

AIRPROX REPORT No 2014230

Date/Time: 14 Dec 2014 1222Z (Sunday)

Position: 5147N 00056W
(Aylesbury/Thame Gliding Site-
elevation 289ft)

Airspace: London FIR (Class: G)

Aircraft 1 Aircraft 2

Type: EC135 K13 Glider

Operator: HEMS Civ Trg

Alt/FL: 1500ft 820ft
QNH (1009hPa) NK

Conditions: VMC VMC

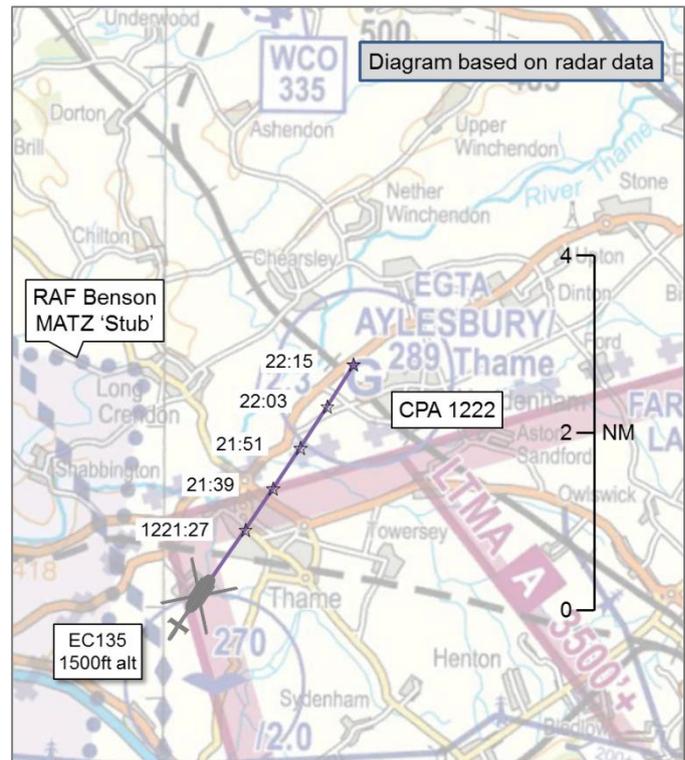
Visibility: >10km 20km

Reported Separation:

300ft V/NK H 150ft V/200m H

Recorded Separation:

NK



PART A: SUMMARY OF INFORMATION REPORTED TO UKAB

THE EUROCOPTER EC135 PILOT reports that his helicopter was coloured red and yellow; white HISLs, position and both landing lights were illuminated; SSR Modes A, C and S were selected; and it was not equipped with ACAS or TAS. He was operating VFR/VMC, in receipt of a Basic Service from Luton Approach, on a 'red' call to a serious incident in Bletchley under an 'Alpha' callsign. He established early that his track would cross the Gliding Site 'zone' and, on approaching the 'zone' he assumed that the site was inactive due to 40kt wind at altitude. Nothing was seen on the ground, and the winch beacon was not illuminated¹. No information was issued by Luton Approach regarding previous activity, so he made the decision to continue. However, approaching the overhead, a K13 glider was observed 12 o'clock low, climbing, still attached to the winch. No avoiding action was taken as the glider was spotted late and there would be no collision (but the risk of collision was high). He continued the transit, landed at Bletchley and made contact with the Gliding Site to offer apologies and accept full responsibility for the incident. He was distracted by the nature of the incident he was attending, allowing himself to be embroiled in operational discussions rather than concentrating on navigating.

He assessed the risk of collision as 'High'.

THE SCHLEICHER AS-K13 GLIDER PILOT reports that the glider had an orange fuselage, with white wings and tail-plane. No lights, transponder or FLARM was fitted. He was instructing, occupying the rear seat as is normal in this type of glider. The front seat was occupied by an experienced glider pilot who was being given continuation training. The pre-flight checks were completed normally, and the glider was winch-launched at 12:20 [from RW25]. The glider was in its normal very high nose-up attitude in the climb, climbing normally, when at 820ft the power reduced. The student immediately lowered the nose to regain flying speed. As the nose of the glider was lowered below the horizon he saw, for the first time, the Air Ambulance helicopter. It was about 150ft above the glider and 200m in front. Because the glider was now descending, no further avoiding action was taken. He could see the words 'Air Ambulance' and its red and yellow colouring very

¹ The Glider Site web page states that: 'There is a flashing light on the winch which is just visible from the launch point to tell you when the winch is in-gear'.

clearly as it passed. Had the launch continued, he believed that there was a very real risk of the glider or steel winch-cable making contact with the helicopter.

He assessed the risk of collision as 'High'.

THE GLIDER CLUB DEPUTY CHIEF FLYING INSTRUCTOR reports that he was operating the winch that was launching the glider. Due to the positioning of the winch, he was facing to the east. When the glider was at approximately 800ft the Emergency call 'STOP STOP STOP' was transmitted over the radio communication system. He immediately cut the power to stop the launch. At the same time as the call to stop the launch was made, he saw the helicopter for the first time. It came from over the top of the winch, on an approximate heading of 055°, at approximately 1000ft. The glider and helicopter were very close. At no time did he observe the helicopter pilot take any avoiding action. He then spoke to the launch controller, who was operating the radio from the launch point near where the glider had started its take-off roll. He stated that before giving the launch signal he checked the sky all around the airfield, both visually and audibly, there were no aircraft to be seen or heard. He therefore gave clearance to launch, and started the launch sequence. As the glider left the ground, a helicopter-like sound became apparent. Initially it was not visible to him as the noise was coming from the direction of the sun. When the helicopter was seen, it was low and approaching straight at the airfield and the launching glider. The 'STOP' command was immediately given and the helicopter passed over the airfield at a low altitude. Considering the direction the helicopter was approaching from and its speed, when he gave the 'OK' to launch, the helicopter would have been approximately 3nm from him and impossible to see at its low altitude and into sun. He thought also that, had the launch not been stopped, there was a very real risk of collision between the helicopter and the glider or the steel launching-cable. He reported the incident to the Group Supervisor at Swanwick ATC unit. 30min after the incident, the pilot of the helicopter telephoned him to apologise for the 'infringement'.

THE LUTON APPROACH RADAR CONTROLLER reports that she worked the Helimed helicopter provided a Basic Service and, as far as she was concerned, the flight was uneventful. About 30min later, she spoke to the Airports Supervisor, who advised he had received a telephone call from Aylesbury/Thame Gliding Centre. One of their gliders had had to take evasive action against a helicopter which was flying in their area of activity. She suggested it could be the Helimed as it was known to be in that area at the time.

Factual Background

The Luton and Benson weather was recorded as follows:

```
METAR EGGW 141220Z 21013KT 160V240 CAVOK 07/04 Q1010=
METAR EGUB 141250Z 20013KT 9999 FEW015 SCT040 BKN070 09/05 Q1010 BLU NOSIG
```

Analysis and Investigation

CAA ATSI

The Radar replay did not indicate any traffic in the vicinity of the Gliding Site, and the Airprox was therefore not visible on the radar recording.

The helicopter pilot was on a 'red call' to a serious incident in Bletchley. He called Luton Radar and a Basic Service was agreed. The helicopter pilot flew over Aylesbury/Thame Gliding Site within 1min of making contact with Luton Radar and being identified. The UK AIP details that Aylesbury/Thame Glider Site can be active at weekends and Public Holidays throughout daylight hours with an upper vertical limit of 2000ft².

² UK AIP ENR 5.5-7

UKAB Secretariat

Both pilots shared an equal responsibility to avoid collision and not to fly into such proximity as to create a danger of collision³. An aircraft operated on or in the vicinity of an aerodrome shall: (a) observe other aerodrome traffic for the purpose of avoiding collision; (b) conform with or avoid the pattern of traffic formed by other aircraft in operation⁴.

CAP 774 (UK Flight Information Services), Chapter 2 (Basic Service) states:

‘Pilots should not expect any form of traffic information from a controller, as there is no such obligation placed on the controller under a Basic Service, and the pilot remains responsible for collision avoidance at all times.’

CAP 493 (Manual of Air Traffic Services Part 1), Section 1 (Air Traffic Services), Chapter 4 (Control of Traffic), page 9 (Flight Priority Categories) states:

‘4.45 Controllers shall give priority to aircraft according to flight priority category ..., where category A is the highest priority and Z is the lowest priority.

4.47 It should be noted that these categories are designed for use as a method of tactical handling by ATC and not as flow control priorities.’

UKAB published guidance for avoiding Gliding Sites is as follows:

‘Gliders can be launched in very high wind speeds so it is unwise to assume the site is not launching just because other GA airfields in the area have ceased operations’.

Flight designation ‘category A’ does not afford prioritisation of routeing or right of way in Class G.

Summary

The Airprox occurred in Class G airspace overhead the Aylesbury/Thame Gliding Site. The EC135 pilot, under VFR in VMC, was operating a HEMS Category ‘A’ flight. He realised that his track would take him over the Gliding Site but did not believe that the site was active. However, approaching the overhead he saw a glider being winch-launched. He did not have time to take avoiding action but assessed there was not likely to be a collision although the risk was high. After the glider had been winch-launched the launch controller sighted the opposite direction EC135. An emergency stop signal was broadcast and the winch operator reduced power to stop the ascent. The glider pilot saw the EC135 as the nose of the glider was lowered below the horizon. He reported that it was about 150ft above the glider and 200m in front. The EC135 pilot reported the vertical distance as 300ft.

PART B: SUMMARY OF THE BOARD’S DISCUSSIONS

Information available included reports from both pilots and the Gliding Club concerned.

The Board first discussed the actions taken during the launch of the glider. The Board noted that when the launch signal had been given it was apparent that the ground crew would not have been able to see or hear the approaching helicopter (which was routeing to pass over the airfield at low-level). As soon as the helicopter had been seen, the launch controller had made an emergency stop call and the winch operator had immediately cut the power to stop the launch. The Board unanimously praised the alertness and prompt actions of the ground crew; it was agreed that it had been their timely actions that had prevented the possibility of a collision, especially given that the glider pilot had had no chance of seeing the helicopter until the nose of the glider had been lowered below the horizon. The Board commended the team’s actions to other gliding clubs as an example of the constant vigilance and readiness to react that was required during winch-launching operations.

³ SERA.3205 Proximity.

⁴ SERA.3225 Operation on and in the Vicinity of an Aerodrome.

Turning to the actions of the EC135 pilot, the Civil Helicopter Pilot member commented that, even though on an emergency call-out and as the pilot he had identified, he should have altered course to go round the promulgated Gliding Site. Having said that, he also noted the pilot's report stating that he had been distracted by the nature of the incident he had been attending; in this respect, the Board agreed that, in some mitigation, he would have had much to think about during his transit and the attendant navigational challenges in getting to his destination. Nevertheless, although the pilot reported that he had looked out for gliders as he approached the gliding site, the Board concluded that he had erroneously convinced himself that gliders would not be flying because of what he had believed was too strong a surface wind. Notwithstanding, and without diminishing the seriousness of the incident, the Board commended the pilot for his frank and honest report, and for his pro-active attempts to ensure that the gliding site concerned were contacted afterwards. It was clear that he was much chastened by the incident, and his willingness to participate in the Airprox process did him credit. Wider coverage of the event would help to stress to others the need for pilots to avoid overflying active and promulgated glider sites no matter if they considered weather conditions to be suitable or not.

Turning to the cause, the Board quickly decided that the EC135 pilot had flown through a promulgated and active gliding site and into conflict with the ASK13. With regard to risk, although it was apparent that the 2 aircraft had been very close to each other, the Board concluded that the actions taken by the launch crew had successfully prevented a collision. However, they considered that safety margins had been much reduced below the normal, and the Airprox was consequently assessed as risk Category B.

PART C: ASSESSMENT OF CAUSE AND RISK

Cause: The EC135 pilot flew through a promulgated and active gliding site and into conflict with the ASK13.

Degree of Risk: B.