

ESGC Launch Marshal: Guide

The reason for having a launch marshal

To improve the number of launches per hour.

The aim

The ideal mode of launching operations would be to have a glider ready and waiting, all checks completed, to receive a launch cable as soon as that cable becomes available. If we assume that two cables are normally drawn out from the winch, then there should be two gliders with pilots seated and preparing for launch as the tow-out vehicle is approaching the launch point, with the first closing the canopy and doing their final checks as it arrives, so that the cable can be walked to the glider and attached (almost) immediately. The second glider should be in a similarly prepared state so that a launch is possible as soon as the winch driver radios that they are "ready".

Why a launch marshal is needed

The majority of pilots do not anticipate their launch sufficiently. By the time they realise that they need to be preparing for flight it is too late, and so there is an inevitable delay whilst those preparations are made. That time is lost and might be used by someone else to launch into better weather, or to simply achieve a greater number of launches per day. The duty instructors are focussed on their current student and all aspects of flying operations in general, particularly the safe operation of the airfield. If they have just landed, instructors are unlikely to know the current status of the flying list or the preparedness of the pilots. The log keeper is in quite a good position to know how the operation is progressing but is preoccupied with the log, radios and visitors etc.. The gap can be filled by a launch marshal who takes list information and combines that with the individuals actually at the launch point, to assess who should be going next, and who should be following them; so they can prompt pilots by suggesting that their glider should be positioned behind this or that glider, and that they will then be number "x" (where "x" is 3, 4, 5 or 6 etc.) to launch. At the same time, if the pilots of the next 2 gliders to launch are not actively preparing for launch they can be reminded that "the cables are on their way".

What the launch marshal needs to do

The primary objective of a launch marshal is to try to achieve a launch whenever a cable becomes available by organising the launch point and pilots. This requires the pilots to be reminded (and chivvied where necessary) that they will be on the next (or next-but-one etc.) pair of cables, and that they should be ready and waiting for them. In order to do this, the launch marshal will need to monitor the flying list, so that they may inform the pilots that their launch will be available soon and that they (the pilot) should be ready for it. Similarly, student pilots may be informed that "their" two-seater is landing, and that they should retrieve it and effectively take possession of it as soon as possible, so that they and their instructor have briefed for their flight and are ready and waiting when a launch is available.

Whenever possible, a two-line launch queue will help, with the inside line usually populated by single-seat gliders and the two-seaters (which are frequently returning from training flights) joining the outside queue, but quite often you can expect these preferences not to be followed.

At least the next two gliders to be launched must be positioned ahead of the launch cabin, either level (wing tip to wing tip) with a few feet of separation, or staggered with wing spans overlapping, as appropriate for the launch point configuration (see the illustrations). If the first glider is then delayed in their flight preparation, the second glider can be (moved forward if necessary and)

launched almost immediately. If the first glider is still stalled in their preparations, the following glider in the other queue (number 4 in the illustrations) may be pulled forward and launched on the second cable; again, this is shown in illustrations. Of course, if it is the glider in the outside queue that is not ready to launch then the inner queue may be moved forward and launched in the same manner.

From this you can see that the pilots for 1 and 2 should be ready to launch when, or before, cables are available, and pilots for 3 and 4 should be nearly ready, in case their launch position is promoted, so it follows that pilots in positions 5 and 6 should be making their preparations for imminent flight too. The objective of the launch marshal should be to have all of the pilots for gliders 1 to 6 at an appropriate level of readiness, and to be filling the queues behind that as necessary.

On a busy day the first four, or possibly six, gliders may be positioned ahead of the launch point, so that the need to continually shuffle the gliders forward may be reduced. Their movement is then in batches of 4 or 6 rather than two at a time.

What the launch marshal does not need to do

It is important that pilots are not harried or hurried through their pre-flight checks, so if the launch marshal has got gliders (and pilots) 1 and 2 into position soon enough then their job is done, except when exceptional circumstances (unanticipated delays) occur. The launch marshal will more often be needed to organise pilots and gliders for positions 3, 4, 5 and 6, and to get the queues moved forward between pairs of cables. Obviously, if the pilots in positions 1 and 2 are not progressing through their pre-flight checks then they may be reminded that their launch is imminent. The launch marshal may help with attaching cables or signalling for a launch, but if they can delegate these tasks they will be able to concentrate on the following launches.

Necessary qualifications

The only necessity is for the launch marshal to have some common sense, and a reasonable understanding of airfield operations. This does not equate to any particular level of piloting skills or badge (licence) level.

Safety

The safe conduct of any flight is always the responsibility of the pilot. It is never necessary for anyone else to check the state of the glider prior to launch. Having said that, the launch marshal will be in a good position to notice unlatched canopies, brakes, or attached tail dollies; and may make a positive contribution to safety by their alertness. As previously mentioned, any glider launching should be ahead of the launch cabin and any other fixed obstructions; so buggys should be positioned behind the launch cabin and unused sand bags removed. Similarly, when a staggered launch pattern is set up, it should not be possible for the first glider to swing into contact with the second, so the possible path of its tailplane should be considered with respect to the wing of the second glider.

