


**From:** rc@robcrimmins.com   
**Subject:** Skydive Chesapeake safety issues  
**Date:** April 13, 2021 at 5:27 PM  
**To:** safety@uspa.org



Ron Bell  
USPA Director of Safety and Training

re: Skydive Chesapeake safety

Mr. Bell,  
I was told by drop zone management on March 27, 2021 that an outline I wrote to our S&TAs detailing safety issues was sent to you on or around March 25th. As these are safety matters I'm afraid I must request they be resolved.

Judgement on the points raised require context that the outline doesn't provide. Originally the points that I raised were to be discussed and resolved internally and if that took place details pertaining to each issue would have been known by all parties or could have been discussed. Unfortunately that didn't occur. The attached letter provides the context that otherwise wouldn't have been necessary.

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April 13, 2021

Robert Crimmins  
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Ron Bell  
USPA Director of Safety and Training  
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re: Skydive Chesapeake Safety Issues

Dear Mr. Bell:

You will have already received an outline written by me of safety concerns at Skydive Chesapeake in Ridgely, Maryland.

In a meeting held with Ben Harris, Troy Drogemeyer (S&TA) and Chris Derbek, another partner in Skydive Chesapeake, on March 27th, Harris notified me that my outline was sent to you for your review. Presumably, that was done in order for you to support the S&TA's decision that the points I've raised will not effect the safety of flight or skydiving operations.

The outline was sent to the drop zone's Safety and Training Advisors, Troy Drogemeyer and John Williams on March 23, 2021. It was also sent to one of the dz owners, Ben Harris, because I'm told he intends to become an S&TA and he already holds the position, de facto.

The outline includes 16 items. Most of the points in the outline are minor, and some, in my opinion, are potentially serious. None specify that there are BSR or FAR violations. At most, they merely suggest that there may be.

Harris is aware of the context surrounding most of the points but it's probable that he hasn't provided that context to you. Some of the details and therefor context surrounding the events that have caused me to be concerned are unknown even to him or either of the two official S&TAs.

The day after my email of March 23, to which the outline was attached, Harris responded, "I shared this with John and Troy. Thanks for the input we'll talk more this weekend if you are around", so I planned to provide those details when we met to discuss the outline but in fact, he didn't care to know, nor did Drogemeyer.

**1. The important potential problems are:**

1.1 Absent S&TA

The second item in the outline, "2. Absent S&TA" simply states that our official safety officers are rarely at the drop zone. Drogemeyer has been there several times but there are months at a time when he is absent.

On March 20th he and my wife were watching a tandem instructor with a customer as they landed. She isn't a skydiver but she's seen thousands of landings so she comments when something doesn't look right to her. She asked Troy, as the S&TA, shouldn't he say something about what she took to be some flaw in the landing.

Troy told her that he wasn't an S&TA for the drop zone. In her opinion, he was emphatically rejecting the association. At the March 27th meeting he told me that he was kidding. It's a troubling joke and

there's no punch lines so it's not surprising that she took him seriously.

John Williams, the other S&TA listed by USPA, was at the drop zone the first weekend that it opened, which was the third weekend in August, 2020. I've been at the drop zone more than any other customer and I've not seen him there since.

## 1.2 Piloting skills

The Context of item "4.6 Aircraft Loading" is significant.

The first load in the drop zone's new aircraft, a Piper PA31-310 Navajo (N6719L), was on December 11, 2020. The ride to altitude was erratic and caused me to become airsick although none of the other jumpers suffered similarly.

On jump run the pilot became distracted with the in-flight door operation and lost control of the airplane. Everyone had pretty much the same reaction at that, extreme distress. All of us wanted nothing more than to get the jump over with. Of course, control was almost instantly recovered, otherwise you would already know of the fatal incident. Derbek, who owns the airplane, was on the load and when the plane rolled suddenly he shouted to the pilot in a loud and very urgent tone, "*Fly the f\_\_king airplane!!*"

Another incident, involving the same pilot, occurred on my second jump on March 20th. It too provides context. The manifest on that load included ten jumpers. There were two AFF instructors with a student. There were no tandems. With ten skydivers in the plane, one jumper has to sit in the co-pilot's seat. If not, when the last person climbs aboard, the aircraft pitches up and the tail can strike the ground. I was seated all the way forward with my back to the co-pilot seat. Five jumpers were on the starboard side of the aircraft which only had four seat belts. I tried to share my belt with another jumper but it was not long enough to do so.

Turning to my right gave me an unobstructed view of the pilot as he prepared to taxi. The jumper that was seated between my legs, the one with whom I was unable to share a seat belt, is a commercial pilot with a multi-engine rating and thousands of PIC hours. He was far enough forward to be able to speak to the pilot.

Once settled in, he turned to the pilot and said, "You'll have your hands full with an engine-out."

The pilot looked to him with worry, if not fear in his eyes and said something like, "... tell me about it."

It's the history with this pilot and that scene that inspired me to write the outline. Discussion with other pilots with multi-engine ratings in the meantime have indicated to me that flying that airplane under those conditions is potentially dangerous.

Derbek responded to the aircraft loading issue at the March 27 meeting by saying the placard on the aft bulkhead of the plane is not to be used for determining how the plane is loaded in our case. I told him that the table I included in the outline wasn't derived from the placard. The data was taken from published information on that aircraft model. To this day I'm not sure if anyone has reviewed my calculations. According to my table that aircraft could be overloaded. If so, the rate of climb could be less than the minimum allowed or the experience and degree of skill of the pilot may be inadequate. The concern alone should have been enough to review the figures but that simple courtesy hasn't been extended.

## 1.3 Intimidation of Complainants / Whistle Blowers

During the meeting on Saturday March 27, 2021 with Harris, Derbek and Drogemeyer I was told none of my concerns outlined in the document delivered to Harris, Drogemeyer and John Williams on March 23 were valid. That pronouncement came after a little over one minute of review of the document.

With that out of the way, Harris informed me that I was to be “suspended” from the drop zone for 30 days. I was also told that my services as a Coach and videographer would never be used, although I had been used as a Coach previously and had qualified for use as a videographer. I was also informed at that time that I would never be an AFF instructor on the drop zone. This is contrary to what I was told a few weeks before when I decided to pursue the rating. At that time I asked, if I was qualified, would the drop zone use me. The answer was yes so I asked if the drop zone would support an AFF class. On March 10 Harris posted a message on the Chesapeake Fun Jumpers Facebook page asking for interested candidates to take notice. This post was placed specifically at my request and in my presence on that date. Therefore, the offenses for which the suspension is supposedly imposed, according to Harris and Derbek, were committed either after March 10th or they occurred before that time and were not acted upon when they took place.

### 1.3.1 Ostensible Reason for “Suspension”

#### 1.3.1.1 Arguments with Staff

On Saturday, March 20, I jumped twice. On the first load four jumpers, three of which were in my group, landed off the field and had to be driven back to the drop zone. Bad spots and landing off is a safety concern listed in the outline. After this jump a staff member, a particularly gregarious and outspoken gentleman, who was not on the jump, noted that I was unhappy with the spot and announced to the room in general, in a loud voice, that I was wrong to complain. He then suggested that fifty years didn’t make me a “pro skydiver”, implying that I didn’t have the experience I claimed to have, and therefore, presumably, didn’t have the credentials or sufficient knowledge to express such a complaint. Naturally I sought to defend myself. Also on that date, and concerning the same jump, the Pilot asked me (I didn’t initiate the conversation) if the spot was good. I said it wasn’t and he and I retired to the classroom to discuss it behind closed doors. On the second jump of the day we had to go around so the spot was off then too. One of the drop zone managers, who is the third owner, asked me the same question. Unlike Derbek and Harris, this owner is not a skydiver or a pilot, yet he also contended that I was wrong to note that bad spots were still a problem even though they have been since the first weekend with our new airplane.

The Saturday of that weekend, December 12, 2020, jump run on the last load occurred near or after sunset and several jumpers landed off the field. My wife and I were among those who drove onto local farms to locate all jumpers, none of whom were found until well after dark. Since then I have landed off the field and other very experienced jumpers have landed off as well, some multiple times. In fact someone has landed off the field every weekend. I’m told that I’m the only one to have complained but even so, that doesn’t change the fact that it occurs much more than it should. This particular point of safety is the basis for the only times that I’ve had any interactions with Skydive Chesapeake Staff that have been anything other than cordial.

The supposed offense, one of several cited to justify the “suspension”, was simply that I was impolite, rude or hostile with a staff member. According to Harris the subject of those discussions or who initiated them had no bearing on the matter. He specifically said so. Neither Harris nor Derbeck were there that day so neither witnessed any of the interactions with any staff. Essentially my side of the story didn’t matter even though it was a matter of safety.

#### 1.3.1.2 Arguments with Customers / Other Jumpers

There have been no such incidents, in fact until now my wife and I are two of the best advocates

the drop zone has and the ones that many gravitate to due to our friendly natures. At the meeting where I was informed of the “suspension” my inquisitors refused to name who I supposedly offended or argued with.

#### 1. 3. 1. 3 Inappropriate or Rude Comments to Students

I have attended two first jump courses as required for the AFF Instructor Rating. Calls to the Skydive Chesapeake Instructor so I can make apologies, if appropriate, have not been returned despite detailed messages specifying the reason. Both of the first jump classes I attended to satisfy the AFF IR were held before March 10th when Harris made the Facebook post about the AFF IR class for my benefit. Whatever I did, had to have happened before that but since I’ve had no interaction with students since then. It’s utterly clear that this is a false accusation.

#### 1. 3. 1. 4 Sexual Harassment / Assault

This reason for “suspension” is the most serious, and yet it is ludicrous. Ben Harris and Chris Derbek, two of the three owners of Skydive Chesapeake informed me jointly at the March 27th meeting that the Naval Academy has complained that I have sexually harassed or assaulted (they weren’t clear on which) a Midshipman. The Naval Academy Parachute team has been contacted. Their team Captain has no knowledge of any such behavior or complaints against me of any kind. This is a lie and some kind of tactic to hurt or silence me. Defamation and slander are other applicable descriptions. At Safety Day on April 3rd, which I was not allowed to attend, Derbek amplified this defamatory accusation by abruptly announcing that sexual harassment will not be tolerated, without further comment. Given the circumstances I think it is necessary that he establish that he is specifically not referring to me. I sent him an email on April 6th insisting on it, to which he has not responded.

#### 1. 3. 1. 5 Conclusion as to the reason for suspension

The evidence of my offenses is either hearsay, false or non-existent. I believe they are thin smoke intended to obscure the important issue and to damage me so that the safety concerns I’ve posed can be discounted. The punishment imposed regarding the use of my Coach rating and any other ratings or qualifications is purely retaliatory.

I have no doubt that USPA will find at least some of the safety points that I have raised relevant and will therefor urge Derbek and Harris to apologize to me for raising them and being punished in the process.

Since the outline was submitted on March 23rd important changes to equipment and operations have been made. The first is an addition of at least one seat belt. Although Harris stated in the March 27th meeting that sharing seat belts is allowed, that practice is prohibited by FAR§ 91.107 (a) (3). In a call to John Williams on April 2, 2021 he informed me of that fact and cited the regulation. Williams attended Safety Day on the dz on April 3 and during his presentation at the event Harris informed the assembly that from then on, the Navajo would not fly with more than eight jumpers. To me, this is vindication that what I did was fruitful, even if none of the other points are valid. No one has thought to apologize or thank me. My suspension is still in effect.

#### 1. 4 Multiple Authorities present a significant safety issue

There are multiple conflicts of interest at Skydive Chesapeake. One has already been mentioned which is

the conflict between Ben Harris' business interest and his responsibilities to maintain safe operations as the de facto S&TA. The "not invented here" condition exists with Harris and Derbek and that principle conflicts with safe operations in general. Why else would a list of safety concerns be treated with disdain and then some of those concerns be implemented almost immediately?

The S&TAs at the drop zone are conflicted. The only concern of mine that Drogemeyer touched on tangentially was about his status as the S&TA. Otherwise he has deferred utterly to Harris and Derbek. Williams caused the seat belt issue to be addressed without acknowledgment of my role in the correction. Harris and Derbek refuse to consider minor items such as tripping hazards much less major items like seat belts and overloading.

The staff member that works for the airport owner permitted an unsafe event to take place because of his dual loyalties. That incident is detailed in outline item 5.

The conflicts between landlord and tenant are very troubling. The incident involving the staff member who works for the airport owner is a result of the landlord's ability to use the drop zone's building and facilities at will. Another such incident occurred on March 27th. On that day he caused the parachute landing area to be displaced to within proximity of power lines to accommodate an event he was holding. This is because Skydive Chesapeake either does not have a lease for the property or it has one that allows the landlord to do things that have a direct bearing on skydiving operations and even workplace safety. If it isn't a necessary condition already, USPA drop zone affiliation should require that skydiving operations and workplace safety be the sole responsibility and under the absolute control of the drop zone operator.

His actions and conflicts make the idea of appointing Harris as the drop zone's Safety and Training Advisor a very bad idea.

## 2. Conclusion

Naturally, I am quite disappointed that my efforts to improve conditions at the drop zone that is only minutes from my home and where I learned to skydive in 1975 have led to being ostracized. I am not sorry however.

In Harris' "formal letter of suspension" he wrote, "Our unique industry requires a certain degree of separation between operational matters and community involvement."

The sport parachuting industry is not unique in that it requires a certain degree of separation between its operational matters and its community. All industries have to maintain that. On the contrary, our industry is special in that it may be the one whose operations should be least separated from the community it serves. Skydiver's are responsible for their own safety so every drop zone's operations are very much a part of their community's business. Skydivers and operators depend on each other for everyone's safety and the further we're separated, and the more Skydive Chesapeake continues on their present course, the more likely it becomes that accidents will occur. I beseech the USPA to intervene to rectify what's occurring at this affiliate.

Sincerely yours,



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