



Photo courtesy of Lionel Green.

// Lionel Green's gyrocopter was destroyed on impact.

THE VALUE OF PREPAREDNESS



When the worst happened, a personal locator beacon was just one tool in Lionel Green's 'should the worst happen' toolkit.

On 4 November 2021, gyrocopter pilot Lionel Green was flying towards Burkes Pass in South Canterbury, when he encountered “a gusty 45 kt wind and an extremely strong downdraught”.

Lionel turned back to Pukaki aerodrome but was unable to keep directional control and lift, and rapidly descended. “At one point we were losing over 1000 feet a minute”.

He flew the gyrocopter all the way to the ground, managing to avoid obstacles. The machine was destroyed in the ground impact, but amazingly, Lionel and his passenger, Glen, sustained only minor injuries.

After moving Glen safely away from the machine and making sure there was no risk presented by the site they'd ended up on – livestock or power lines, for instance – Lionel went looking for the personal locator beacon.

“I'd strapped it to the back of my seat, but it had been thrown out by the impact. Note to self, more secure strapping needed. Fortunately, it's brightly coloured and I found it lying on the ground about 30 metres away.”

He activated the still operating – and clearly robust – beacon and RCCNZ (Rescue Coordination Centre) leapt into action, immediately making the first of Lionel’s two listed ‘distress’ calls – to his wife, Rebecca. When they couldn’t get hold of her, they phoned his son, Anthony. “Is your dad likely to be flying today? Is he likely to be flying in the Burkes Pass area?”

Flight following

The reason RCCNZ staff couldn’t contact Rebecca was that she was already calling the police.

Lionel has the free but uncertified flight-following app, “Glympse”, that Rebecca checks in with every now and again to monitor his frequent trips – just checking where he is and how long it might be before he gets home.

During this flight she noticed that, unexpectedly, the aircraft was going more and more slowly, then doing some turns. Then it registered zero groundspeed.

She dialled 111.

“I like to have this flight-following app,” says Lionel. “Because the PLB has to be manually triggered and, if for some reason you can’t do that, it’s good to have this back-up.

“But I’d also never rely on this app alone. It does have its limitations and needs cellphone coverage, which can be patchy in more remote areas of the South Island. It’s no replacement for a certified flight-following service like the one supplied by Airways. I also can’t expect someone to be watching it constantly.

“So the PLB is an absolute necessity.”

Lionel says dealing with RCCNZ “humbled” him.

“It made me very proud to live in this country. Those guys at the rescue coordination centre do a fantastic job – their communication was a well-oiled machine.

“They had the rescue services on the way within minutes. Even an off-duty fire officer from Burkes Pass heard the call and drove over.

“Within 20 minutes we had fire, ambulance and police all with us.”

But the PLB and the flight-following app aren’t the only things Lionel has in his little case of ‘just in case’ support.

“I’d also spoken to the people at Pukaki airfield and told them what I was doing and my intended route.

“And I also have two other people that I always let know where I’m going, when I expect to get there, and my intended route.

“One of them is a helicopter pilot and the other is an Air New Zealand pilot. They take it quite seriously. I text, ‘Hey, I’m leaving Pukaki now’ and then I might be at the top of the mountains and send them a photo. “Hey, this is where I am now”, and then I’ll text them both when I land. If they haven’t heard from me within half an hour of my intended landing, they’re both on to me, ‘Hey, where are you, you okay?’”

That’s some system – doesn’t he feel sometimes he’s overdoing it a bit?

“No I don’t. I think it’s all part of good airmanship. You’ve got a responsibility to keep yourself safe and your passenger safe.

“What do I say to my passenger if they’re injured out in tiger country? ‘Oh, I’ve got no beacon and I haven’t told anyone where we were going and I haven’t told anyone what time to expect us back.’”

“You’ve also got responsibilities to the people looking for you, to make it as easy as possible and as risk-free as possible to find you.”

Lionel says his preparation made the RCCNZ job “quite straightforward” according to one officer.

“Without all that preparation and flight-following back-up, it might have been that night or the next morning before anyone found us. I know people have died waiting for help.” »



Photo courtesy of Lionel Green.

// Having a personal locator beacon meant help was with Lionel and his passenger within 20 minutes.

» Easy as

It may not be a legal requirement but having a PLB is, according to Lionel, a no-brainer.

“They’ve got a fantastic app to register the beacon,” he says.

“You can go in any time you like, edit it, update your details, change the distress call phone numbers, anything you like.”

In his methodical way, Lionel makes sure his details are kept current with beacons.org.nz.

“One of the RCCNZ guys was telling me that a PLB had been activated and when they rang the distress numbers listed by the beacon’s owner, it turns out the aircraft the beacon was registered to, had been sold six years earlier. The new owner had never re-registered it.

“What’s the point of having a beacon and uncurrent details?”

Lionel says that, at a bare minimum, pilots should let someone know what they’re doing, their destination, the route, and the time they expect to arrive.

“Then keep that line of communication open, especially if your plans change,” he advises.

He says he learned his own lesson some years back, when he told someone all those things, then, because it was such a beautiful day, changed his plans – without letting anyone know back at the base aerodrome.

“I returned later than I had anticipated to a very worried group. One was really distressed because she’d lost a family member in a flying accident some years before.

“That taught me the value of having all communication lines open – and a PLB.

“You never think you’ll ever have to use it – that’s how I felt, anyway. But I’m glad I have been prepared when the worst did happen.” ➤

// MORE READING

Read the *Vector Online* article "Overdue. Now what?" about RCCNZ's response in a search and rescue situation. Go to aviation.govt.nz/vector-online.

Comments or queries? Email vector@caa.govt.nz

THE PROPER USE OF s13A

Section 13a is a valuable emergency exemption from the rules – but it’s not an everyday operational tool.

The basics

In some emergencies, Section 13A of the Civil Aviation Act 1990 allows pilots-in-command and operators to breach civil aviation rules *but only* in the following circumstances:

- (1) People or essential supplies urgently need to be flown somewhere.
- (2) People and/or property are in danger and need to be protected.
- (3) You use s13A *only* for what is necessary to deal with the actual emergency. (For instance, if you breach the rules on minima to pick up a patient in cardiac arrest and deliver them to hospital, you can’t use the s13A exemption to fly back to base, still breaching the rules on minima, because that final leg is not part of dealing with the actual emergency.)