

Parowan and Condor

What kind of title is ‘Parowan and Condor’? What do Parowan and Condor have in common? Well, the answer is that both Parowan and Condor have lots of mountains and both Parowan and Condor’s many mountain sceneries are ‘technical’ soaring sites, demanding specific skill sets and techniques in order to do well (or sometime, even to survive the experience!).

I’m writing this article from my trusty van at the 2010 Parowan Sports Class Nationals at the end of day 3. Today was a completely blue day, with high winds and broken thermals. In order to get around the task, a combination of ridge soaring, thermal soaring, and mountain soaring was required. The best and most reliable thermals were located on the highest ground, i.e. the mountain peaks, so the task involved getting from one mountain peak to the next, sort of like stepping stones across a creek. The idea was to reach the mountain just high enough to get that killer mountain thermal, ride it to well above the peak, and then move on to the next one. We were often working in close proximity to very steep mountainsides, sometimes several thousand feet below the top. As you might imagine, this can be pretty scary and intimidating for the uninitiated.

Well, I’m here to tell you that I count myself among the uninitiated, at least with respect to mountain flying in real life. I’ve never flown at Parowan (or any mountainous site, for that matter) before, and I’ve never flown at a site where oxygen is required. However, I **have** flown hundreds of hours in the mountains in Condor, and the ability to transfer skills from Condor to real life is what this article in particular, and Condor Corner in general, is all about.

Several times today, I found myself in situations that were completely new to me as a real life pilot, but very familiar from Condor. On the second leg, I was flying with another glider on a downwind run, approaching some fairly high peaks. Of course, we both wanted to get there as soon as possible, and to connect with the expected monster thermal as low as possible. I stopped a couple of times in relatively weak thermals, because I know from Condor that mountain thermals have a definite lower limit, and arriving at the mountain too low can mean the difference between a 10kt thermal for 4000’ and nothing, the other glider pressed on, and I watched it swoop up the side of the mountain, miss the thermal, and beat a hasty retreat away and around a lower flank. I arrived at the same place just a couple of hundred feet higher, and enjoyed a nice elevator ride to 14,000’. I would never had known to do that except for my Condor mountain flying time. On the last leg I was struggling home into a high headwind, along a line of low mountains with a few higher peaks. At one point, I was able to work my way up the side of a high peak by first working some lower outcroppings, and then along a ridge that connected the outcroppings to the central peak. This is something I have done literally hundreds of times in Condor, but never before in real life. I learned to do this the right way in Condor by doing it the wrong way many times, often to the point of wrecking my virtual glider. So, when faced with a similar situation for the first time in real life today at Parowan, I wasn’t completely clueless. I already knew that I couldn’t just run straight at the central

peak, because I would arrive too low to get into the main thermal, so first I had to work the lower outcroppings. I also knew to always have an ‘out’ available if plan A didn’t work out. And, of course I knew to be very careful about avoiding the lee side rotor when thermalling above the peak. Initially I had to do a few figure-8’s on the lower outcroppings until I was above the ridgeline (another lesson learned the hard way in Condor) and had sufficient clearance to circle.

In addition to the benefits of being able to practicing specific skill sets in a realistic environment where death is not forever, Condor can be very useful for area familiarization for a new site. Because I knew I was coming to Parowan this year for the SC Nationals, last winter I flew a number of tasks in a prototype Parowan scenery put together by Condor (and real life) ace competitor David Leonard (ZL). The prototype scenery didn’t have any roads, rivers, towns or anything else, and had only one airport (Parowan), but the topography was quite accurate. So, I looked at flight traces and tasks from a previous Parowan contest, and then flew these same tasks in the Parowan scenery in Condor. This gave me some rudimentary feel for the layout of the task area, and how to manage the downwind and upwind transitions from one mountain range to another. When I actually got here and took my first familiarization flight, I was able to quickly recognize the actual layout from my flights in Condor, giving me a degree of comfort I could not have gained any other way.

Condor isn’t the real thing, but it’s not a bad substitute, and skills learned in Condor do transfer to similar situations in real life. Of course, Condor doesn’t model a lot of real life weather, like rain showers and T-storms, and it doesn’t know about things like mid-valley convergences (another thing us flat-landers don’t do well), lake effect, etc.

As always, please feel free to contact me at ‘paynterf@gmail.com if you have questions or comments about this article, or would like to share your Condor experiences.

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