

Two dead as paragliders collide at Torrey Pines in San Diego County

By PAULINE REPARD
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Reporting from San Diego —

Two paragliders were killed Saturday when they collided above the Torrey Pines Gliderport in the northern coastal area of San Diego County, authorities said.

The incident occurred around 2:40 p.m. at the popular cliff-side launching point off Torrey Pines Scenic Drive.

The two solo pilots crashed into each other about 35 feet in the air and plummeted onto the steep cliff face, about 45 feet below the top, San Diego lifeguard Lt. Rich Stropky said.

One of the men was certified to fly on his own; the other man was working on his certification, Stropky said, adding that it wasn't immediately clear to him which man was certified.

One man was believed to be 61 and the other man was 43, he said. One was from San Diego and the other from Orange County.

No further details about the pilots' identities were immediately available

The two men — one flying north, the other flying south — collided midair, then crashed into a north-facing cliff, stranding them in a precarious position.

Several witnesses called 911.

“When we arrived, we had no reason to believe the injuries were fatal,” Stropky said.

A San Diego Fire-Rescue Department helicopter assisted lifeguards by lowering medics onto the cliff face — a move that was faster than using ropes to rappel down the slippery sandstone gorges, the lifeguard supervisor said.

The helicopter ended up hoisting the bodies to the top of the cliff.

The gliderport was busy earlier in the day with dozens of onlookers and several paragliders soaring up and down the coast, over the cliffs.

Winds were 10 to 12 mph.

The flying spot is not meant for beginners. It is rated for intermediate pilots with a P3 rating who have 50 hours of experience, or for advanced pilots with an H4 rating. Anyone wishing to fly must check in with the gliderport operator and show a license.

The gliderport also offers a school, as well as tandem flights for nonpilots.

The gliderport was popular for sailplanes in the 1920s, radio-controlled model airplanes in the 1960s and hang gliders in the 1970s, before paragliding came into vogue in the 1980s.

Repard writes for the San Diego Union-Tribune.