



Nylon Origami, or Three Days at an SIV

By Brett Hardin

A crisp morning breeze blows down-valley and scallops the surface of the water. A dozen people mill about a lone shade tent planted on a peninsula of brown dirt. Paragliders, harnesses, life jackets, radios and all sorts of gear are stacked in little piles. Someone points up into the blue sky and says, “She’s off tow.” Several thousand feet above the lake, the towline and its little orange drogue chute fall away from the pilot.

Brad Gunnuscio has his hoody and sunglasses on, and a radio in hand. If I didn’t know Brad and I bumped into him on the street, I would be apologizing pretty quickly – he is a stocky, formidable-looking character, but his smile is as wide as his shoulders and will quickly put you at ease.

Brad looks up and talks into his radio. I can hear him talking and I can also hear his voice coming through a nearby radio, but with a slight delay. Another radio is turned on, and now his voice comes over the two radios in stereo. His real voice blends with the delayed radio voices, and now it sounds like his voice is coming from everywhere all at once... My ears revel in this acoustic alchemy. Each transmission ends with a crack of static that makes me feel like we are on some covert mission in the middle of nowhere, and in a way we are, because something special is about to happen here on the edge of this pristine lake in southern Oregon.

High above the lake, the red-and-yellow paraglider starts a spiral turn

and picks up tremendous speed. With incredible energy, it suddenly straightens out, and the pilot swings under the wing and pendulums up and over the top of the canopy. At the top of the arc, the wing pivots around and faces the ground, and the pilot drops like an anvil, stretching the skinny lines. The g-forces build and the pilot and wing become one as they slice the sky apart with rhythmic precision.

Using nothing more than his keen eyes and the instructions he relays to the pilot by radio, Brad creates a three-dimensional dance between human, wing and gravity. We watch in awe and anticipation – soon each of us will have our turn above the lake. As it turns out, the pilot doing one of the best



Photo: Ted Stratton

Tow launching

Photo: Brett Hardin

Brad coaching Dave Cantrell, SIV clinic in Oregon



Photo: Ted Stratton

Brad and student, SIV clinic in Arizona

asymmetric spirals seen during the clinic is Kelli Brooks. Watching her perfectly timed asymmetrics, one might think she was an acro pilot, but nothing could be farther from the truth – Kelli doesn't have her P-2 rating yet. As a matter of fact, her total airtime doubled at the end of the first day of towing. Despite being as novice as it gets, she is fearless – by following Brad's radio instructions exactly, we watch as she experiences the extreme opposites of gravity: One minute she is compressed into the bottom of her harness, the next she is almost floating weightless as she looks down at her wing and the earth below it. Kelli is quickly learning the fine art of canopy control and energy management.

As the clinic progresses, the maneuvers become more demanding and stressful. The flights are less about flying, and more about moments when everything goes eerily quiet, the wind stops, your wing crumples and disappears and the lines spill into your lap like wayward spaghetti noodles. Next comes plummeting backwards followed by your wing awakening with a God-almighty surge. Back on land and between tows, I wonder what is safer, cross-country flying or attending a maneuvers clinic over the water...

It's my turn on the sharp end of the towline. I am really glad this is the last day of the clinic. The weather has been

changing, a system is moving in. It started as a high milky haze advancing towards us from the horizon. The blue sky was replaced with overcast, and now successive waves of dark cloudbands roll over us – mammata clouds are bulging out of the bottoms. Something doesn't feel quite right...

The sky improves just a bit, and the decision to continue towing is made. Five minutes later I am 3000 feet over the lake. I force myself to take deep breaths because I will need a lot of oxygen real soon. Stu Caruk turns the towboat 90 degrees, signaling to me that the tow is over, and I pull the release. The drogue chute drops away and I suck in a huge lungful of air, then blow it out like it was smoke, and now it's showtime. Brad's voice comes over the radio: "OK, stow your bridles, relax, take a deep breath and enjoy your last peaceful moments...." Just as his transmission clips off, I hear him giggling, but he comes right back on the radio with, "Just joking... Are you ready?"

In about five seconds Brad will give me explicit instructions on how to self-destruct in mid-air, and he is expecting me to follow his instructions without hesitation; if I do it exactly as he says, my self destruction will be immediate and complete, and I will then start plummeting... If that isn't enough pressure, I have

a dozen comrades looking up, watching my every move. I simply smile because I know if anyone can talk my wing back to life, Brad can do it, and this becomes my only real hope.

I follow the instructions and bury and hold my right brake. My wing stalls and spins violently and a gallon of adrenaline dumps into my bloodstream. A voice in my head screams, "What the hell are you doing? Go hands up!" I fight the voice and hold down the brake as the wing stalls and spins. My lunch asks if it can come back up; I deny it permission. A few more simple instructions from Brad follow: hands up, check the surge, and as my wing settles back into normal flight, I realize I am not going to die after all. I ponder the realization that I am actually paying good money to get this scared – surely it would make more sense if someone were paying me to take such a thrashing, wouldn't it...?

So why am I doing this? It's not for the adrenaline, and I don't like being scared. I'm doing it because I fly enough that eventually something nasty is going to happen to my wing and when it does, I want to have several tools in my bag of tricks so I can recover and fly on. After three days of mashing my canopy, I know my wing a lot better, and I'm reasonably certain the others do, too.

At the end of the last day, Brad takes a couple of tows and links together a sequence of serious acro moves, and I get a sense that he truly lives the flying lifestyle. Brad lands just as the local instructor, Kevin Lee, pulls up in his van; out comes a barbecue, a table, and cuisine ranging from pickled buffalo to homemade salsa, garden-fresh veggies, and cold beer. While the smell of grilling burgers drifts downwind, the wind sock gently sways on the shore of this peaceful little lake, and eight tired pilots, two instructors, and a towboat captain recount the stories of the last three days. Laughs and smiles go all around.

Tomorrow the shade tent will be gone and the birds will have the blue sky and this little lake all to themselves...

