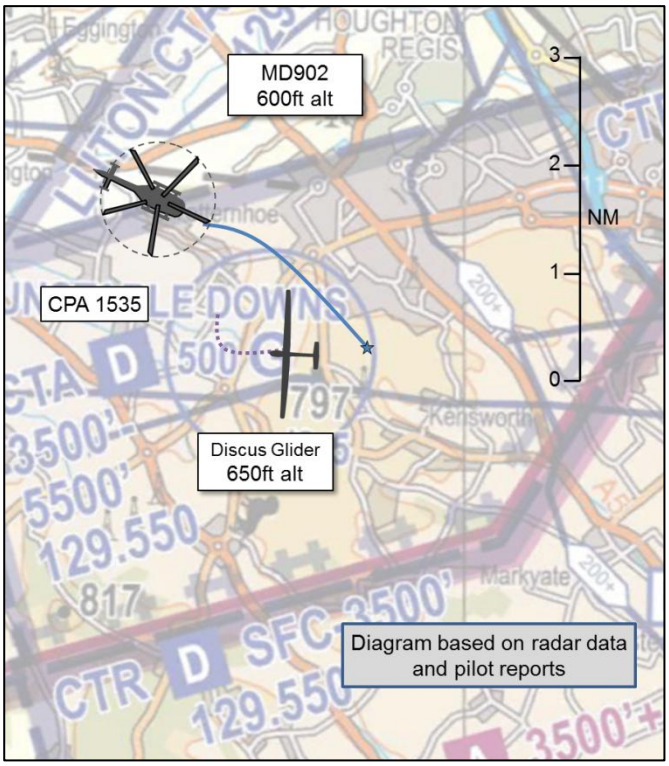
AIRPROX REPORT No 2015026

Date: 20 Mar 2015 Time: 1535Z Position: 5152N 00033W Location: Dunstable

PART A: SUMMARY OF INFORMATION REPORTED TO UKAB

Recorded	Aircraft 1	Aircraft 2
Aircraft	Discus B	MD902
Operator	Civ Pte	HEMS
Airspace	Lon FIR	Lon FIR
Class	G	G
Rules	VFR	VFR
Service	None	Basic
Provider	NA	Luton
Altitude/FL	650ft	600ft
ACAS/TAS	FLARM	TCAS I
Alert	N/A	Nil
Transponder	NA	Mode A, C, S
Reported		
Colours	White	White/Red
Lighting	Nil	Strobes, HISLs, Nav and landing
Conditions	VMC	VMC
Visibility	10km	>10km
Altitude/FL	650ft	600ft
Altimeter	QNH (1023hPa)	Rad Alt
Heading	100°	130°
Speed	100kt	110kt
Separation		
Reported	0ftV 500-700m H	100ftV 400m H
Recorded	NK	



THE DISCUS PILOT reports that he was conducting a winch launch from the west run. As he levelled off at approximately 650ft to release, he saw a red and white helicopter on a reciprocal course in his 2 o'clock, at the same height, and about 500-750m away. The helicopter immediately banked to its left, levelled off, and continued on its original course towards Luton Airport. The glider pilot then radioed a call to warn other gliders, and radioed the office to ask them to inform LATCC about the incident. Because there was reasonable separation between the two aircraft he turned right to take advantage of some perceptible lift. He noted that they had just changed from the NE run to the West run; had the launch been from the NE run the incident would have been much worse.

He assessed the risk of collision as 'High'.

THE MD902 PILOT reports flying back to North Weald from an RTA, his initial route was to route overhead Luton Airport; however, as he got closer, Luton Radar asked him to turn right and head further south to keep clear of traffic departing from Luton. He informed Luton that they would fly via VRP M1/J9 to keep clear. This he did, flying between Dunstable Downs G/S and Dunstable town; he saw 1 glider in the circuit, and remained visual with it as he passed to the southeast of the VRP. Luton radar had not given any information that there was flying activity at Dunstable and seemed happy with his routing. He did not receive a TCAS alert.

He assessed the risk of collision as 'None'.

Factual Background

The weather at Luton was recorded as:

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METAR EGGW 201450Z 36006KT 290V020 CAVOK 12/03 Q1025
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Analysis and Investigation

CAA ATSI

The Helimed helicopter was returning from the Leighton Buzzard area to North Weald and called Luton Approach for transit of the Luton CTR at 1542:20. A Basic Service was agreed. The pilot had intended to route via the Luton Airport overhead (this was approximately a direct track from his take off site to North Weald). However, as he approached Luton he was advised that, due to number of departures from RW26, this would not be available and was offered routing to the north or south. The pilot elected to track to the south (and west) of Luton to Junction 9 (A5) on the M1 motorway before setting course for North Weald. Various areas of controlled airspace are delegated to glider flying at Dunstable – on request - depending on the prevailing weather conditions and associated runway in use at Luton. When notified as active, the MATS part 2 requires controllers to provide Traffic Information on the activity, even when providing a Basic Service. However, the helicopter pilot was not advised of any activity at Dunstable Downs, although a radar review did not show any contacts in the Dunstable Downs area until after the Helicopter had transited. The helicopter pilot did observe a glider in the circuit which he remained visual with. The winch operator reported the helicopter was observed to turn right slightly – this was consistent with the right turn the pilot took to route further south. The Glider pilot reported the helicopter had passed approximately 500 to 750 metres away at the same height – approximately 650ft agl (c.1150ft amsl). Radar recordings showed the helicopter flying at approximately 1200ft.

Following this occurrence a Unit Safety Information Notice has been issued by the sector involved reminding controllers of their responsibilities when the airspace is delegated with regard the information about gliding as detailed in their local unit instructions.

UKAB Secretariat

Both pilots shared an equal responsibility for collision avoidance and not to operate in such proximity to other aircraft as to create a collision hazard[1]. 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 operation[2].

Dunstable Downs Glider Site is located to the south of Dunstable by approximately 500m between the Site boundary and the Town boundary as shown in the image.

[1] SERA.3205 Proximity.
[2] SERA.3225 Operation on and in the vicinity of an Aerodrome.

Comments

BGA

Gliders by nature normally fly a descending circuit pattern, so are more likely to be encountered below 1,000'AGL when close to the airfield. ATC radars do not pick up all gliders, so ATC cannot give complete traffic information, only that a particular area appears to be active. Also, launching may take place at any time without warning.

Summary

An Airprox was reported on 20th March at 1535 between a Discus glider and a Helimed MD902. The glider had just launched from Dunstable Downs and was levelling at 650ft. The MD902 was receiving a Basic Service from Luton and transiting at 600ft.

PART B: SUMMARY OF THE BOARD'S DISCUSSIONS

Information available consisted of reports from the pilots of both aircraft, transcripts of the relevant RT frequencies, radar photographs/video recordings, reports from the air traffic controllers involved and reports from the appropriate ATC and operating authorities.

The Board first looked at the actions of the MD902 pilot. Whilst accepting that the circle depicting the glider site on the charts was not an avoid, the Board noted that, nevertheless, it was there to remind pilots to keep clear of the site and to expect winch launches. There followed some discussion about whether a pilot following the edge of the town could be considered to have left a wide enough margin from the winch in the circumstances that pertained at Dunstable Downs. There were helicopter and glider members who were familiar with the site at Dunstable Downs, and the general consensus was that, although it was feasible to avoid the glider site itself by remaining close to Dunstable Town, it was a busy area with both glider and paraglider activity and that, in reality, with only 500m or so available gap, there wasn't really enough space to manoeuvre away without flying over the Town should the need arise. Although helimed helicopters had a general dispensation to permit flying over built-up areas, the Board were informed that pilots were instructed not to use this dispensation unless on operations, and therefore the pilot would have been reluctant to fly over Dunstable at 600ft.

Some members wondered whether the pilot could have called Dunstable Downs on their discrete frequency to advise of his routing, but it was agreed that this was only possible if the aircraft had a second radio because, within the CTR, Luton ATC would not have wanted the pilot to leave their frequency. The Board then noted that the Luton controller had not informed the pilot that the glider site was active, and that the pilot's original request to track overhead Luton would not have put him in the vicinity of the glider site at all. All of this had influenced the pilot into changing his routing and squeezing between the town and the glider site. Nevertheless, the Board agreed that the pilot should have expected that the site would be active, as it almost always was, and they opined that he might have been better served by routing to the west of the glider site, accepting that this would increase his track distance and therefore time to destination.

The Board noted that the Luton controller could not see the glider on his radar, and there then followed a discussion about glider conspicuity, a regular discussion at the UKAB. Glider members opined that even for gliders that had transponders, Luton ATC asked them to switch them off in order to avoid clutter within the CTR and triggering TCAS warnings with airliners flying overhead the site (especially during winch-launches which saw 45° climb angles with associated flight vectors that might impinge on airliner TCAS envelopes).

Ultimately, both pilots were visual with each other and, notwithstanding the glider pilot's comments about what might have been if the winch launch was in the other direction, the Board agreed that, for this incident, the cause was that the MD902 pilot had flown close enough to cause the Discus pilot concern; they assessed the risk as Category C, effective and timely action had been taken.

PART C: ASSESSMENT OF CAUSE AND RISK

Cause: The MD902 pilot flew close enough to cause the Discus pilot concern.

Degree of Risk: C.