Taken from Rec.Aviation. Soaring posting by Ramy 10 June 2012.

Below are the pilot reports with their permission:

From Walter: Cirrus pilot

"<snip> After reaching 10,700 feet over Tuly Peak I headed upwind to work the Dog Skins ridge, I was loosing some altitude and went back to the Red Rocks

where several other gliders were also searching for lift. There was some turbulence but no good thermals to circle which caused most gliders to manouver around in search of lift. I was keeping track of the gliders in the area but suddenly at about 6,800 feet I felt a jolt and a loud noise as another glider I hadn't seen collided with me. The Cirrus immediately turned the nose down and at first it seemed I had lost control of the glider. During impact I hit and slightly cut my left leg against the instrument panel and my Oudie went flying. I could see a damage on the left wing but being around 2,000 feet over the ground and heading down with what seemed limited control I didn't think there was much time to try seeing if I could regain control. I decided to bail and was surprised I couldn't get the canopy to open (may have turned out to be my saving grace). I then focused on controlling the glider the best I could and head to a landing area. After getting the glider to level flight, I headed back towards the airport for a straight in landing on runway 21R since the main runway had a glider getting ready to take off. I made a call on the radio that I had an emergency and lowered and locked the landing gear. The landing was normal without incidents but there wasn't much height left. I had to wait for someone to come help me since I couldn't open the canopy from the inside as the back hinge had released but not the front part and it was stuck.

After talking to the other pilot Bill Johns (who used to be a fighter pilot) from BASA flying a Pegasus and hearing his account of the event, we hit pretty much head on, with him flying right over my canopy and his right wing hitting my left wing (I was in a gentle right bank and he was either flying straight or on a gentle right bank). He saw me about 1 second before impact and thought he was going to take my tail off, but fortunately he missed that. My wing was somewhat damaged but other than losing 80% of my left aileron and having parts of the fiber glass torn (see first 2 pictures), it was still flyable. After landing we noticed that the root of the Cirrus wing had signs of stress and damage as well. The Pegasus lost about 3-4 feet of his right wing tip and half of his right aileron (see 3rd picture). He didn't loose control of his glider and headed back to the airport, landing after me on the dirt next to runway 21L.

If we had been flying thermals in a gaggle or if we were all flying ridge it would have been simpler since we would be following a protocol. The instructor Mark said the thing he might have done differently was to leave the area since there were too many gliders flying in different patterns (some trying to find thermals, and some trying to fly the ridge). I understand that trying to see each other would have required a careful and lucky scanning of the horizon, but even so, I am not sure how easily we would have been able to see each other. A FLARM device sounds really good to me right now, as any indication of a likely collision, even if 3 or so seconds before impact would have prevented the accident."

From Bill: Pegasus pilot

"<snip> All ASI gliders were to be on 122.9, ASI frequency, so there was a lot of chatter to do with airfield activities as well as airborne gliders. I made an initial call that I was climbing over the Red Rocks, then monitored and did not hear reports by other gliders in my area. As it turned out, I wish I had been more proactive in providing and asking for other position reports.

At 2:46PM, as I headed westerly, wings level, at about 7000', another glider suddenly appeared from under my nose on the right side, very close aboard, and complete opposite direction, too close for me to react prior to impact. The impact was charactarized by a loud "bang" and perception of parts flying in my right peripheral vision. The Pegasus was unphased by this, though she lost about 2 feet of right wingtip and the outboard half of the aileron. I experienced no loss of control, and made a shallow turn to the right to look back for the other glider. Ailerons and parts were fluttering in the distance and the Cirrus was well below, but continuing in stable flight to the east. I made a call to Air Sailing informing them of the mid air, that both gliders appeared to be OK and we would be returning for emergency landing. I continued at altitude, following the Cirrus as he made a low, wide circling turn and lined up for 21R. Once he was down, I proceeded over the field at 6500', lowered the gear, checked spoilers and verified again that I had good control at pattern airspeed. I landed 21L uneventfully.

I think short of something like FLARM, the only thing which could have prevented this would have been better situational awareness of which other gliders were working in the same area. The conditions unknowingly put us each at the same altitude searching for lift, and nothing is harder to see than another glider head on. The other pilot reported he never saw me before, during or after the incident. Also, I learned after landing that he had lost control and attempted a bailout, had trouble opening his canopy release, so went to plan B and was able to recover the aircraft. We were no more than 1500' above the steep terrain at impact.

Both of us flew the next day and I had my best flight of the camp in the ASK-21 that Friday with Rob Stone. His comment...Bill's head was moving all the time...he sure was looking around!"

My conclusions after reviewing Walter's igc trace:

1 - Although the mid air happened at 2500 feet above the airport, they were only slightly more that 1000 feet above the hills below, probably too low to bailout successfully. the failure of the canopy release may have been indeed his saving grace.

2 - After the impact he dropped quickly and lost 2000 feet in one minute. Luckily the ground was dropping at the direction he was flying! He was only around 500 feet AGL after the first minute.

3 - The dive did not really slowed down much until the landing flare.

4 - The turn and the dive took him straight to the runway. He did not have time or altitude to land anywhere else. He was on the ground 2 min after impact.

None of them had flarm or pcas. Other then the obvious conclusion that flarm could have saved the day, another lesson is to check your canopy emergency release mechanism to make sure it works. Better scanning would have helped only if they knew exactly where to look at the right moment. Better radio communication as we often do in some places may have also helped preventing this accident.

I consider the results a miracle.

Ramy