

## On Wind and Wing

By Pastor Mike Lowe

I've always wanted to fly. For years I've been having recurring dreams about flying. I was probably 5 years old when I first started dreaming about it. In the beginning things were difficult. When the wind started to blow I would lie back against it and do a kind of back stroke. It resembled someone drowning. But somehow I was able to maintain a low hover. People walking by were tormented with facial contortions.



I was determined to improve my status and technique. It was years later before I was finally able to roll over and fly facing the wind and the ground. It required more than superman effort, and still I looked like someone drowning. But somehow I was able to maintain a low hover. People walking by were still disturbed with disfigured faces, but my aeronautical advancements, albeit little better than an accident looking for a place to happen, motivated me to believe I would some day fly with the best of birds.

Eventually flying improved with age and something akin to maturation. I am now able to fly effortlessly, dipping and dodging, swooning and swooping through thin air not unlike my fair feathered friends. I love the way the wind feels as it cascades across my face and hands, coursing through my hair, flying in the breeze like Old Glory. I can go anywhere and do anything. People walking by now look up and point saying, "There he is! Ain't it great!" No more morbid faces. Thank you Jesus!

But mastering my dreams did very little to satisfy my desire to fly. Then one fine, chilly autumn day my dreams came true. It all began on the Cinder Hills just outside Flagstaff, Arizona. Geologists speculate that around 2,000 years ago a series of volcanic eruptions transformed a 16,000 foot mountain range into a cluster of conical shaped hills made up of small, lava cinder stones. The area elicits darting images of pre-historic man and dinosaurs engaged in mortal combat, fighting for first place among the survival of the fittest.

Perched atop one of these cinder hills, called Sheba, my highly skilled instructor uses graphic word pictures to help me understand the art of paragliding. The object is to run downhill until prevailing winds convert 10 pounds of nylon fabric into a flying fortress. Closed panels capture incoming air to form a rectangular kite, which is attached to the pilot by dozens of strands of strong string, and behaves exactly like an airfoil or airplane wing. The four aerodynamic laws of lift, weight, thrust and drag combine forces to allow foot launched pilots the freedom to fly, soar, maneuver and land safely.

Wearing a massively padded harness, helmet, gloves, and a two-way radio my instructor decides, after a day of ground handling, I'm ready to launch into thin air. The connecting cords that attach me to the glider wing are routed in such a way that four primary risers serve as steering lines. There are four sets (right and left) named A, B, C and D. Pulling and releasing the risers cause the wing to behave in a predictable manner. For example, the A lines act like an accelerator pedal, and the D's act like brakes. The B and C lines provide in between responses.

Okay, I spread out the glider on the ground and walk back until there's no slack in the lines. Facing the glider, with my back to the wind, I pull on the A risers until the wind blowing against the wing forms a wall. Then I hurriedly release the A's and pull on the D's to prevent the wing from flying overhead and lifting me off the ground before I can inspect the glider. Parking the glider allows me to see that none of the lines are tangled and that the wing is properly inflated.

Everything checks out okay. I am now ready to position the wing overhead. Since I am doing a reverse launch, the lines are crisscrossed, left over right. The mass of converging cordage resembles a bowl of spaghetti, and I am somewhat intimidated. But I have faith in my instructor, so I press on. With the steering

toggles in both hands, I begin pulling on the A's. Immediately the wing lifts off the ground. Initially, the angle of attack acts like a drag chute and I find myself skidding rapidly forward for several feet. I feel totally out of control, but my instructor assures me that this is quite normal - being dragged, that is.

Now the wing is directly above me, and to keep it from over flying and collapsing on top of me, I take a couple of steps backwards. However, before committing myself, I quickly scan the glider once more to ensure everything is still functioning correctly. Certain that all is well, and with my instructor's approval, I spin around and begin charging downhill eager with anticipation. I am slightly hunkered over with my arms and hands jacked up high behind me. This awkward position enables me to run without causing the wing to stall by inadvertently pulling down on the brake lines.

The harness bobbles and bangs around beating my back and legs making it difficult to keep my balance while hopping over sage brush, prickly plants and potholes. The wing leans left, so I zigzag left and add some brake to compensate. Then it leans right, now left again, and I scramble to keep things afloat. I feel light on my feet. Now I'm leaping long distances running on tiptoes. Finally, I'm running in mid air as solid earth fades away. I'm flying. Dear God, I'm flying. I love it. This is awesome. I pinch myself to make sure I'm not day dreaming. But I'm wide awake, and I'm actually flying. Thank you, Jesus. I love you. I'm flying. Yes, yes, yes!

The two-way radio is blaring. "Mike, are you okay? Is everything alright?" I press the push-to-talk button and respond, "Yes, I'm fine." My instructor explains, "We heard all the yelling and screaming and thought maybe you were hurt." Ha, ha! Hurt? I'm having the time of my life. An eagle flying on my left looks at me, looks away, and then looks back again, as if trying to figure out what a bottom dweller like me is doing in the sky. I love it. Dude, I'm flying. That's what I'm doing. Down below everything has shrunk. People look like ants, and trucks resemble toys. Antelope, cows and horses are running frantically. No doubt I remind them of a terrible pterodactyl. But I feel like a dove.

The earth is returning. I'm slowly losing altitude. It's time to start thinking about my landing. The landing zone (LZ) is roughly the size of a baseball diamond. It should be plenty of room to land safely. My ground speed is approximately 20 MPH, which is too fast. Landing at that rate of travel could cause undesirable consequences (i.e., bruised flesh, torn tendons, broken bones, etc). I do a series of figure eights to lose some altitude, and also so I don't over shoot the LZ and land on the barbed wire fence. Pulling down on the left toggle slows down the left side of the wing causing the right side to fly faster thus generating a left turn. Pulling on the right toggle has the opposite effect.

I'm only about twenty feet up. And now it looks as though I'm going a lot faster than only 20 MPH and it's making me very nervous. I'm having visions of slamming into the ground disappearing beneath the surface and dying before the earth moving equipment can excavate my carcass. But just before my feet touch down I bury the toggles below my waist causing the wing to flare. My landing is as soft as sitting in an easy chair. The glider hovers overhead for a moment and then lies down gently. And I am relieved to be alive, and ready to go again and again. I love being – On wind and wing.

