

My First Landout

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I was trying to accomplish the simple task of checking Australian glider pilot Jim Stanley out on the details of aerotow, which he hadn't done for a while, and refamiliarizing him with the Blanik. After completing the tow procedures we released in the wave at around 4000 feet and climbed slowly up to 8500. The view from there was breathtaking with towering cumulus clouds interlaced with delicate laminar veils from the various local waves and above it all stacks of long thin razor sharp stratospheric wave clouds high over the main mountain range to the east.

The westerly was becoming more humid so I kept an eye out for clouds developing below us. They are famous for closing-in quickly and obscuring all traces of the earth below. Experienced local pilots have found themselves with no clue as to where they were and been drifted downwind toward the mountains while trying to sort out how to fly blind in cloud. This was foremost in my mind even while shooting some pictures of another glider that came alongside. Every couple of minutes I pointed out to Jim how we were drifting or where we were in relation to the leading edge of the wave cloud below, giving him the opportunity to make some decisions as to where we should be. I waited to see what he would do, and he in turn was waiting for me to take charge. Soon, I decided it was time to get down without waiting. The large pie slice clear area of earth and sea below us was starting to close from the narrow end like the blades of a huge pair of scissors cutting us off from the airfield. We dove to the north along the beach with full airbrakes dropping fifteen hundred feet a minute and soon emerged over the Otaki River mouth nearly 20 kilometers north of the airfield at Paraparaumu. It was really quite fun and we had little concern for we were right over the Otaki airstrip and still had nearly 4000 feet on the altimeter.

The view to the south was not too promising. Seemingly everywhere was clouding-in and lowering, in grey and dismal contrast to the dazzling sunlit wonderland we had just escaped from. With the Otaki strip located I decided to head south a ways to see if we could make it to the Waikanae ridge which was just off to the left between us and our destination. We might be able to use the ridge to extend our glide further south. I knew there was a couple of good landing pastures at the base of the ridge. These were used often by gliders that "ran out of wind" and had been carefully pointed out to me during my local orientation flights. Just the day before I had zoomed blithely along above them in the tremendous lift next to the ridge.

The cloud base lowered rapidly as we flew south and we followed it down, heading for the north end of the ridge. I wanted to conserve altitude but we had to go nearly 100 knots to descend fast enough to stay out of the clouds. It was so loud in the cockpit that Jim and I had to shout to hear each other and I couldn't hear the radio at all though it was turned up full volume. I reported our situation to the glider base and flew on toward the ridge expecting some good lift any second. The ridge is about 6 kilometers long and nearly 2000 feet high. We arrived at the north end just below the crest and I took it in close waiting for the needle on the vertical speed indicator to swing to the UP half of

the scale. But, the needle just continued to hang unwaveringly on the DOWN half of the scale. This was disappointing but I continued south along the ridge toward the pastures near the far end hoping for some lift.

We were down to about 1500 feet when we hit a strong spike of lift right at the south end. I immediately slowed and started to work it, flying in close to the trees where it was strongest, and concentrating on maintaining safe speed and clearance while maneuvering. I was doubtful that even if we could climb to the top of the ridge that we would be able to fly the six or so kilometers back to the airfield. The cloud was even lower and darker that way so I kept my eye on the pastures at the base of the ridge. While soaring around in and out of the lift, hugging the contours of the slope, and wondering if those were trees or bushes just off the wing, I mentioned to Jim that I had seen someone do this very same thing a few days after I arrived in New Zealand. A radio call had come in to the base from a pilot low on the Waikanae Ridge and I had watched with binoculars as the glider crawled up the slope. At the time it had looked impossible and I thought the guy was pushing his luck. I didn't know about the pastures then though. Now it seemed a completely reasonable adventure and I was really relishing every second of it. Unfortunately, the lift just wasn't enough to help us climb. After a few minutes we had descended to 1400 and I decided to head for the pasture.

The pasture was divided up into three main parts. One was long but very narrow and bordered by big trees, the middle part was wide but had a fence across the middle. The third part was just right and I had been told it was the smoothest, flattest, best choice; used often and, I later learned, as recently as one hour ago by the president of the club. Flying over at 1000 feet I noted all these things and felt quite certain that I'd be best off sticking to the tried and true. During the fly around prior to starting the landing pattern I noticed something moving in the corner of the pasture near the end I wanted to touch down in. No, it was a BUNCH of somethings and they were moving WAY faster than any farm animals I've ever seen, zipping around like hyperactive microbes, twisting and turning, zigging and zagging, but more or less keeping to the end corner of the pasture.

Jim confirmed my observation that we had a pack of humans on motorbikes right where we needed to land in about one minute. Needless to say I became a little concerned at this point. I hoped they would see us but I knew they would never hear us over the din of their engines. I made one last call to the glider base, "Five Six, Kilo November going into the field at Waikanae" and went quickly through the landing check-list.

The westerly winds that create the fabulous ridge and wave soaring conditions here also demand extra attention during landings due to wind variability and turbulence. To compensate, one flies the landing with extra speed and stays very close and high until certain of making the landing area. I had been doing this the last couple days at the airport and appreciated it's effect.

So, I set the landing up accordingly and began the descent. If the motorcyclists got in the way I'd just have to divert to one of the other parts of the pasture and take my chances with the obstacles they had to offer. We continued to watch the motorcyclists during the

downwind and crosswind legs of the approach. I felt confident that I could drop in over them since they still seemed concentrated at the near end.

The wind I planned for didn't materialize and soon it was apparent that I was too fast and too high. As I turned onto final approach raindrops started smacking all over the canopy. I pulled on full airbrake and banked into a sideslip to increase our descent. The rain obscured the view out the front significantly and I strained to see the motorcyclists and fences. Fortunately, the shower lasted only seconds and as the first fence passed underneath I could see that the motorcyclists were all behind. The far fence was approaching fast but the glider was still flying. I forced it down on the ground but it was going too fast to stay down. Beyond the fence there was a house and trees directly ahead.

I've read in manuals and heard stories of what to do if you have to stop a glider in a hurry. It's called groundlooping. It's not something we practice because it can be a little hard on the glider and not a little frightening. The basic idea is that you intentionally bank the wing down till it touches the ground and drags the ship into an abrupt turn whereby it slides sideways to a halt. Dragging wings on the ground at high speed is something a pilot endeavors to avoid. It's kind of like poking yourself in the eye; one instinctively avoids doing it even without direct experience of its effect. It's easy to believe that it might have uncomfortable consequences. Well, it was clear that continuing on the course we were now on would definitely lead to consequences much more uncomfortable than a poke in the eye!

As the house loomed large in the windscreen I said to Jim, "Buddy, I'm gonna have to groundloop it" and brought the right wing down. The effect was marvelous! The glider immediately swung smoothly to the right and slid nicely along sideways for about 20 meters and stopped without the slightest lurch. I was astonished! We were still nearly FIFTY meters from the fence and house and trees. The glider which was blazing along to its destruction had stopped on a dime without the slightest damage to its self, the occupants, or anyone else. Jim and I climbed out in wonderment and were met with a buzzing brigade of tiny motorcyclists some of who looked no more than five years old. Boy oh boy were they excited to see us! They clamored to tell us how another glider had done just the same thing an hour or so earlier. We pointed to another glider that was due down in about thirty seconds and sent them racing out of the way to the side. One little guy struggled to restart his cycle, looking increasingly alarmed as he jumped on the starter.

After half a dozen frantic attempts we hauled him and his machine out of the way and watched the same glider that we had photographed in the wave half an hour ago make a perfect landing. While watching I noticed the rain shower we had flown through. It was a narrow silvery slip of a shower that couldn't have been more than a couple hundred meters wide clearly visible against the deep green of the forested ridge. It was the only rain we could see anywhere perfectly located on our final approach path!

Within twenty minutes the sun started peeking through the murk. Bo's truck with the glider trailer came through the gate and out hopped Tom, Les, Jaime, and George. We

were back to the airfield within an hour and had the glider reassembled, inspected, and ready to fly in another hour.

Later that evening Jim and I sat down for a serious debriefing session. There was no getting around the fact that our afternoon of high adventure was not only unusual for a check-out flight, it was riding the fine edge of disaster. The excitement of successfully achieving my first off-airport landing was diminished by the realization of how close I had come to seriously harming the glider and my student. Whenever a pilot gets into a situation where there's only one card left to play, then somewhere along the way the game wasn't played well. I hesitated just a few minutes too long before descending from the wave; might have been a better choice to stay around the Otaki airfield... I asked Jim to play instructor and critique his decisions and actions during the flight as well as an honest, no holds barred, critique of my decisions and actions. At this point Jim reluctantly admitted that he was, in fact, a fully qualified instructor! He said that he didn't want anyone to give him an easy time with the checkout procedures by assuming he knew what he was doing!

He remarked that today's flight was perhaps a little more involved than he'd expected but I assured him that there would be no further checkout requirements! We continued with a productive and thorough evaluation which only strengthened my feeling that Jim is the kind of guy anyone would be lucky to fly with.

I guess I did some things right and of course, luck played a major role. Jim deserves a medal for bravery, especially for that bit right at the end of the flight where I put the wing down and we became passengers. My thanks to the retrieve crew who seemed to me at the time like angels "coming for to carry me home". Funny what adrenalin does to a person.