

Sharing the Lakes with Low Flying Jets.



Typhoon - Low over Thirlmere earlier this year

In 1993 Alan Peter, 51 from Westfield, Massachusetts killed four people in a light aircraft. Alan was not flying the plane. He was a skydiver in freefall who collided with the plane at 7000ft. It may be a big sky, but shit happens.

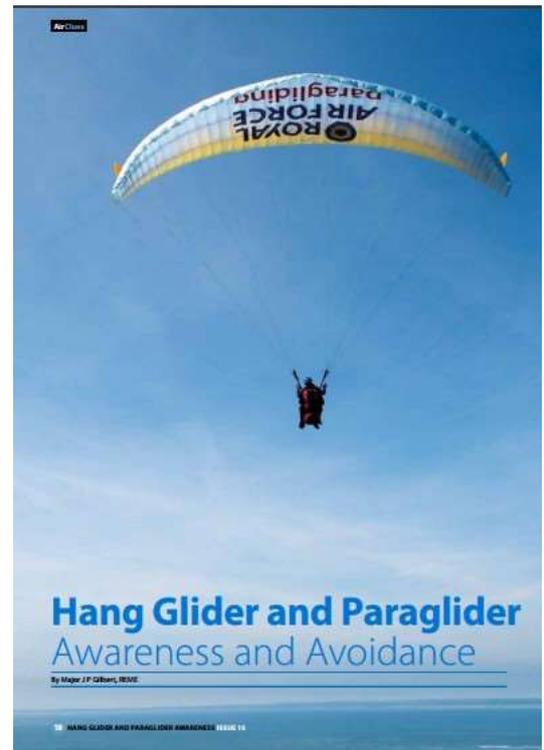
Closer to home, June 2018, A Hawk pilot flying a low-level training sortie northbound along the Windermere to Keswick corridor was unknowingly headed towards a light aircraft flying in the opposite direction and approaching Dunmail Rise. There was no collision, just a close shave. Fortunately, a Merlin helicopter pilot north of the position had spotted the plane and transmitted details of a light plane heading 'against the military flow system'. The Hawk pilot was alerted, spotted the plane at a distance of 3nm and took evasive action. He subsequently reported the airprox.

An earlier airprox, in May 2013 was a little closer. A Tornado, in a 3-aircraft formation was heading northwards from Keswick towards Bassenthwaite Lake. The Tornado crew spotted a white winged light aircraft about 0.5nm ahead flying towards them against the 'flow system' . It passed overhead. The crew warned the following two Tornados by radio, who then passed under the light aircraft at 300 ft separation just north of Thirlmere.

Most paraglider pilots flying the Lakes are aware that we share the skies with military aircraft. Those of us that get to fly mid-week will most likely have seen Hercules and fast jets passing through at low altitude. A few of us have had slightly closer encounters. Brian Doub, coolly described to me his experience of a Typhoon passing approximately 50ft below him. Earlier this year I witnessed a Hawk flying through the exact position and altitude where John Westall had been just 20 seconds earlier as he approached the landing field below Far Whitestones. Neither of the CSC pilots were aware of the approaching plane or could have taken evasive action. No airprox was reported in either case, so it is likely that the jet pilots were not aware of the paragliders.

If you would like to experience what the crew of a Typhoon would see on a low flying exercise through the Lakes, there is an excellent video put out by the RAF on YouTube; 'Flying the Typhoon Through Mac Loop at Low Level' https://youtu.be/kT7qrYi8R_M. Every paraglider pilot should see it.

The military are well aware of our sport and our regular flying locations. They have in the past included articles on paragliding in the Royal Air Force Magazine, 'Air Clues, issue 15'. Before every sortie the pilots are briefed on NOTAMS that apply to their proposed route. If there are CANP notifications of paragliders flying, this will not stop the military flying that route, but it will (hopefully) increase their preparedness to take avoiding action.



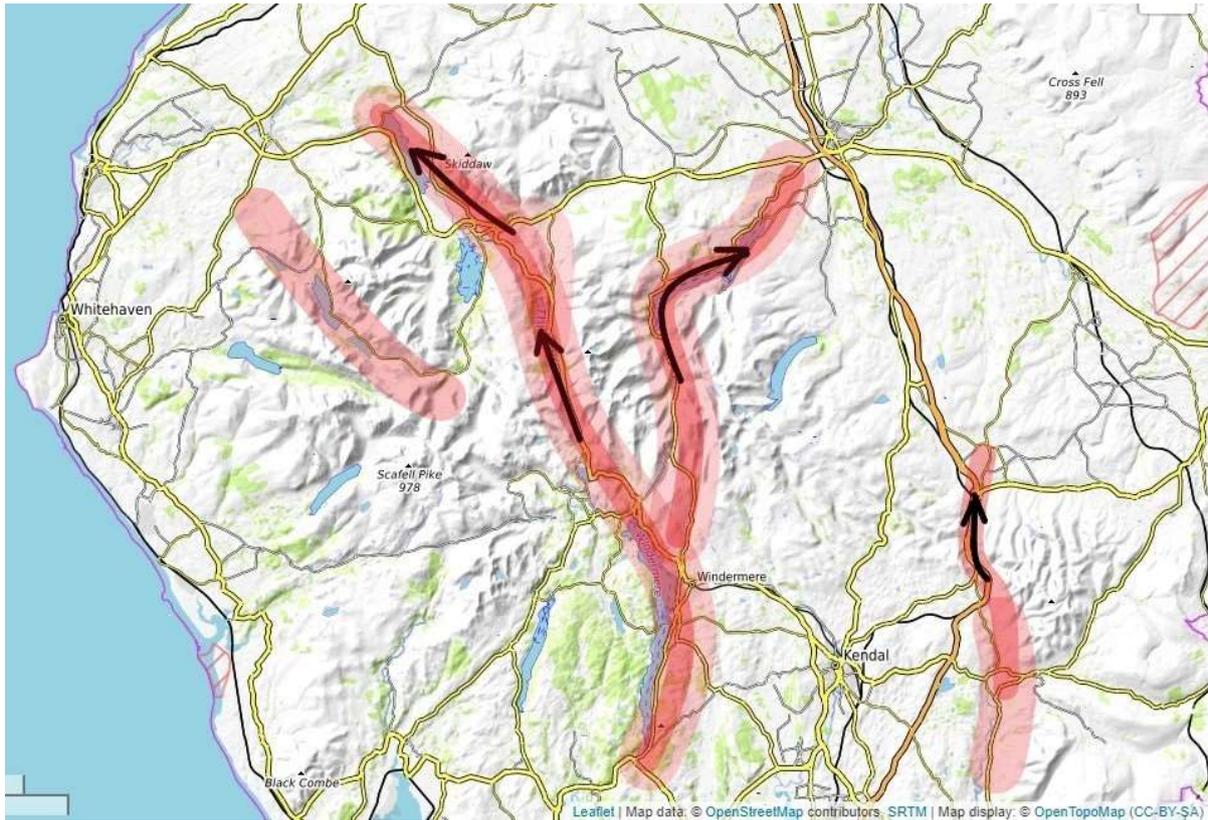
RAF Magazine - Air Clues issue 15

The map below indicates the major military low flying routes through the Lake District. The red lines indicate approximate flight paths. These are not precise; they are also not comprehensive. All of Cumbria falls within military low flying area 17 (LFA17). It is therefore possible to encounter low flying aircraft anywhere in the Lake District. However, the map indicates the busiest routes. Aircraft can fly these routes in any direction except for the three zones subject to Directional Flow Control. Military flight maps (AIP ENR 6-5-2-1) include 'flow arrows' to indicate mandatory flight directions.

- a) Northward from Grassmere, over Dunmail rise, along Thirlmere, avoiding Keswick and then over Basenthwaite
- b) Northward along the M6 corridor through the Tebay gap in front of Far Whitestones
- c) Northward from the bottom of Kirkstone pass turning east along Ullswater.

The flow arrows and their limits are indicated in black on the map.

Remember that military flying is not restricted to the red routes. Brian Doub describes one experience. "I've seen the RAF head straight for Blease Fell from Clough and climb straight up the fell side with gliders in the air. I was walking up and it scared me so bad that I walked back down even though it was flyable. I've never seen the sky empty so quickly of PG pilots. But that only happened once".



The busiest military low-flying routes through the Lake District

There is clearly a potential risk of collision; it is small, but as we have seen, shit happens. So, what can we do about it?

There is of course the ongoing discussion about possible regulations that would require all aircraft including paragliders and hang gliders to carry transmitters such as FLARM. That may happen but is still some way off.

Low-level military flying does not take place at weekends. By flying mid-week we increase our risk compared to those hard working paraglider pilots who only get out at weekends. We could reduce our risk by avoiding the busiest low flying routes mid-week and making a conscious effort to fly other locations in the Lakes. That probably does not appeal to most, as it is easy to see from the map that this would exclude many of our preferred sites and make XC flights difficult.

We could think about limiting the amount of time we are flying out over the middle of the valleys in the busy flight path areas mid-week. It is safer when flying closer to the valley sides or over the fell tops.

In a recent thread on *Paragliding Forum* there was a discussion on avoiding aircraft collision. Several contributors put forward ideas to drop below the flight path. These included carrying out a B-line stall or a spiral dive. Neither of these seem appropriate for the Lakes. Besides the likely close proximity to terrain, the main problem being that the paraglider pilot is unlikely to be aware of the oncoming threat until it is too late. Particularly when the threat is a fast jet. It may be possible to hear Hercules aircraft approaching, but unless they are in sight, we don't know their altitude and they could well be below us!



Hercules aircraft approaching at low level over Thirlmere

Other suggestions were to increase visibility, either by tight turns or wing overs. This may be the best and possibly only option open to us. If we do hear approaching aircraft, it is likely to be Hercules or other slower aircraft. Showing more wing colour by turning will increase visibility. We are unlikely to have time in the case of a fast jet approach, however, it is worth remembering that jets are often flying with a partner. If the first jet passes, there could well be a second following close. Putting in a few tight turns at this point would be a good idea, provided we are clear of terrain and other wings. Brightly coloured wings will have the best visibility. It is too late to think about this as we see the first jet scream underneath, but worth considering next time you are buying.

Finally CANP's. Pre-warning the crew of a fast jet that we may be out and about in the Lakes and potentially dangling right in front of them is probably the best opportunity we have to minimise risk. Even if we are planning to fly XC, a single NOTAM for the take-off site will make them think about paragliders in the Lakes area.

Submitting a CANP is now easier than ever by using the [CANP for Free Flyers](http://www.canp.logans.me.uk) web page www.canp.logans.me.uk. You may well get a call back from a pilot or flight planning officer asking for more information on your plans for the day. They are not calling to persuade you not to fly, but to assess the true nature of their risk.



Hawk - Drops low into Kirkstone Pass



Hawk - Screams north over Dunmail Rise

Tim Oliver

CSC Safety Officer

Thanks to Vernon Metcalfe of VCM Photography for use of his amazing images.