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Flying high: German paraglider Gerry Mayr glides over Mount Cook yesterday.



Safe landing: Gerry Mayr back on the ground with his paraglider.

Paraglider thought he would die

John Keast Mount Cook

German powered-paraglider pilot Gerry Mayr cheated death over New Zealand's highest peak yesterday when a vicious spinning wind hurled him out of control and into freefall.

As Mayr, 42, fought to regain control of his tiny craft on the eastern side of Mount Cook, he thought he was going to die.

"It was like a big hand came over and said, 'Gerry, you're going down'," Mayr said. For up to 10 seconds, with his chute deflated, and the engine working hard in the thin air, Mayr was jerked like a rag doll by the rotor effect of the westerly wind.

"But then the chute filled with air again. It was frightening. It's my first mountain flight," Mayr said.

But just two hours after he took off at Fox Glacier on the West Coast, Mayr — out to do 40 sports in 40 days — touched down, to the mild surprise of staff, at Mount Cook Airport, with his 200cc engine all but out of fuel. "Perfect timing," he said.

Soon after taking off, Mayr said, he felt jittery as he reached altitude.

Photo: Steven Clarke

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