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# Dirt Dive This

BY IAN DRENNAN

**T**he dirt dive: something every skydiver has been a part of. Whether it's a first-time jumper receiving a tandem briefing moments before boarding the airplane or a seasoned RW veteran preparing for "the" jump at Nationals, the dirt dive is an example of our inherent need as skydivers to plan out, practice and know what to expect on each and every jump. Not a bad idea, considering that when we gear up, it's with the intention of throwing ourselves towards the earth at 120+ MPH. Even a solo jumper dirt dives. It may be a mental rundown of the intended jump on the way to altitude, but it's a dirt dive nonetheless. Whether the planned dive works out or not is a different issue. The point is, there is a plan. If things start deviating from that plan, a jumper can either decide to stick with the circus and see what happens, or bail.

What happens if things start deviating from the plan under canopy? How will you know if anything's hitting the fan if you don't have a plan to begin with?

The typical dirt dive covers the time from exit to tracking, or roughly 45 seconds. The average skydive lasts four minutes. How many jumpers do you know who dirt dive their landing? Landing pattern? Where they will fly and what they will do until they reach the altitude at which they will enter that landing pattern? Your response doesn't count if you are a "canopy pilot." The reality is that most jumpers consider the skydive complete once they have a parachute inflated overhead. Canopy flight is simply a means to get to the ground so they can prepare for the next jump.

Let's get to the root of the problem: Most people don't get into the sport for the canopy flight. Rather, they are intrigued by the rush associated with hurtling toward the ground and—bonus!—there is a brief parachute ride afterward, an opportunity to let their stomach descend from their throat, their heart rate to return to normal, and their friends to hear

them shouting at the top of their lungs about how awesome the freefall was. Didn't anyone mention that the vast majority of injuries and fatalities occur under canopy? It takes quite a number of jumps for that reality to set in. By the time a licensed skydiver appreciates the danger of the canopy flight itself, they're typically convinced that they've come this far and don't need any further instruction, unless they want to swoop at some point.

Fortunately, there has been a recent movement to provide essential canopy skills to skydivers of all levels. Scott Miller, a name synonymous with canopy flight education, laid much of the groundwork for the cultural shift that now recognizes the importance of essential flying skills. A desire to swoop or become a competitive canopy pilot is no longer the only reason for taking a canopy course. An A-license jumper just coming off student status can share a classroom with an AFF instructor for one simple reason: There are fundamental skills that we as skydivers have the responsibility to possess. This is not only for our own safety, but for the safety of everyone we share the sky with.

These essential skills classes are not as rudimentary as you might think. You won't be taught what a toggle is, or what to do if your end cells don't collapse within 2.3 seconds. You won't spend the day identifying all the "oh shit" situations your canopy can get you into, or what to do about them. You *will* learn and test the capabilities and limitations of your current canopy (which flies a lot differently than the student boat you learned canopy skills on) and yourself as a pilot (who flies a lot different than the student who learned canopy skills). You will learn the mechanics of canopy flight and the ability to safely land your parachute, should you find yourself in a less-than-optimal situation. Above all, you will leave the class with the skills to fly and land your parachute in a safe, predictable manner—including dirt diving every landing pattern from now on.

Of course, there are advanced courses for learning to swoop, either casually or competitively, as well as one-on-one coaching for the more competition-minded pilot.

In this sport, we should be constantly improving our skills. Whether learning to sit fly, putting a random team together for a local competition or perfecting the final point on the way to gold at Nationals, each jump offers an opportunity to learn and to build a more solid set of skills. I challenge YOU to think outside your normal skydiving box and look to the ground, rather than the sky, for your next set of improvements. Whether you are an A-license jumper looking to build confidence under canopy, an AFF instructor who hopes to pass the most current knowledge along to our newest jumpers, a D-license jumper who simply wants a different (yet safe) rush when it comes to landing, or a swooper taking the next step to becoming a competitive canopy pilot, there is a canopy course out there for you.

So, no excuses! It's as easy as a quick phone call or e-mail to bring a reputable instructor to your drop zone and make the skies safer for us all. If you still aren't convinced, then read the latest and greatest incident reports from the United States Parachute Association or your country's association. Canopy collision related deaths are on the rise; the sad reality is that the vast majority of those incidents could have been avoided if we all spent just a little more time dirt diving our canopy flight and landing patterns. 🚀

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Ian Drennan is a PD Factory Team canopy pilot and Flight-1 canopy skills instructor who has lost good friends to canopy collisions.  
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