wing to be layed out for launch

paramotor. Luckily, being in radio contact with Herbert, we found a Paddock not too far with no livestock and big enough to land a 707. A disgraceful landing on a strapped ankle followed. I had made it a whopping 135km on my first attempt with no modifications on my paramotor. I was ecstatic with my achievement, but at the same time I knew I could do better. The obsession had begun. I had already planned my next flight.

The following weekend looked very promising, with westerlies forecast for Saturday as far inland as Roma. So we headed out driving several hours Friday night, camping near Roma. We left before dawn, to find our googled take-off site with plans to fly back to the coast. It turned out to be of no use, so we kept on looking, driving further out west and searching for a suitable launch. We finally found what we were searching for about 40 km beyond Roma near Muckadilla. The folks from the country are only too happy to help. We settled on a small hill facing the right direction with thermal cycles coming up at a near predictable regularity as the day progressed. My paramotor had now gained considerable weight with some modifications to the frame and the two extra five-litre tanks installed on the sides. Seeing the terrain

and strength of cycle coming up the hill, I opted for a reverse. A good launch timed perfectly with a nice cycle made this a perfect take off. I was glad to be in the air and wasted no time to circle straight into line with my GPS coordinates, hoping to get enough height to take advantage of strong upper westerlies. An inversion prevented me to getting to the altitude I wanted. There was some really rough air under the inversion and it took me a lot of time to get through it. To my surprise, it was as smooth as silk from there on and with speeds of up to 107km/h. I was jubilant passing Miles to my left and aiming to reach Dalby as my next way point. It had cost me a considerable amount of fuel to get through the inversion, and after 3 hours I started to realise I wouldn't make it all the way to Dalby. I also had considerable difficulties keeping in contact with my ground crew as the phone reception isn't always that great in the country side. I managed to fly a total of four hours and the distance of 278km, more than doubling my previous record. I landed near an empty farmhouse close to a small road, 40km from my ground crew. They were having difficulties with their GPS and it took them close to two hours before they managed to pick me up.

Planning for these attempts takes a lot of time from all involved. The learning curve is steep. Without my ground crew's help, it would not be possible to chase my goals. Thank you for the great support.

I fly a modified Kangook frame. These are the best frames I have found. The engine is a Ros 125, very powerful, economic and lightweight. I use a Dudek Nucleon Wing. The reflex system makes them a fast, reliable and rock solid wing when it comes to turbulence. On the last record flight, I would have landed a lot earlier if I was flying a standard paraglider wing.

I also would like to thank Ben Darke from Kangook for helping me with the setup, service, custom parts and advice.

Would I have been able to breach the inversion early in the flight, I am confident I could have doubled my distance.

My goals this year is to achieve 500km, then 800km and later in the year I am planning to have an attempt on the World distance record of 1105km. This will take a good amount of planning and further modification to my paramotor. We have already put more than six months work into this next attempt.

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