

AIRPROX REPORT No 2010147

Date/Time: 26 Sep 2010 (Sunday) 1028Z

Position: 5041N 00403W (Corn Ridge Near Oakhampton)

Airspace: Lon FIR (Class: G)

Reporting Ac Reported Ac

Type: Paragliders x 3 EC145

Operator: Civ Pte Civ Pol

Alt/FL: 500ft agl 1500ft
(RPS/QNH & RA)

Weather: VMC NR VMC NR

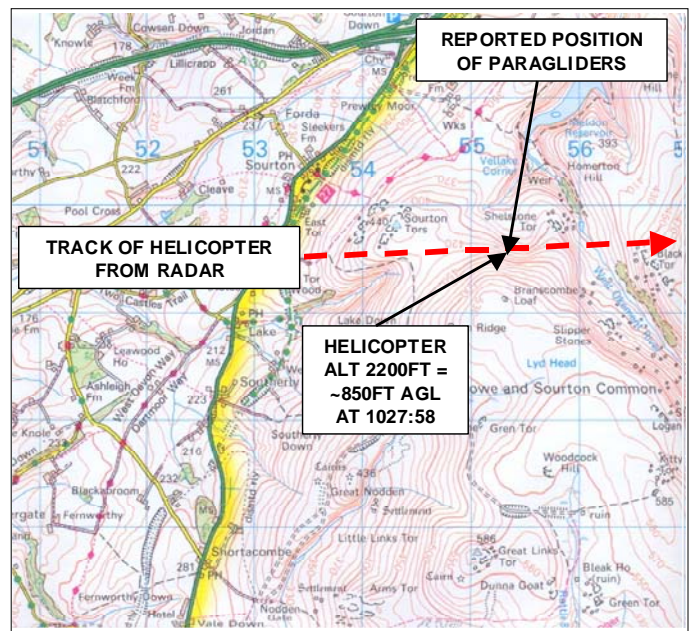
Visibility: NR >10km

Reported Separation:

200ft V/0 H 500ft V/1nm H

Recorded Separation:

NR



PART A: SUMMARY OF INFORMATION REPORTED TO UKAB

THE PARAGLIDER PILOT reported (2 reports were received but 3 paragliders were involved) that he was flying a multi-coloured paraglider at a local flying site with 2 other paraglider pilots. One had climbed to around 500ft above the hill [ground] and 200ft out from the ridge, another was around 100ft behind at a similar height and the third was 300ft to the W also at a similar height; all were ridge soaring at about 12kt. The first and second pilots both saw a blue and yellow police helicopter about 1nm away to the SW at about 700ft agl (i.e. 200ft above them) coming towards them. The helicopter continued on a straight and level course directly towards them and passed directly over them about 200ft above. The first pilot made large hand gestures to the helicopter pilot while the second made large turns, to show their position, but the helicopter took no evasive action or make any attempt to give them wider separation. The helicopter continued on his track towards Exeter without changing heading.

He pointed out that their ac are very delicate and do not react well to turbulent air and they consider themselves lucky to not have been affected by the downdraft. The first pilot assessed the risk of collision as being high and the second as low.

It was not possible for them to move quickly out of the way as, due to the wind speed on the day (12-18mph), they had very little ground speed and conducting emergency descents would have been dangerous at their low altitude.

THE EC145 PILOT reports recovering from the Padstow area to Exeter in a blue and yellow police helicopter, with all lights on, squawking 0032 with Mode C. At the time they were transferring from a BS with Newquay to Exeter, in the cruise heading 090° at 120kt, following a routine police task, in good VFR, when both he and the crew saw paragliders about 3km away on the windward slopes of Dartmoor near to Okehampton.

He conducted a gentle turn away and maintained 500ft vertical separation, thus ensuring that there was no risk of collision.

The paragliding was not NOTAMed on the day in that area, despite there being intense activity.

UKAB Note (1): The EC135 shows on the recording of the Burrington radar, squawking 0032 and tracking 085 at FL022 (QNH 1013mb - 2200ft amsl). The terrain in the area varies from ~500ft to the W rising to 2038ft just to the SE of the incident position; although the ground height varies considerably, the height in the area reported was 420m – 1380ft. The paragliders do not show at any time.

UKAB Note (2): The reported time of the incident was 1hr in error resulting in some confusion and a delay in obtaining the EC135 pilot's report.

THE BHPA comments that all the ac were being operated normally in Class G airspace. There is no requirement for this sort of paragliding activity to be NOTAMed, nor any method by which it could practically be NOTAMed. [See Part B]

With the helicopter pilot having the paragliders in sight the BHPA believes that there was no risk of collision, however, there was a risk from the helicopter-generated turbulence.

The BHPA understands that UKAB is charged with assessing only the risk of a collision between ac and not the risk associated with the effect of the helicopter's downwash on the paragliders.

Over the years there have been a number of helicopter/paraglider incidents the common feature of which has been the helicopter pilot's insistence that their downwash could not affect the paraglider. It seems that many pilots of powered ac are unaware that what they feel as a mild bump when crossing the wake of another ac (something most pilots have probably experienced) is sufficient to cause the total collapse of a paraglider - at 500ft agl this could well be fatal since there is insufficient time to recover or deploy a reserve parachute.

Over the years the BHPA has requested that the CAA consider research into the actual extent and possible effects of helicopter generated turbulence upon lightweight ac. These requests have been turned down. The BHPA believes that with the increase in both light-weight ac and helicopter activity over the last ten years it is unfortunately only a matter of time before there is a fatality, or serious accident, effectively caused by a helicopter pilot's lack of knowledge, knowledge which is currently not available.

PART B: SUMMARY OF THE BOARD'S DISCUSSIONS

Information available included reports from the pilots of both ac, radar recordings and a report from the BHPA.

Board Members were not able to reconcile the significant differences in the separation reported by the respective pilots. The Secretariat informed the board that the position of the incident reported by the Paraglider(s) was an accurate Latitude and Longitude, indicating that it had probably been GPS-derived and therefore, in their view, unlikely to be significantly in error. One Member however, pointed out that the pilot might have noted this position some time after the actual event. Although the radar-derived track of the helicopter was also accurate (within the limits of radar accuracy and plotting - say 200m) when the track and position were plotted the separation appeared to be closer to the distance estimated by the helicopter pilot than the paragliders. The reports provided by 2 of the paragliders indicated that there were at least 3 of them in the area but did not state the actual number in the area and Members agreed that there had most likely been more. The reports also stated that the paragliders were spread over an area of some hundred metres and that the pilots had made hand gestures at the Helicopter; Members reasoned that they would have been unlikely to have made hand gestures at the helicopter if it had been 1nm away, as reported by the helicopter pilot. As is usual in such cases of conflicting information Members placed equal weight on both reports but, since they were significantly differing, they sought a plausible explanation. A Member suggested that the helicopter pilot might have seen (and reported) other paragliders and estimated the separation from them; Members agreed that although this would provide a plausible explanation, it would not be possible to substantiate the theory. They also agreed that an experienced professional helicopter

pilot would not have deliberately flown 200ft directly over (or just upwind of) a paraglider, as he would almost certainly be aware of the hazard that would result from his flightpath. That being the case, Members agreed that the helicopter pilot had most likely not seen the reporting paragliders.

The DAP Advisor informed the Board that, contrary to the BHPA comment, it is straightforward to report such activity to AUS, for instance by mobile telephone, and for them to issue a NOTAM; he agreed however, that on some occasions, such NOTAMS might be promulgated too late for them to be effective.

The Board agreed that, since the helicopter pilot had not seen the Paragliders in his forward field of view above the ridge and there had been 200ft [reported by the paragliders] vertical separation, there had been no risk of collision.

PART C: ASSESSMENT OF CAUSE AND RISK

Cause: The EC145 pilot flew close enough to cause concern to a group of paragliders, some of which he may not have seen.

Degree of Risk: C.