

BRITISH PARACHUTE ASSOCIATION
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STATEMENT RE:- GROUNDING OF RESERVE PARACHUTES

The recent grounding of Invader reserves was initiated because of the suspicion that there might be a design or materials fault in these canopies. This was based on the investigations of the Danish Parachute Association following two fatalities where these type of reserves had failed under differing circumstances but had exhibited similar patterns of damage and materials failure.

The BPA came under considerable criticism for temporarily grounding these canopies pending further investigation. The reasons for doing so, however, were perfectly sound and the criticism which the BPA did attract was not half of what it would have done if a BPA member had been killed because the Association had done nothing.

Following the grounding of the parachutes, BPA officials were in touch with the Danish Authorities, the canopy Manufacturers, and Parachutes De France who were conducting tests on a canopy of identical construction. Apart from being in Denmark and meeting the officials who had directly investigated the fatalities, and also meeting the President of Parachutes De France and a representative of the manufacturers: subsequent international contact was maintained virtually on a daily basis on the telephone until the grounding was lifted. Nobody in this country, therefore, could claim to be better informed than the BPA.

It was particularly sad, therefore, to hear that criticism had come from some jumpers, riggers and dealers who were openly accusing the BPA of being over cautious and awkward.

The grounding has been lifted because the Parachutes De France tests subsequently indicated that this type of design meets commonly accepted modern standards and that the canopies concerned are no worse designed and constructed than other lightweight reserves on the market today.

It is interesting to note, however, that several large manufacturers are now paying close attention to design criteria for reserve canopies and particularly at the way in which Kevlar is used in their construction.

Lightweight reserves exist because there has been a market demand for lightweight kit generally, and that demand has been met. It is not irrational to suppose, however, that in meeting that demand a reasonable threshold of safety design may have been crossed. Under test conditions canopies may well perform acceptably, but perhaps little margin is left for what is needed to cope with unusual circumstances which only occur or are 'discovered' in the field by the customer. Hence the recent spate of groundings and modification recalls that seem to be dogging the reserve canopy industry at the moment.

If manufacturers had got it right then recalls or groundings would not be necessary. This does not mean that manufacturers do not do their utmost to try and get things right. As with any field they can only develop through experience.

However, to BPA members who have to listen to all the criticism and arguments which fly round in all directions I would say this.

The BPA is not a dark mysterious, bureaucracy. It is simply an organisation of people who use parachutes for fun. When the BPA initiates a grounding of equipment it is not done out of malice by desk bound officials who have nothing better to do than see what mischief they can get up to next. It is initiated by experienced skydivers who are concerned at preventing fatalities: and if someone tells you that a canopy must be safe just because it's got a TSO or because it worked last time he used it, and chooses to ignore the fact that other people have also been killed using it, then that person has either got a vested interest or is a bloody fool.

Furthermore if the BPA did not attempt to control standards or at least comment on them then such fools would be in a position to wreak even more havoc than they already do.

Tony Knight
CHAIRMAN, SAFETY AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

20th October 1988

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