



The Weight-Watcher's Guide to Paragliding – Part 2

Bob Drury reminisces on the early development of 'combos' - harness / rucksac combinations. Marcus King rounds up what's available ten years later in 2008

A decade ago I sat deep in conversation with Rob Whittall. We'd just come back from an expedition to the Himalayas, where both of us had failed to enjoy the cumbersome weights of the paraglider bags that had hung from our backs like Quasimodo's hump – ironically they even made us walk like him! We'd been humping (excuse the pun) 35 kg around in our unshapely, poorly designed sacks for days on end. It was agony. Clearly something had to give, and hopefully it wouldn't be our backs. We looked at what gear we could leave behind next time and realised we already had it down to the bare minimum. Lightweight fabrics hadn't reached the market yet, so losing much off the wings was out the question. Only one area of our kit stood loud and proud as the obvious place we could lose weight: our harnesses and bags. I mean, for a starter, surely we didn't need both?

Rob beavered away over the winter and ideas bounced back and forth until in the spring of 1999, when Rob unveiled his 'Transformer', a rucksac that turned into a harness. There were only ever two Transformers made, one for each of us for a trip across Nepal, however, I went on to use my Transformer on expeditions for years to come. Ok, at around 6 kg it was still pretty heavy, but it was voluminous enough to house a Nepalese family and strong enough to withstand a nuclear blast - the general abuse and wear and tear we gave them

as we dragged them around the globe never even touched them.

The Transformer worked by having a hinged seat plate that zipped into a compartment between the back system and the main chamber of the rucksac. The majority of the straps and buckles were attached to it. When in rucksac mode it worked fantastically as we had used as proper framed section from a rucksac, so carrying even heavy loads was as painless as could be. Once the seat plate came out and hooked into the shoulder straps, we had a standard harness with a monstrous rucksac stuck on the back. To finish the large rucksac hood came off, was stuffed full of sleeping bag and clipped under the seat to give some protection. The Transformer functioned fantastically and even had pockets within the back to stop stuff rolling around in flight.

Woefully, we never got around to ironing out the little glitches in the Transformer MKI and getting it into production, in fact the project never got any further than those original two prototypes.

Now however, the idea of the combo has finally caught on and many manufacturers are commercially producing them. Keen to look at what developments had been made in the ten years since we made the Transformer, we tracked down as many combos as we could find and, packing a standard medium sized Ozone Vulcan, we set out to try them all out.



CO CHAIRBAG

Like the Nervures Air Trek, this is a full harness. The harness is a standard geometry with a ply seat board – a lightweight carbon fibre board is optional. The harness incorporates the 'get-up' safety system, where the leg straps clip into and become part of the chest strap. Although this adds to the weight and complexity it means you can't forget to clip in your leg loops in. The harness comes equipped with reserve bridals and has Velcro bridal guides as well as speed bar holder and pulleys. Two side pockets are easy to access in flight.

The bag has one zipped opening up the middle. The harness again is adjustable in all directions and has a padded mesh back and a chest strap. Reflective stripes on the bag itself mean you will easily spotted on those late night return treks to civilisation or if walking at night in the X-Alps. The bag swallowed our test glider along with a helmet and had room for the reserve and some spare clothing making it another great choice for travelling.

The back protection uses a Cygnus system, which has replaceable battens, which APCO say improve inflation. The back part of the bag has a high cut to give protection to the neck area.

Always keen to address as much of the market as possible APCO have released three different models based on the same technology. The Classic and the Plus both weigh in at 2.5 kg and require either a side or front mounted reserve, and the Integral has an under seat reserve pocket making it even more 'normal' than any other combo. The downside is the weight increases to 2.9 kg.

Seat plate	Yes – plywood or carbon
Speed bar pulleys	Yes
Integral reserve	Yes
Airbag	Yes
Advertised Weight	2.5 – 2.9



CONCLUSION

The secret to buying the right harness is to match it as close as possible to your needs. If you are going to be carrying your flying kit up mountains and rock faces, and if a safe descent is more your concern than a long XC flight, then the split seat combo are a great option. However, once you start wanting to pack in the kilometres and use them as your main harness on a flying trip then you'll start to find them lacking: the split seats aren't that comfortable on long flights and the handling can be unnerving in strong thermals as your weight shift is more direct than with a seat board.

Once you introduce a seatboard you can find pretty standard harness handling out of all the models reviewed. All would be fine to fly long XC's on in strong air. Now it's just a matter of personalised comfort, and which particular features attract you.

One major point, as we found out, is that your choice of wing is very important. Lightweight gliders made from thinner tissues pack down far smaller than standard wings. We've managed to pack them down to around half the size of a normal wing, which is a massive saving in volume and precious space when using a small bag. In contrast a modern, medium-sized LTF 2 wing was a tight squeeze in most of these models with just a helmet and gloves. Whilst some companies like Nervures offer a fantastic complete lightweight kit or glider, combo and reserve, many of us still want to continue using our normal wings and enjoy the weight reduction of a combo. However, as it stands none of these combos were really up to the job of acting as a main harness if you were to need to carry much extra kit beyond helmet and gloves. If you were flying in a cold place you'd really struggle to get all your clothes most of them, and in some it

would be simply impossible.

More so, one of the major raison d'être of the combo harness has still not been properly addressed by the industry, that which the Transformer addressed so well, the expedition / travellers market. To carry enough vol bivouac equipment with a standard wing, or even enough of your possessions for a decent holiday, would be impossible with all of these harnesses. I took one away with me on a three week trip to America as part of the test and ended having to put it inside a standard glider bag so that I could carry the rest of my possessions on the plane! The answer must lie in a combo that allows the rucsac mode to offer 100 litres plus with an effective compression system to manage the load and stop it slipping – funnily enough, just like the Transformer Rob made ten years ago. With 100 litres plus, a combo can work for recreational pilots who don't want to change their wings, will still satisfy expedition and traveller pilots too. Manufacturers, we await your response. **XC**

