

# No Excitement Without Fear

*Brian Cunningham*



*Airborne!*

*Photo Cunningham collection*

I'm not sure when I first realised that in my case there's no excitement without fear, but nowadays it seems to be truer than ever. However, it's all about getting the excitement/fear balance right. Too much fear, i.e. terror, and the excitement is swamped, leaving me a trembling wreck. No fear, i.e. no perception of risk, and there's none of the delicious tingle that reminds me I'm alive.

I've found this approach works for me. My first motorbike was purchased before I could ride a bike. I remember the day as if it was yesterday. It was the mid-90s and we were living in Denver, Colorado. I was mowing the lawn when it hit me that I'd wanted to own a motorbike for my entire life. I was 52. Time was running out. It was now or never. And Christine was back in the UK...

I phoned a friend who had nine motorbikes: 'Kevin, I want to buy a motorbike.' I said, breathlessly.

'Fine. Let me know when you want to go looking and we'll make a day of it.' He replied.

'I mean now, right now, I want to buy a motorbike now!' I could hear the words almost as if someone else was saying them. It was as though they'd spent years bottled up inside me just waiting to escape. I was very afraid that the moment would pass and I might change my mind.

'OK. I'll be right round.' He said, sensing the urgency.

Ten minutes later we were in his car heading for the strip and the lawn remained half-finished. The first dealership we came to was BMW. As we pulled in I spied a gleaming naked roadster on a stand near the car park.

'That's it!' I said, 'I want that bike.'

'But Brian, surely you want to look at the other brands before you make your mind up?'

'Nope. That's the one.'

Within seconds the salesman was on the spot extolling the virtues of the bike. I barely heard a word. There was desperation in my voice 'You don't need to SELL me this bike. I WANT it - now. How much is it?'

'\$10,000.' He replied.

'Done.' I said and that was it.

On the way home in the car Kevin gently asked me if I'd told Christine. I hadn't.

'Here's what I'd do.' he said 'Take the Jesuit approach and beg for forgiveness, not permission.'

It worked. A month later I picked up the bike, having passed both my US driver's license and the mandatory motorcycle safety course. The ride home truly was a white-knuckle ride. My fear was palpable but oh what excitement! A few months later, at the end of our time in Denver, I rode it across to San Francisco and shipped it back to the UK. For many years afterwards I was half-man, half-motorbike.

When I was 67 I felt the itch to take up kite-surfing. Remembering my in-off-the-deep-end approach I bought two kites, a board and a harness and then spent several years trying to learn how to use them. It was very difficult. Had I not bought the kit up-front I'd almost certainly have given it up. Owning the gear definitely stiffened my resolve. Now passably competent, kite-surfing is constantly thrilling. Always on the brink of a wipe-out, it is a near perfect balance between excitement and fear.

At 73 I thought it was time to scratch another long-term itch - paragliding. Once again, I decided to go straight in off the deep end and I signed up for a two-week course with a paragliding school in Switzerland. Based on their recommendations I straightaway bought a wing, harness and reserve parachute. Then I began polling my friends to see if one or more of them were interested in joining me on the course. I received every excuse under the sun from 'I'm doing my hair that day.' to 'I think that's the day I wash the car.'

The first two days of the course were spent on a gentle gradient learning how to launch the wing by running down the slope. Normally I'm not a good student, but on this occasion I listened very carefully to the instructor. The cost of failure in this sport is quite high. At the end of each run we had to collect the wing and trudge back to the top of the slope to repeat the process. It was exhausting work, but by the end of day two I had a fair idea of how to launch the wing.

On day three we awakened to rain and low cloud so the morning was spent doing theory. At around 3pm there was a break in the weather and we were bundled into the minibus and taken up the mountain to an alarmingly steep field about 1,200m above the landing spot. It was only then that the reality of my situation hit me. I'd assumed that we'd do a tandem flight with one of the instructors before taking the plunge but no; this was to be our inaugural flight.

We prepared our wings, laying them out with great care, making sure that our lines weren't tangled and checking the buckles etc. By the time the three of us were ready to launch, I was a nervous wreck. The first student got the instruction to go and she set off down the slope. As her wing rose it began to slew to the right and the tip tucked alarmingly under the wing. An accident looked inevitable. Just then I heard the instructor call out on the radio 'Abort! Abort!' and with remarkable presence of mind she yanked the right-hand brake hard and swerved back into the hill. She was fortunate not to injure herself but the incident left my knees shaking so hard I could barely stand.

'OK Brian, ready to go?' Came the steady voice of the instructor on my radio. No longer really in control of either my voice or my limbs I nodded dumbly.

'Just remember your training and wait until you feel the breeze on your face before launching. Go when you're ready.'

I did a final check of my lines and buckles, checked my airspace to make sure there were no other flying objects in the vicinity, felt the breeze on my face and sprinted down the slope as hard as my wobbly legs would carry me. The few seconds before take-off were interminable and I will remember them for a long time, but the rush of euphoria on becoming safely airborne was one of the most intense experiences of my life. There I was, sitting in a deck-chair, floating in the sky almost a mile above the valley bottom. It was surreal.

A minute later the radio crackled 'Hi Brian, this is Stu at the landing spot, you're doing great. I'm going to talk you down, but before that I'd like you to a couple of exercises.'

Less than ten minutes later I was on the ground and still in one piece. I missed the landing spot by a few metres but landed safely in a sublime meadow of waist-deep grass and wild flowers. It was a moment of sweet contentment. I knew that if I never flew again, this experience was worth every penny I'd spent on the course and the equipment.

After that we flew a dozen more times, launching from higher up the mountain and spending longer and longer in the air. Under radio instruction we did many exercises, all of which reassured me that the beginner wing I'd bought was the most docile and forgiving wing imaginable. However, the thrill of taking off and within seconds the incredible feeling of soaring a mile above the valley bottom never diminished.

Two weeks later I left Le Chable with my Club Pilot License, some amazing memories, renewed self-esteem and a stronger conviction than ever that for me, there really is no excitement without fear.