



Operations Advice Notice

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The Press and Gliding Accidents

Whilst our training, airworthiness standards and operational procedures are very robust and thorough, there has been and will most likely be accidents in the future. Gliding, like all aviation activities, has inherent risks which we strive to mitigate. The worst of these is serious injury or possibly death.

Nothing can really prepare your members for such a nightmare. Traumatized relatives need urgent attention, police are demanding assistance, and pilots are telling each other what they saw. Now, the phone is ringing with queries from the media. You can stall them for a little while but it won't be long before they're on the doorstep, seeking answers. And don't think that just because you are not at the scene you will not be confronted. One Club President was at his house the next morning only to be confronted on his front lawn by camera crews from three large TV Channels and reporters. They can find you anywhere!

Bad News is Good News

For the news media, the old cliché is largely true. Bad news is usually good news. It's not that reporters enjoy covering stories about death or major injury. They certainly don't get any pleasure from pouncing on people in times of grief. However, news organisations must cover all major stories and journalists have to be naturally suspicious when they cover any 'big' incident. They're doing their job. They want to get all the details they can to do it properly. And they want to do it better than their media competitors.

The Gliding Federation of Australia's Position

The GFA respects every Club's right to choose whether or not to assist the media. However, in most cases, it can be beneficial to the sport to make a brief, informed comment. If we don't speak, we may look like we're hiding something. Of course, if we say too much we create a whole new set of problems. We might inadvertently provide fodder for lawyers who are waiting to pounce. We could upset the Coroner or police investigators. Most importantly, we risk adding to the distress for grieving friends and relatives.

How to Use This Guide

This guide aims to prepare you for dealing with worst-case scenarios. It could be kept as a handy reference when you find yourself in a damage control situation. But it's vitally important that you take some time to practice before that happens. We train students to repeatedly go through their emergency procedures. Our instructors must study and revalidate. So why shouldn't we do the same with media damage control?

(Original work by Australian Parachute Federation, Adapted for Gliding. Refer www.apf.asn.au)

The best way to use this guide is to read it right through once or twice, then get together with others and practice. Make it just like an oral exam for an instructor rating, but instead of a panel of examiners, you put yourself at the mercy of pushy 'reporters'. Work through the scenarios in here, and create some of your own. What would you say if you were handling such a situation? How would you say it?

Most of the advice is useful for all types of negative encounters with the media. The principles are the same. Make sure you appear open, cooperative and sensitive to the issues you're dealing with.

Freedom of the Media

We live in a democratic society with a free media. When we're watching the T.V. news, listening to the radio, or reading a paper, we like to believe we're being given all relevant information. We know our media outlets are in competition with each other and we expect to benefit from a broader range of viewpoints. If an accident happens in our rail network, we expect a full inquiry and we expect media scrutiny of the issues. So it's only fair for Gliding to be subjected to the same standards. We don't operate in a vacuum. Our activities affect our customers, our members, local residents and others in the aviation industry. We also attract the spotlight because of a public fascination with Gliding. Generally, people just can't comprehend why anybody would fly without a motor. They assume we are risk takers. A serious accident can only reinforce these beliefs if we don't step in to even the balance.

One very good reason for assisting the media: If you give the news crews what they want, they usually go away.

If they have the pictures, interviews and answers they need, the reporters will go back to their offices to file their stories. If not, they might hang around for hours, seeking comments and speculation from any passer-by or nosey neighbour.

Sources for Stories

It doesn't take long for news of a Gliding accident to reach newsrooms. Police and ambulance services all have media units, employed to alert reporters to serious incidents. Scanner buffs are also quick to contact newsrooms when they hear something out of the ordinary. Passing motorists use their mobiles to ring through news tips. And a nearby resident might call a newsroom to ask why the police helicopter has landed in the paddock next to her property.

The Scene

The first task for a news crew covering an accident is to get to the scene. They'll head straight to the paddock or airport in the quickest way possible. Their chopper might suddenly arrive over your airfield, without calling ahead. You can stop them from landing, but you probably can't stop them filming from above. If a crew drives to your front gate, you can always refuse them entry. But what is to stop them from going into neighbouring properties, or filming from the public road alongside the paddock?

By the way, unless the gate is closed, they're even perfectly entitled to come into the scene without an invitation. The crews are not trespassing until the owner asks them to leave.

Witnesses

After assessing the accident scene, a journalist would seek out witnesses to describe what they saw. If the reporter is left standing at the gate, there'll be no shortage of speculation from neighbours or passing motorists. Eyewitnesses will give a dramatic, albeit inaccurate, account of what went wrong. They'll also point the news crew in the direction of the local anti-Gliding crusader, who'll spice up his interview with many other tales about previous incidents.

All of this will provide a spectacular story for the reporter. They'll throw in some long shots of club members running around looking as if they're trying to hide something, and they'll wrap it up with a shot of the gate, bolted shut to keep them out.

Wouldn't it be better to provide a brief, but informed statement, from someone on the scene? The reporter might still use some of the spectacular witness accounts, but at least you can provide some balance.

Think about this? You could say that the President or a spokesperson of the GFA will respond, but can you get him/her in a suitable time? It is much better to train members from your Club and have control over the situation at the scene.

For example club members may be anonymously standing in the background when a media crew comes to investigate a glider landing in a paddock:

"The film crew, desperate to get something, interviewed a 7 or 8 year-old boy. He had no idea what the problem was and gave an arm waving, dramatic view of the landing. Made us look rather amateurish, to say the least!"

Deadlines

In the news media, deadlines dominate everything a reporter does. If they have to file a story by a certain time, they'll use the information they already have. If all they have in the can is the anti-Gliding crusader and an over excited eyewitness, then that's what they'll use. They want to include your comments to provide an accurate and balanced story, but they can't wait another hour. The producers are demanding their copy right now.

Once you've decided that it's prudent to assist the media, you need to do it promptly.

Invite Crews onto the Scene

NOTE: If the police are in attendance they will have secured the area and will control who has access to the site. However it is not unusual for the media to arrive before the authorities, so it is important that the accident scene is secured and access limited to only a few responsible persons. It is also important that wreckage, ground scars and the accident site are disturbed as little as possible to ensure that investigators are able to determine the factors that contributed to the accident.

By inviting news crews onto the property, you have a degree of control over what they film and who they interview. Keep them together and find an appropriate spot for them to shoot.

They do need to get shots of the accident scene, and it's preferred any victims who have passed away be covered by a sheet or shielded from view. In most fatality situations, broadcast laws prohibit the media from showing particularly grisly shots. Usually, when the cameras are aimed at a body, the real focus is on the investigative activity going on around it.

Make sure the cameras don't have a full view of the entire accident scene, because your own members and staff will probably want to grieve without being filmed. However, the camera crews will try to obtain shots of distressed people. This may provoke an angry reaction from your members, who feel it's too intrusive. Camera guys are used to these reactions and usually try to shoot such vision from a discreet distance.

Assign a responsible person to make coffee for your visitors and keep them company while you work on your statement. Tell them you will speak in half an hour, and do your best to meet that commitment.

"If you keep silent, the media go and ask neighbours for their often ill-informed comments, or else just make it up!"

Prioritise

Nobody in the media really expects you to drop everything in this situation and deal with them first. Of course, they might try to pressure you if their deadline is looming. Just explain that you're dealing with relatives, members, police and investigators. The reporter should accept that you need a little time to gather information before speaking with them.

Prepare a Statement

You need to step away from the whirlwind for a few minutes and gather your thoughts. Write down the key points of what has happened. Think carefully about what you should and shouldn't say publicly. Remember your practice scenarios. If you don't trust yourself to ad-lib from your key points, then write out your statement in full.

If you are not the best person to do this, then arrange somebody better and help them prepare.

Making a Statement

Attitude

Now that you're prepared, take a deep breath and walk towards the media pack. Acknowledge them politely, but do not smile. They are filming as you walk up, and this is a sad occasion.

The crews will close in on you, but don't be intimidated. They may even be touching you or breathing down the back of your neck as they jostle to get their microphone in the best position. Keep calm, and take charge.

In a respectful tone, tell them you'll limit your comments to a brief statement, and you will not be able to answer their questions.

Now, take another deep breath and say what you want to say.

"I think the most important thing I learned was a 'no comment' will not prevent a story going to air. I found it better to be cooperative and give some very basic information. The media then had enough for a short story and were happy not to sensationalise some other information they may have heard from a witness."

Keep it Brief

Don't go into too much detail. The media needs a few quotes, and you'd be surprised at how much you can say in a brief statement. For example:

"The club is mourning the loss of a much-loved member and friend. We're not releasing his name just yet, because relatives haven't been notified. I can tell you he was an experienced glider pilot. On his second flight today, the Glider departed formation behind the tug and impacted the ground.

This tragic incident is being investigated by the authorities, and experts from the Gliding Federation of Australia are assisting their investigation..

I'm very proud of our members, who've been working hard to assist the investigators, and indeed all the emergency services, during a difficult afternoon for all of us.

We're all feeling very distressed about the loss of such a popular person. He loved his gliding and was enthusiastic in encouraging newcomers to the sport. We offer our deepest sympathy to his friends and family."

Your statement has stuck to the facts. You have kept it brief, yet you have provided several quotes. You have not offered any speculation or opinion, and you have shown some genuine sensitivity to the victim and their loved ones.

Of course, you won't get away with it that easily. The reporters will not allow you to escape without firing a few questions:

Reporter: *So, are you blaming faulty equipment?*

You: *I'm not blaming anything at this stage. The incident is under investigation and it's too early to reach any conclusions. The wreckage will be thoroughly examined during the course of the investigation.*

Reporter: *Well, what else could cause this?*

You: *A number of possibilities are being considered, and we must continue to have an open mind while the investigation is carried out.*

By now, you're trying to get away, but the questions keep coming. You must politely take charge again, and end the interview.

Reporter: *Could he have had a heart attack?*

You: *It's really not appropriate for me to speculate on anything as we gather all the facts for an investigation. I've told you all I can at this stage, and I really must get back to my members. Thanks for your understanding.*

Tell the Truth

Never tell a lie during a media interview. If you know full well there was a failure of some sort, then do not say the aircraft appeared fine. Even the littlest white lie, designed to protect somebody, can blow up in your face. You will be exposed sooner or later and you could be cast as the dishonest gliding club with dodgy equipment.

But don't offer the answer voluntarily!

Not the Whole Truth

Despite the need to tell the truth, you are not in a witness box here, and you are not compelled to answer every media question. But it's very important that you provide an acceptable reason for not answering the question:

Reporter: *I heard somebody over there say that tow rope was broken!*

You: *I repeat, I won't be drawn into any speculation, and I won't reveal any specific aspect of the inquiry at this early stage. The equipment will be thoroughly examined and if the experts identify any problems.*

Very persistent, pushy Reporter: *Surely you can say if a tow rope was broken or not?*

You: *The force of the impact had a significant effect on the aircraft and rope, and it will take some time to fully inspect each of the components.*

Don't Voice any Opinions

It's very important to avoid giving an opinion. Accidents are not always as they initially appear, and lawyers could later seize on any media statements, no matter how informed your opinion was at the time.

Likewise, leave the conclusions to those looking after the investigation.

Respect the Deceased and their Loved Ones

The deceased pilot may well have had a history of stupid behaviour. But nothing could be gained by saying this now. Find something nice to say. Be sensitive to those who are grieving.

Say something positive

In some cases, you can turn a story around a little by finding something positive to say. Your positive comment might be something as simple as praising all of those at the club who've pulled together at such a difficult time.

Finding it difficult

If your words just aren't coming out, take a breath and start your sentence again. For this type of story, the journalist is not trying to make you look like an idiot. It might be a little different if you were obviously trying to hide something or avoid an issue, but they generally just want quotes they can use in their story. You might also find yourself becoming emotional while describing the deceased. Journalists are used to this, and they'll probably ease off any tough questioning. But they won't stop rolling the cameras, and your tears are likely to make it into the final version of the story. This could be embarrassing, but it doesn't reflect badly on you at all. It shows you are a human being. Just take a breath and keep saying what you want to say. Or, politely walk away.

Out of Left Field

You may be well prepared for talking about the issue at hand, but anything can come your way when the cameras are rolling.

Reporter: *When we were standing at the gate, a neighbour told us about a series of recent accidents here. It sounds like a very unsafe airfield.*

Don't let them bait you! The temptation is to defensively declare, "We're not unsafe!" but that could fall right into their trap. Instead, keep your calm, polite and open tone:

You: *Gliding like all aviation sports comes with risks. Injuries can and do occur. The Gliding Federation of Australia is always working to improve safety and we aim to learn any lessons we can from serious incidents.*

Now, another reporter can sense it's getting tough for you.

Reporter 2: *The neighbour also told us about dangerous low level flying especially at the end of the day.*

If you don't keep your cool now, the headlines could be very interesting.

You: *It would be unfortunate if anybody used today's tragic events for their own personal crusade. We're here mourning the loss of a friend in very distressing circumstances. It's not the time to respond to baseless claims.*

There, it's over. Don't breathe a sigh of relief just yet and don't smile. Thank the crews for their understanding and walk away.

You're probably already kicking yourself, wishing you had phrased something differently or stressed a point more emphatically. It's not too late to make important corrections or provide journalists with new information. But, you'll generally have to accept that it's done now, and move on to more important things.

Telephone Interviews

You do not have to do these. They are not at the scene. But you cannot be confident that the reporter is not going to "ring around" till they find somebody to respond. You cannot be at the clubhouse all the time. Eventually a well-meaning and distressed member will answer the phone and may not be prepared to deal with the situation. A similar procedure should be followed if anybody calls, seeking an interview over the phone. Technically, they shouldn't tape record the conversation without your permission, but it's a good idea to assume they're rolling anyway.

Either way, once they've identified themselves as being from the media, they're perfectly entitled to take down every word and to quote you on it.

A radio news journalist will probably want to "roll a tape" for broadcast purposes. Once again, they should state this quite clearly, but you can always check: "Are you recording this? Is it for broadcast use?" Just like the television crews, a news journalist will be seeking brief sound "grabs" to add to their story. Once again, you can provide a brief statement, and decline to answer further questions.

A newspaper reporter back in the city might also seek a phone interview, after sending a local photographer to the scene to get the photos. Reporters from the wire service, or overseas media outlets could even call. The same principles apply. Be brief, open and sincere. You may have said the same thing 20 times over by now, but it's the first time this reporter has heard it.

Photos and Videos

The media will probably be seeking photos and videos of the deceased. Don't discount how this works. One Club President arrived at his clubhouse after a fatal accident with reporters inside taking photos off the wall and promising to return them after scanning! Club members were stunned and oblivious to the situation or not as forceful in asking the reports to stop.

As for other shots of the deceased from previous flight or shots near aircraft etc., you'll have to make a judgement call. You should also consider the feelings of friends and family. Some pilots really want to be remembered for enjoying their sport. Their loved ones might take comfort in seeing their smiling face during a previous flight. Such shots remind everyone that the person died doing what they loved. Other pilots might have regarded the media with a degree of scorn. It would be disrespectful to their memory and hurtful to their families if shots were released.

Playing Favourites

In a damage control situation, you must not play favourites. Once you've decided to speak to the media, you simply must speak to all of them. Even inadvertently forgetting to return a call could make you appear the villain. The snubbed reporter will then double their efforts to get another angle on the story, and it probably won't be favourable to you!

Off the Record

Nothing is off the record. Even if the cameras and tape recorders aren't rolling, the reporters will be listening to everything you say and they'll be ready to quote you. They're quite entitled to do so. Background information is not the same as off the record. For example, you might provide background information on how a winch launch works. You might also explain how the GFA assists in the investigation process. This information is ON the record, if they wish to use it. The reporter would usually paraphrase or simplify your information and use it in their story.

Remember, everything is ON the record, unless you make it clear that it's not. Here's where it gets complicated. For example, a politician would give an off the record tip to a reporter, knowing full well that the story will eventually end up in the public arena. The politician knows the journalist will act on the tip, but they TRUST that their name won't come into it. A mature, responsible journalist will use that information to seek confirmation elsewhere. They will not burn their contacts. They'll confront other politicians with the information, and they'll flush out a story. However, a keen young reporter who's trying to score instant brownie points might just as easily put you right in the manure.

Stick to rule one: Nothing is off the record!

Damage Control Checklist

For a fatality or serious accident:

- Accept the media's role to inform the public
- If you don't speak, an ill-informed witness might have plenty to say!
- Invite the media in to the scene and allow them to film from an appropriate vantage point.
- Take a few moments to prepare a statement. Jot down key points or write out every word.
- Make sure you appear to be open, honest and willing to cooperate.
- Keep your statement brief.
- Stick to the facts, with no opinions or conclusions.
- Don't tell any lies.
- If you choose not to answer a particular question, explain why.
- Respect the feelings of everyone involved.
- Find something positive to say.
- Treat every media organisation equally. Don't talk to some and not others.
- Nothing is off the record.

Other Damage Control Situations

Local Political Issues

A serious incident is difficult enough, but local battles over noise or other airport users create their own challenges. They can often prove much trickier. The gliding fields future could be at stake as determined locals use the media for their own crusades.

There really isn't an option to stay silent. As long as the other side provides angry quotes and interesting photographs, the media will keep running the copy. Yes, in the interests of balanced reporting, they should contact you and seek a response. If your response is 'no comment' then they are not under any obligation to put your side of the story.

If the trouble-making neighbours are damaging your club or reputation, you might consider legal action. Sometimes a solicitor's letter to a newspaper encourages the hounds to back away a little, but you may well have to fight it all the way.

Your best bet could be a dignified, but pro-active approach right from the start. Make it clear that you won't enter a slanging match, but you would like the chance to respond to specific allegations. When you do respond, do so with accurate information and without resorting to tit for tat claims. Don't make untrue allegations against your opponents, and don't make untrue statements in your own defence. You'll only end up looking worse.

Be Prepared

Staying Silent

Nobody from the GFA is saying that you **MUST** speak to the media. It's your right to stay silent. It's even possible that a news crew won't manage to snare any witnesses and the accident scene is well hidden from the road. If so, your silence might be the final straw that leads to the story being scrapped. You'll still have to accept that others have the right to speak. Police media units might issue a statement, or witnesses could make comments at the scene. The GFA Office may also give an interview if they feel it would help the sport.

"It is better to provide an official comment whenever possible rather than leave it to the media to seek uninformed, biased, or even misleading comments elsewhere. I am always careful to try not to say anything that could damage the sport or the organisation."

Expert Help

Once you accept that speaking to the media can minimise the fallout, then you must prepare yourself for facing the cameras one day. Media professionals can be hired to help you practice for such an encounter, and you'll feel a lot more confident if the need does arise.

Media Trainers can coach you in role-playing various negative scenarios. This is a terrific way of testing your performance under pressure. Area Councils could probably arrange sessions like this every year or so for a few hundred dollars. You could also hire a PR consultant to do the talking for you in a damage control situation. However, the media usually wants to talk directly to those at the coalface. In fact, reporters tend to have a natural distrust of PR people, who often try to pull the wool over their eyes.

Practice

If you have corporate media trained people in your club, use them. Talk to them and find out if they would be willing to speak to the Press in situations. Regardless, spend time working through scenarios that suit your club environment. Practice in small groups and allow people to say what they would say. Role play!

Prepare for the Worst

For those who've experienced a negative media encounter, the ordeal is usually etched pretty firmly in their memory. They sometimes feel so badly burned that they forget all the positive coverage they've received over the years. It's all pretty daunting to prepare for the worst-case scenarios, but you'll probably find your confidence builds each time you practice.

If you do need to use your new media handling skills, you'll be very grateful for the effort you've put in.



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