



Closer To Home.



Flying High, Living Large: Jay Carroll paraglides into a cliff face and lives to tell about it

By Sam Moses
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Broadway Toyota



“Right now you’re carrying an aircraft with a range of 100 to 150 miles,” says Jay Carroll, who’s gone places behind the accelerator of a paraglider where no other man has gone. We’re standing in his backyard in the Columbia Gorge, facing the mountain he launches from whenever the conditions are right. His paraglider is in its pack on my back, where he put it to make his point.

“You can take off using nothing more than your feet, and with some flying skills and a reasonably well-developed sense of the environment and air currents, you’ll be able to fly into the clouds and travel cross-country,” Carroll continues. “You may have launched from a mountain you weren’t familiar with, and you’ll land at a place you definitely won’t know. It might be a farmer’s field where he’ll feed you an apple pie and a couple of beers while you tell him stories, and if he doesn’t drive you home you can stick out your thumb and hitch a ride and meet somebody else. It’s always a great adventure because it’s always an unknown waiting for you — in the sky and on the land when you come down.”

I hadn’t seen Carroll for a few years, not since he competed in and won various events in the Gorge Games. Then one day last week he pulled up in his well-traveled VW Vanagon to check out Swell City, a windsurfing spot where I was sailing. He was hobbling, and I could tell it wasn’t a mere limp on a sprained ankle; this gimpy stride was for real. I’d seen fused ankles before in race drivers — drag-racing great Shirley Muldowney comes to mind.

Three years ago Carroll crashed feet first into the face of a cliff in the French Alps, at about 20 mph and more than a thousand feet off the ground. He not only lived to tell about it, but today, with ankles that don’t bend and aren’t perfectly straight, he still paraglides, kayaks, windsurfs, kiteboards, skis, snowboards, climbs and mountain bikes.

“My friends say it’s great that my ankles are fused,” he says with a small, wry smile, “because now they can keep up with me.”

Bruce Chevrolet



Carroll is an accomplished professional photographer (www.jfoto.com), but adventure and recreation are more important to him than material things, so he works only as much as he needs to. He's recently married, no kids. He has a long, lean body, graying red hair in a braided ponytail, clear blue eyes not quite matching the one blue eye of his dog, Azul, who cheerfully guards the stuff in the yard: kayaks, a canoe, a kiteboard, plus wetsuits, bathing suits and life jackets drying in the hot sun and dangling over the weathered rails of fences and pickup trucks.

Carroll is also the PR man for the Portland-based Cascade Paragliding Club, which has nearly 150 local members, including about 30 women. He likes paragliding more than hang gliding because, he says, "The simpler the aircraft, the more developed the skills of the pilot need to be. And paragliding is the closest thing man can do to pure flying, because the craft is so simple. A hang glider can fly at 18 to 60 miles an hour, so it's more for the speed freaks. A paraglider takes flight at 12 miles per hour and can accelerate to about 22. And there have to be very specific wind conditions.

"It's a privilege to be able to fly," he continues, "so we make sure anyone who takes up paragliding gets a lot of instruction. The only way to approach it is to focus on safety, safety, safety. Paragliding is not a thrill-seeking sport. It's aviation. We follow aviation rules. We're flying around in the clouds just like the jets, but we don't fly over 21,000 feet, even though we can. We carry instrumentation: radios, variometers, which are kind of like altimeters, and GPS devices. The energies are immense, and you get a tremendous feeling of power and excitement from being able to ascend mountains using only your flying skills. After you get over the fear factor, you start needing it. Paragliding is very addictive. You can easily get to where it's all you want to do.

"When you catch the right thermal, you can climb so fast it's scary," he goes on. "Most pilots like to stay in the 400 to 800 feet-per-minute range. But 1,200 to 1,600 is not uncommon. And it's a mind-blower to ride 2,200 feet-per-minute. It's pretty rough, because when there's rising, there's sinking, too. That's where the accelerator, or speedbar, comes in. You use it mostly to get out of weak air and into better air. When you're in sink you fly as fast as you can to get out of it. There's even more loss of altitude and stability under acceleration, but you need to gain the speed. And if you run into turbulence while on full speedbar, the chances of having a crash are greatly enhanced. I've been whacked several times while having the accelerator bar full on."

Carroll says pilot error, no matter how indirect, is ultimately behind every aviation accident, including his own crash against the cliff in France — in "the candy store of flying," as he calls the Alps.

"I might have gotten into a space between two thermals and got hit by a downward burst," he says. "I felt like I was in a vacuum. But I had gotten myself boxed into a canyon and left myself few options, and good piloting means having as many options as possible.

"Right then, I made the decision to fly into the wall and hopefully regain control of the glider by maneuvering. I've revisited the incident many times, and I still think my only option was that bizarre thing, to make that planned crash. After the first impact I kept falling, banging off the wall, paddling against it with my arm to try to push off. Lines were starting to snap, the wing was shredding, and I said, 'If I'm gonna survive this thing, I have to back-fly and get away from this cliff.' Anything else would have killed me."

He succeeded in escaping the clutches of the cliff and landed on his butt with his smashed ankles and legs elevated to protect them. It was in a valley a couple of miles from a hospital — good karma if it ever existed. The emergency treatment by French doctors prevented amputation, although that remained a scary possibility for three days, but the work had to be undone and redone by orthopedic surgeons when Carroll got back to Portland.

It was nearly 11 months before he took his first steps. He's had a number of surgeries and still carries ski poles in his truck, which he sometimes uses to get around.

"He's made tremendous progress, but he's been through hell," Steve Roti of the Cascade Paragliding Club says. Along with 10 other club members, Roti was with Carroll on that paragliding trip to the Alps. "I was about 10 miles behind him, and I heard him say on the radio,

'I'm in the air, I have two broken legs, I'm gonna land.' That's all I heard until I landed myself, in another valley.

"I'm the accident-reporting chairman for the U.S. Hang Gliding Association, and I've never heard of one like this," Roti continues. "I call it a James Bond kind of accident. He had the presence of mind to crash into the wall to get out of a freefall, then push off the wall after bouncing down its face, then fly a severely damaged glider to a safe landing on the valley floor. Lesser men would not have survived that accident. Jay is a guy who really does live large. He's done some things with a paraglider no one else has."

Most notably, if not visibly, he crossed the North Cascades. He and Mark Telep didn't even decide until they were in the air and saw that conditions were ideal that they would attempt what had never before been done. They had launched from 7,001-foot Goat Peak above the town of Mazama, Wash., and with Carroll leading the way and looking for thermals they flew west above the North Cascades Scenic Highway toward Mount Baker, landing near Ross Lake in the Mount Baker Snoqualmie National Forest.

"In terms of audacity and skill, it was almost a mind-blowing flight," Roti says. "They did that nearly 10 years ago, and it's never been repeated — a hang glider hasn't even done it yet. People still talk about it with awe."

Carroll used to fly into the unknown in the Canadian Rockies, where he says the biggest risk was grizzly bears after landing. He doesn't fly cross-country any more, limiting his flights nowadays to mellow cruises around the Cascades. But he remains excited by the challenge of pure aviation. The first thing he does when he wakes up each morning is check the clouds. Selecting the good times to fly is an art in itself, he says. "Cumulus clouds are what you need, and the lifespan of a cumulus cloud is five to seven minutes," he points out.

Finally, he takes the paraglider pack off my back, but he doesn't exactly fly away. He drives off to the next adventure: two weeks of rafting down the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. And it's not a guided trip. One permit per year is granted to private parties, and a friend of his has been waiting 13 years for his turn. He needed good companions and co-rafters, and Jay Carroll was first on his list.

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