

# Back in

Photo: Robert Smith

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ROBERT SMITH RETURNS TO PARAGLIDING AFTER A SERIOUS ACCIDENT

After an encounter with a dust devil fractured my pelvis and two vertebrae in the spring of 2020, I had resigned myself to not flying again until 2021. However, in the autumn, when the weather forecasts promised an opportunity that seemed too good to miss, I decided to return to the air.

I had regained full physical fitness by the late summer, when my wife and I travelled out to our flat in Andermatt in the heart of the Swiss Alps. However I was uncertain about the mental side of my recovery, and wondered whether I would be comfortable or insecure in the air. When this medium – in which I had come to feel

weak high pressure to the south should prevent the development of any disruptive northerly winds without bringing a significant risk of föhn, and produce a light southwesterly airflow. Although the airmass was rather stable by Fiesch standards, once the thermals got going from around midday they should be relatively gentle (2-4m/s),

Photo: H. Taggi Tagmann



Airborne again after serious injury

completely at home after nearly 3,000 hours airtime over 28 years – had betrayed me so badly, would I ever be able to trust it again?

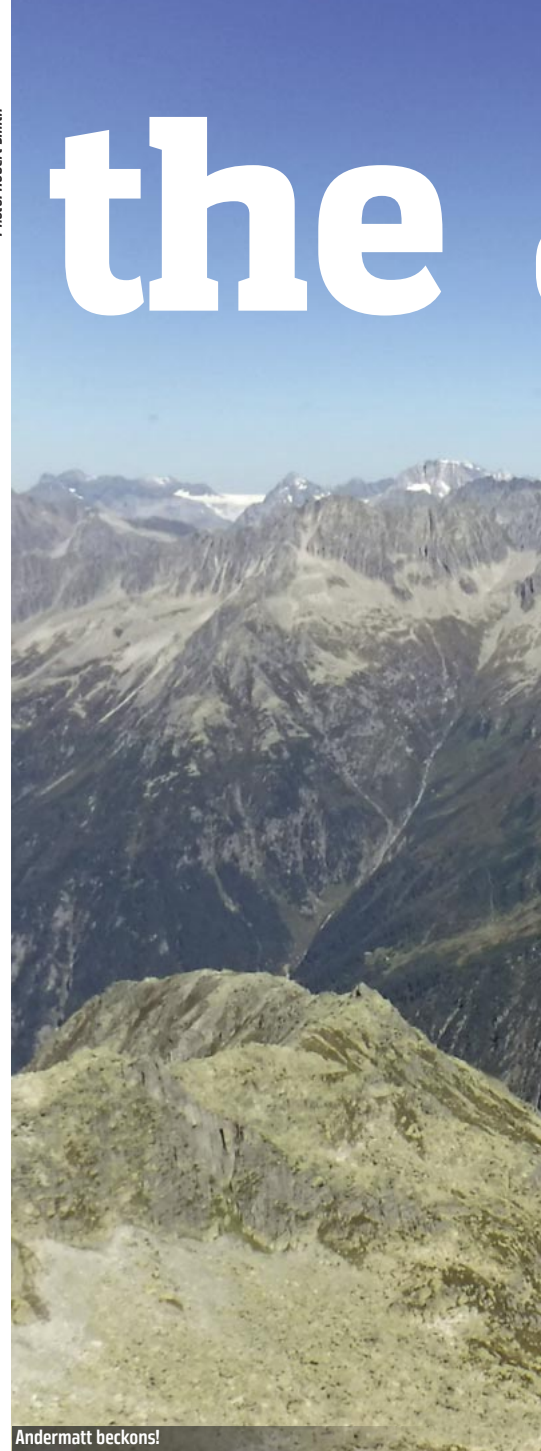
Fiesch, with its reputation for feisty thermals and tricky valley winds, might seem a less than ideal choice for a rusty and slightly apprehensive pilot. But dangerous conditions do not arise here without a reason, and with over 400 flights in this area I have become familiar with assessing its risks. My accident, on the gentle Marlborough Downs, was a direct result of proximity to the ground, whereas I usually spend the majority of my airtime in these large mountains well away from terrain.

The scenic train journey from Andermatt directly to the gondola station takes just over an hour, so I arrived at the take-off in a relaxed and positive mood. It was helpful to chat with a couple of flying buddies, and I felt reassured that their assessment of the day coincided with mine. We agreed that

reaching at least 3,500m by mid-afternoon. There would be only scanty cumulus, with no chance of any showers.

I would have liked an opportunity to refresh my muscle memory with some ground handling, but enough wind to keep a wing overhead would ring alarm bells here. Ready to launch, I could see a pilot climbing out from the lower take-off directly in front of me. As soon I felt the first upslope puff of the thermal on my face I popped the glider up, and with a committed run was safely airborne. Even some very experienced Swiss pilots let out a loud whoop when their feet leave the ground, in a way that would raise eyebrows in the UK, but I resisted the temptation and focused on getting into my pod without delay.

With the other pilot already well established and turning tightly in the thermal, I took up a diametrically opposite position to maximise the opportunity for us to use each other to map out the lift. Now it really was difficult to restrain the urge to whoop!



Andermatt beckons!

Photo: Robert Smith



The Aletsch glacier, one of free flying's classic views



# air



In considerable pain in hospital on the first day after my accident, aware that the outcome could have been even worse, I had wondered if the risk of coming to serious harm outweighed any benefit gained from my enjoyment of paragliding, and whether it was time to give it up. As the familiar exhilaration of free flight intensified with every 360, I was in no doubt that I had made the right decision.

After a few hundred metres the climb petered out. I felt no need to hurry off XC, as my priority for the day was only to reacquaint myself with flying. I potted around in the area between take-off and the Fiescher glacier to the north, to give the lift time to improve. After a while I was able to get above the ridge in order to take a picture or two of the Aletsch glacier, at 23km the longest in the Alps, and one of the classic views of free flying. Then, reassessing the situation, I decided to set off on the milk run to the east. This starts with a 5km glide across the Fieschertal valley towards the south-

facing side of the Goms, the uppermost stretch of the Rhône valley.

Reaching the shoulder at the end of the transition, I quickly found some rising air near the ground. There's often a localised venturi effect here, but the extent to which it was churning up the lift in a 10-15km/h drift across the slope was greater than I had anticipated. For the first time since launching over an hour earlier, I experienced a sensation of vulnerability.

I struggled to decide how much this instinctive feeling was an appropriate response to danger, or an over-reaction to the sensitivity of a raw nerve. One of Kelly Farina's sayings – 'Never forget, we do this for fun' – popped into my head, and I wondered whether fighting on in tricky conditions would end up setting me back. But with enough height to reach a spine with a windward aspect, I pushed on to be rewarded with a much smoother climb, drifting at barely 5km/h, and the disquiet ebbed away to the back of my mind.



After that, I continued my slow progress up the Goms valley in weak thermals and a gentle tailwind, with each thermal a little stronger and taking me a bit higher than the last. With 3,000m at the Sidelhorn, the final peak of the ridge line, I could see from the absence of ripples on the lake in the col of the Grimsel Pass that the notorious northerly wind wasn't blowing here today.

I now had a key decision to make – should I commit to an attempt to get over the Grimsel and Furka Passes ... or what? The 5-10km/h southwesterly drift wouldn't prevent a return to Fiesch, but a headwind push after I'd been enjoying the assistance of a light tailwind didn't really appeal, and if I was successful I should be able to reach Andermatt without much difficulty. I found it easy to make up my mind, and began my glide towards the Grimsel immediately.

The area between the passes is often a bit of an unknown quantity; usually there are excellent thermals there, but sometimes I've had to search around before finding one. This time the very first trigger point fired off the strongest climb of the flight so far, taking me quickly back to 3,000m. Keen to achieve the maximum possible altitude before crossing the ridge above the Furka Pass, I headed towards the higher terrain and was rewarded with an even more vigorous little core to over 3,500m.

Delighted to be experiencing a state of flow rather than anxiety, despite this test of my active flying skills, I recalled with amusement how I had considered abandoning the flight an hour earlier. As soon as I topped out I set off across the Rhône glacier, revelling in the excellent view of this spectacular river of ice.

I had hoped that the sunny windward face of the Furka ridge would provide an opportunity to gain some more altitude, but on arrival I found no evidence of lift and continued over the spine into the lee side. I had enough height above the crest to get well away from it before descending to its level, and I felt no rotor.

Approaching the next obvious thermal trigger, the sheer cliff of the Chli Bielenhorn, I started to notice significant variations in my ground speed. When I began to circle in some weak lift I found it to be rough, with an erratic horizontal component which I decided was probably caused by mixing winds. Once again I became aware of a heightened sensitivity to turbulence near terrain, and rather than hanging around in this dodgy air I moved on without delay.

Fortunately my next climb was more congenial. I wanted to get above the spine of the ridge leading along the Urserental valley to Andermatt, but either this thermal petered out or I lost it and I pressed on again. However, having lost track of the time, I failed to register that a slope facing south-south-east isn't likely to work all that well after 3pm on a stable autumn day. With a tailwind of around 10km/h blowing across the terrain, I was reluctant to get too close, and picked up nothing as I approached the village. Flags showed that

Photo: Rebecca Hedges



Robert Smith landing behind his flat in Andermatt, mission accomplished

the usual northerly valley breeze was pumping through vigorously at ground level, but the lazy rotation of the turbines on the ridge line of the south-facing mountain beyond were indicating a weak south-westerly up there. I decided that this slope was worth a try.

Traversing the alpine meadows with the clanging of cowbells in my ears, I was disappointed to encounter no rising air. My last chance was to continue across to Rossboden, the west-facing mountain just beyond the village. As I approached I could see a Swiss flag by a farmhouse pointing directly up the shoulder there – it wasn't game over yet! The mixture of thermic and dynamic lift here was quite lumpy but felt entirely benign. I was relieved to feel no qualms about scratching close in where necessary, and gradually gained a few hundred metres of height.

The climb weakened and then disappeared and I went back into search mode, but by the time I found more rising air I had lost

most of the height I had gained since my arrival. Never mind, I thought, I'm still having fun! However, when I reached the same altitude a second time, once again the lift seemed to vanish. As it was now after 4pm and I had been airborne for nearly four hours, I felt that perhaps it really was now time to quit. Needing a glide of just 4:1 to reach Andermatt, I headed out towards the village and accelerated to full bar into the gentle headwind. In a few minutes I was touching down right behind our flat, well satisfied with the renewal of my relationship with the air.

I wouldn't presume to tell other pilots how they should approach a return to flying after a serious accident, but I hope that my account will at least provide some food for thought for those unfortunate enough to be facing a similar challenge. What worked for me was to wait for favourable conditions, to set as my goal the simple enjoyment of flying for its own sake, and to pay attention to my inner voice rather than to try to block it out.