

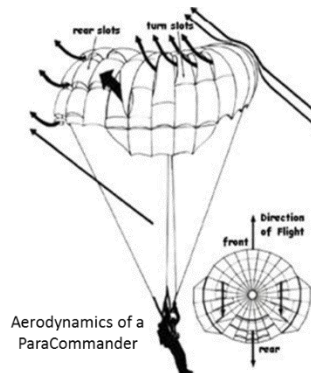
Pioneer and the Parachute that goes UP

By Jim Reuter, Pioneer Parachute historian

In the early 1960's, Pioneer created a new and profitable niche in the recreational market. It began when a Frenchman named Pierre Lemoigne visited Pioneer at the Forest Street plant. Lemoigne had developed a special parachute-like kite that was capable of lifting a person into the air when towed behind a car or boat. Pioneer bought the U.S. rights to this device, made improvements in its lateral stability (Who has not had their kite suddenly take a nose dive and hit the ground head-first?), and applied for patents of their own. They called it a "Para-sail" and put it on the market as a thrill-ride parachute that was towed by a boat and lifted a strapped-in person to more than sixty feet above the water. It became very popular at beach resorts and, when Pioneer moved to its new factory on Hale Road, the Parasail was in full production. The Gemini astronauts used Parasails to train for a parachute landing in the event they were forced to eject from the capsule. They were towed aloft over the water and then released from the tow rope for a free descent.



The Parasail led directly to the development of the Para Commander, a descending version which, because it glided at about a 45-degree angle and was steerable, became the number-one choice for sport parachutists for fifteen years or longer. Both the Parasail and the Para-Commander were manufactured with fabrics of many bright colors and patterns. On many days, the large, open production floor of the new plant on Hale Road would be as colorful as a circus.



In 1965 NASA was searching for a way to return the Gemini capsule over land instead of over the ocean. To avoid ground obstacles, this required a final-descent parachute that would both glide and be

steerable. Pioneer designed and tested very large versions of the Para-sail for this purpose. NASA made at least one test with a boiler-plate Gemini capsule. Video of this test is available in NASA archives.



80-ft diameter Parasail with
dummy Gemini spacecraft