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"I've been thinking of writing this piece for a while, but I've been reluctant to actually do it. Something has been holding me back.

Perhaps it was because I knew I'd be leaving myself open to all manner of vitriolic response or ridicule, after all, the people here on Skysurfer are never backward in offering comment, especially when they can remain anonymous. Perhaps I thought it would be too embarrassing to put into print the thoughts that have been bothering me for a long while now.

The last few weeks have shown that we are still remarkably capable of killing ourselves, and it would appear that no amount of urging on the part of those in authority will make people change the way they do things in this amazing sport of ours.

So here are my thoughts. The piece is lengthy, but it's something I felt compelled to write - straight from the heart."

Terry Wahlen

Personal Responsibility

Together those two simple words form a term that seems to be fast disappearing from the lexicon of this unforgiving sport we skydivers enjoy.

To me, skydiving is a sport where from the instant you commence the activity **YOU ARE DEAD** – unless **YOU** decide to save your own life. You can't phone a friend, you can't press "Ctrl, Alt, Del" and start again, and you most certainly can't do nothing and hope it all works out.

Let me expand upon those two simple words, and then let me give you a few more.

Personal - relating to one person, conscious and individual

Responsibility - accountability, authority to act, duty, obligation, bond, restraint

Together they define an immensely important facet of skydiving, something that should be at the forefront of every skydiver's mind, from the minute they think about going to the drop zone and start packing their gear bag to the minute they leave to drive home.

To me, the definitions given are those things we in the skydiving community **MUST** observe, for without *Personal Responsibility* we will continue to see friend after friend after brother after sister after parent after student die in this sport.

Personal Responsibility should be written on your logbook in bold red letters.

Personal Responsibility should be displayed on wind blades bordering the swoop pond and on banners mounted on poles at the drop zone entry gates.

Personal Responsibility should be tattooed on your arm instead of the flying closing pins and Latin words for "I'm a Hard Core Skydiving Dude" we commonly see.

I can understand the mentality that views skydiving as a hard-core sport meant for hard-core people - a sport

tailor-made for renegades and social pariahs who want to take life in a headlock and drag it kicking and screaming into submission - but I think that's a misguided view. On every AFF First Jump Course I run I see people from all walks of life - people like teachers, accountants, doctors, university students, middle-aged mothers; all different and none of them what you'd call "hard-core".

On every course I tell my students that skydiving is a sport that is 95% mental and only 5% physical - and I believe in what I teach. For many who progress past the AFF course, however, it would appear massive problems develop with the mental side of the equation as soon as they leave "student hood" and enter the general drop zone population.

Here they witness the conversations of the "radical" dudes, and they hear stories of wicked swoops and crazy stunts, dodgy deeds and disaster averted, downsizing canopies and amazing wingsuit flights. They see fantastic GoPro footage and can't wait to rush to 100 jumps and glue one to their head. They hear of people doing stuff that they shouldn't be doing, but they also see those people repeatedly getting away with it.

They know there's danger at every turn but they push it into the back of their minds because, after all, everyone breaks the rules and gets away with it. Don't they?

And there are other words we need to examine, for these other words fit hand-in-glove with the first two.

Words like Rules, Regulations, Duty, and Obligation.

By now I can feel some of you rolling your eyes and uttering four lettered monosyllables, having already decided you'll read no further. You've decided that it's not worth your time because I'm one of those guys who always go by the book. You're probably one of the people who snigger whenever someone tries to improve things by offering suggestions for further safety improvement.

Well, here's the thing. I don't care.

What I'm trying to do here is give a wake-up call to every one of us that straps on a rig and leaps out of an aeroplane. And I'm doing it because I'm sick of hearing that someone just died doing what I love.

Rules - laws, systems, procedures

Regulations - guidelines, principles, protocols, conventions

Obligation - responsibility, onus, legal contract

Duty - something that must be done because of a legal or moral contract

Think about those words. They're **NOT** words used in our sport because someone wants to make your life miserable. They're **NOT** words designed to truss you up in so much red tape that you need a chainsaw to cut yourself free before you can have a jump. They are simple words that every person in our sport should embrace, for without them our sport regresses, and more people die.

Words like *systems, principles, onus and moral contract* may be meaningless to some skydivers, but to me they are the glue that binds the sport together.

Think about your first jump course. How many times did you practice your systems? Your whole training revolved around having a systematic approach to both learning and action. Aircraft exit, free fall, deployment, canopy flight, emergency procedures, circuits, landings. Without a systematic approach to each of these phases of learning your chance of becoming a statistic increased.

Principles apply in both senses of the word, meaning your own personal ideals, standards and behaviours as well as those principles involved in the regulation of our sport. We write guidelines and apply certain conventions and protocols to ensure everyone involved in the sport knows the difference between what is right and expected and what is not, yet how often do we hear the bush lawyers twist and reinterpret the Op Regs to suit themselves. Yes, the Op Regs can be convoluted and open to interpretation, but I bet there's not

one skydiver out there who doesn't know the APF's true intentions. Simplify it and think of it this way – all they're asking is for us to do things safely. All we need is to be principled in everything we do.

The Code of Ethics should mean something to each of us.

The *onus* is on every one of us to engage in our sport in the safest manner possible, and if that means you have to sit on the ground because you don't hold the requisite certificate or meet the eligibility criteria for a certain jump then so be it. You may think you can handle a canopy half the size of the one you're on now but why hurry? What if you have to land it downwind, unexpectedly, for the first time, in a small space? You may feel confident about flying your canopy when the winds are howling, but what if it goes wrong? If your first mistake could be your last then why the hurry?

And *moral contract* - now there's a term. We sign a contract when we start skydiving, but I'm not talking about the official paperwork you might have signed at any stage of your career, or the legal disclaimer that every drop zone makes you sign if you want to join the sport. The contract I'm talking about is the one that bestows upon each and every one of us a duty, not only to ourselves, but to the girl sitting next to you in the aeroplane, to the guy packing his parachute on the grass in front of you, and to the visiting tandem passenger who's about to have his first ever jump.

It should not be an onerous task to walk up to a fellow skydiver and offer a word of caution when the turbulence is kicking off or when the cloud base is dropping. It shouldn't be an issue for an experienced jumper to introduce herself to a novice, have some friendly chitchat with him, and then ask whether he saw the canopy he cut off on his final turn.

It should be an automatic response from every one of us to be willing to go up to someone and ask the questions that need asking. We shouldn't have to be afraid to speak up when we see or hear something that is obviously not right, even if we are not Sky Gods. We have a DUTY to act upon anything we see or hear or read if that thing is likely to lead to an incident or an accident. We must grab these people and lead them to an understanding of the risks they're exposing themselves and others to by doing what they're doing.

Over the years I've been witness to a lot of crap in this sport. Let me share some of the things I've seen and heard, and perhaps it might give you some idea of why I've felt so compelled to write this piece.

Fatalities and major accidents

Beautiful people I've known who have died or been maimed in the last six years. It has been a shocking time of late, with four skydivers dead in the last month alone, but there have been many deaths that seem incomprehensible considering the experience levels of those involved. Senseless deaths that leave great voids in the lives of those people who are left behind. I've attended too many funerals and I am running out of tears.

Some will say that in a sport such as ours a certain number of fatalities are acceptable. I disagree. A certain number of deaths are inevitable, as with any high-risk venture, but just because something is inevitable it shouldn't mean we abandon attempts at mitigation and simply accept it.

Tandems

Tandem Masters who treat their paying passengers like crap, oblivious to the concept of professionalism. They exhibit no enthusiasm during gear-up, they hold no conversation on the ride to height, and they even fall asleep on the way up because they had too much of a good time the night before. After landing I hear some TMs badgering their passengers into buying the video they shot "just in case".

Tandem passengers are technically *students* and potentially our sport's future, so how hard can it be to show some common courtesy and a bit of interest, and not simply treat them like a commodity?

Sky Gods

Skydivers who think that because they have five million jumps they can treat everyone else like crap. Yes, you are exceptionally experienced, but no, you do not have the right to speak to me like I am something stuck to the bottom of your shoe when all I'm doing is asking a question, making a suggestion or simply doing my job. Civility and respect, that's what I give to you, and that's all I ask in return.

Tutors

Experienced jumpers in positions of trust, yet there are some in our sport to whom the rules and regulations are anathema - something to be ignored or circumvented at every opportunity in the name of being a "cool dude". Post-jumping bar conversation is often quite insightful when listening to fellow skydivers discussing tutors in derogatory terms, often stating publicly that so-and-so will kill someone one day because they don't look out for the people they're tutoring and are only interested in money or their own status.

Instructors

Unfortunately we have those who always talk down to their students, almost like they're saying, *"I'm a Sky God, and you are nothing"*. They're either burnt out or only in it for the perceived status, free jumps or to make pocket-money, having long forgotten why they became instructors in the first place. Their logbook comments reflect this apathy when they write one-word entries that give no meaningful insight for the next poor bastard that takes that student into free fall.

Perhaps they should go back and read Claude Gillard's words in the Parachute Instructor Manual. Let me give two quotes from his Foreword:

"But to balance the pleasures and status that come with being a parachute instructor there are the responsibilities. As an instructor of ab-initio students you have considerable influence on their future behaviour, safety and attitude. If you impart a wholesome and safe attitude you will never need to question your conscience, but if you impart an attitude of "she's right mate" and "anything goes" you may someday feel guilt for your contribution to a fatal accident"

and

"You have only succeeded in your task when your students have become safe and competent parachutists"

Sage words indeed.

Canopy Piloting

On almost every load there are skydivers under canopy approaching the landing area in a completely ad hoc fashion, displaying no sign of a planned circuit.

Qantas pilots fly circuits. Private pilots fly circuits. Glider pilots and ultralight pilots fly circuits too. Why do these pilots fly circuits? Because it provides predictability, that's why - some measure of order and confidence in what the guy in front of you is going to do next. Once you're under a canopy you are a *pilot*, and you are *flying* your canopy all the way to a full-stop landing.

And if you're going to swoop the pond then don't do it after a four-way from 14,000 feet; do a hop'n'pop instead, and that way everyone knows what you're doing and you won't endanger that student engrossed with his first unassisted landing.

Off DZ landings

People trying to stretch their glide back to the DZ only to finally realise that they're not going to make it, and then performing a hurried landing into whatever's below. This often results in downwind landings into rocks or fences, or low-level hook turns into the ground. Don't believe me? Read the incident reports in Australian Skydiving Magazine (ASM) and be enlightened.

As a gliding instructor one of my responsibilities was to take prospective cross-country pilots for outlanding practice, and this achieved a number of things. Firstly it made them more relaxed about the thought of landing away from the aerodrome, and secondly it reinforced in them the need to make decisions early to ensure they had everything they needed below them when it counted. No sudden changes of mind, no second-guessing. Just a simple "I'm at 2,000 feet so it's time to pick a landing area".

We used a mnemonic to ensure we'd picked a safe area - WSSSOS, which stands for Wind, Size, Shape, Slope, Obstructions, Stock, the six things you needed to check before deciding to land a glider in that paddock. I still use it now under canopy whenever I land off DZ, because it makes the whole thing a structured, planned approach.

Skydive Planning

I was always told "plan the dive, dive the plan", and it makes sense to adhere to this simple process, yet I often hear people in the plane changing the jump they'd dirt dived on the ground. Why complicate things? Keep it simple and that way everyone knows what to expect during the jump. Have a plan in case the base doesn't build, or someone doesn't get into the formation, and don't change it at the three-minute light or even worse, during freefall, because that's just a recipe for disaster.

Equipment and Emplaning

Look closely and you'll often see the very best skydivers this country has produced walk to the aeroplane with their leg straps dangling behind them and their chest-straps undone. Why? Do they think it looks cool? What's going on? Is it that their equipment is so uncomfortable that they can't bear to have it fitted correctly until they must board the aircraft? Or are they saying "I'm so amazingly awesome that I can leave it to the very last second before I wear my gear in a jumpable configuration?" Who are they showing off to? Students? They're new and impressionable skydivers who know very little about the sport, hardly the right group to try to impress don't you think?

You might just have them thinking, *"yeah, I wanna be that cool one day"*, but there's also a chance you might be setting them up to be yet another statistic.

Breaching Op Regs

I was the only instructor on a load where three guys were going to do hop'n'pops when I noticed one young bloke wasn't wearing an altimeter. I asked him where it was, and he replied, "I forgot it", so I told him to land in the aircraft. He argued that it was legal to do a hop'n'pop without an altimeter because it was only a short free fall, so I then asked him to show me his written authorization from the ASO as was required under the Op Regs at the time. Obviously he couldn't.

A couple of the experienced jumpers then got involved and told me to not be a prick and let him jump. I wouldn't.

If it happens again I'll do the same thing, because someone has to take responsibility.

Gear sales

Equipment sold to the ill-informed by the unscrupulous. People treating their fellow skydivers as clearing houses for their out-of-date gear, or selling gear that's well beyond the skill level of the person buying. People treating their friends as customers.

Caveat Emptor **DOES NOT APPLY** in skydiving. If you are selling something to someone the onus is on **YOU** to make sure it's the right gear for them, not the other way around.

The Books

When was the last time you read the Op Regs, Dual Square report or any other of the publications on offer on the APF website. There are many opportunities to refresh your memory, especially when the weather's crappy, so why not do it? You never know when you'll discover some gem that might just save your life.

In skydiving short cuts can be a fatal, yet I find it amazing that so many people are willing to take this approach. Downsizing at the earliest opportunity, circumventing regulations, participating in jumps that are way beyond their level of expertise, not being up front about their qualifications if it might mean they can't be on a particular jump, swooping the pond in a last-second decision to try to look cool, or trying to do a bit of ad hoc CRW with a mate without any prior warning or training.

If you're not willing to put in the effort then perhaps this isn't a sport for you. There is no easy way to advance here, you just have to do the jumps and gain the experience.

Read the incident and accident reports in ASM or on other online sites - there are plenty out there. By doing so you will see that even people with thousands of jumps kill and injure themselves with frightening regularity, sometimes due to complacency, but often because they made a last-second decision to do something out of the ordinary, something they hadn't planned and practiced.

Don't deviate from established malfunction emergency procedures – they're tried and tested and proven to be the best solution to your problem. The wrong time to improvise is ten seconds from impact.

Read up on canopy handling, because statistically that's where you're going to get into trouble nowadays. Do a canopy-handling course, check out the manufacturer's websites, or read your fellow skydiver's theses on the APF website. Read le Blanc's stuff. There's a mountain of information available at the click of a mouse button, and in skydiving, too much information is never enough.

Don't get onto the aeroplane until you know exactly who is doing what and in what order. Check the windsock for landing direction before you climb aboard. Know everyone's opening heights and intended flight paths. As your canopy opens be ready to steer away from other canopies, and when you're stowing your slider or undoing your wings make sure you keep your head on a swivel.

Look **BEFORE** you turn.

Scan your fellow skydiver's gear when you're riding to height. You never know when you might save someone's life by noticing that a something has been incorrectly connected. I've only found two chest straps undone so far, but on both occasions the person involved didn't mind me telling them. I also know of a student who thought something looked amiss with an experienced skydiver's three ring attachment. He was right, a Bendix tube had been misrouted through the rings after a rigger had performed a reserve repack. This then raised another issue - the rig's owner had not pre-flighted the rig before emplaning.

And keep your own gear in excellent working order - its cheap insurance to replace a worn part before it becomes dangerous.

If you're tracking make sure you know how to navigate so you don't end up tracking back into other groups.

Issue #63, Vol 5 2012 of ASM's *Safety Matters* section (pp66/67) tells a chilling story of an F-Certificate jumper falling through the canopy of another skydiver who lost his way and tracked back towards an AFF group.

Don't be in a hurry to downsize or to swoop. There's plenty of time to do the cool stuff.

Get lots of experience before you fit a camera to your helmet. The Op Regs give you the minimum requirements to be allowed to do certain things, but it doesn't mean you'll be ready at those minima. GoPros may be small but when your pilot chute bridle is wrapped around them they can really ruin your day.

And trying to look cool by not wearing a helmet might be trendy, but how can you be sure the next landing isn't the one where you land off, fall over and smack your head on a rock? Or perhaps cop a boot in the head on exit. Do you really want to find out the hard way?

Take care when packing. Don't rush it. Replace your closing loop or rubber bands if they're dodgy and take the time to untwist your brake lines. Check that the pilot chute's cocked, and then check it again after you've closed the container. Then get someone to check it again before you leave the plane. Believe it or not I found a veteran skydiver's pilot chute was not cocked correctly, and this was after the three-minute light came on and I asked him if he wanted me to check his pins. He landed in the plane.

Perhaps think twice about leaving your gear on the floor after your last jump because the bell just rang and there's a free beer to be had. *"I'll pack it later"* might turn out to be a bad idea, especially if you've 'had a few' or are hung over, or even worse, you jump it after your drunken mates packed it for you.

Run through your emergency procedures on **each and every jump**, and always jump with the attitude that the next jump is the one on which you're going to have a malfunction. Systems work, even more so when practiced.

The same applies to your landings. Expect the next one to be the one where a PLR will be needed. Practice them... often. It's amazing how many experienced jumpers disappear when I ask for volunteers to demonstrate a PLR for my first jump course students. Those that do offer their services invariably learn something because the last time they practiced was on their own first jump course, often many years ago.

Folks, all of this is stuff you already know but have either forgotten or for some reason have chosen to ignore. Many people have said it here on Skysurfer or in ASM articles, and no doubt you've heard it from people on the ground at your own DZs.

We simply can't continue with the "she'll be right" attitude, for that is an attitude with only one outcome. The culture amongst our skydiving fraternity must start changing for the better and it must change soon. Moreover the change must come from within, or it will be forced upon us from without. If you think there's too much regulation now then you're in for a huge shock, because if we don't fix it ourselves someone else will, and that will see our relatively self-governed sport become regulated beyond recognition.

Each of us needs to take a long hard look in the mirror and decide what it is we're doing in this sport. There are as many reasons for jumping out of an aeroplane as there are people jumping, but I'd like to know that the person sitting next to me on jump run has thought it through, not only for their safety but for mine too.

Sure, the CI and DZSO have to carry out their responsibilities, for they are the ones tasked with running the practical side of day-to-day operations, but they can't be everywhere and see everything all the time. We can all help in the safe running of a drop zone.

***Personal responsibility* is needed NOW.**

Like I said before - I've attended too many funerals, and I am running out of tears.