

Mooove Over, Bessy!

LCdr. Ken Durbin

I was only slight left wing down and correcting on what was my best guess at final. I felt a little high-on-profile but wasn't sure. It was hard to tell exactly where I was because it was a grass field on Mustang Island, and I was attempting to land my newly acquired Eippformance Quick Silver ultralight aircraft.

It was my first landing in this single-seated flying machine and my fifth landing since I received abbreviated training in a loaner aircraft. I was completely on my own. No radios, no control tower, no asphalt, just me and a few sea gulls.

A farm road and high-voltage power lines bordered the field. To my novice eye, it looked like I was about to land a little long. As I approached midfield, I looked beyond the barn that sat at the end of the landing strip. There was a fence, a road, power lines, and sand dunes. It occurred to me, if I waited much longer to waveoff, I might be forced under the power lines and above the 15-foot sand dunes.

I had flown over the sand dunes earlier in the day and the thermals that rise off them tortured my ultralight aircraft and me. I decided to wave off and rolled the motor-

cycle-grip-accelerator to full power. My 30-hp, two-stroke engine, screamed back to life and drove my 36-inch, balsa-wood prop to its maximum rpm. I pulled back on the stick, started to climb, and then banked left. Since I was nose high and slight left wing down, I felt a gust of wind, or burble, that had risen over the dunes and barn in front of me. It hit my kite like a brick wall. I felt the aircraft pitch up and momentarily slow. I could feel the increased drag. I adjusted my pitch forward slightly to decrease the climb angle. It appeared to be only slight turbulence.

I was 45 degrees through my shallow turn, at about 350 feet, when it happened. The engine's whine increased to a screaming pitch, along with a corresponding increase in RPM. I felt no G-load increase. I looked at the engine block bolted to the root tube above me. There was no visible sign of failure, but I imagined the increased RPM wasn't a good thing. I looked over my shoulder at the prop—it was windmilling and provided nothing in the way of forward thrust. I rotated my twist grip to idle and rolled wings level.

I was going to land whether I wanted to or not. With a 7-to-1 glide ratio at 350 feet, I had about a half -mile until

I met turf. My instrumentation consisted of an altimeter on a string around my neck—it was flapping in the wind behind me. I wasn't sure of my altitude, and I didn't feel it was important to wrestle with the string behind me. Regardless of what the gauge around my neck might tell me, I was sure it wasn't enough for a 90-degree turn into the wind, let alone a 360. What I saw in front of me was what I got—and it wasn't good.

I was lined up for a crosswind landing and headed for the middle of a rather large gathering of “moo-moos.” With no airspeed indication, I was taught—as brief as my instruction was—that to avoid stall, I needed to keep the wings level on the horizon. To do so, I would look left and right to check that the wingtips were parallel with the visible horizon. It appeared that, unless I pulled back on the stick, I would hit one of those milk producers right in the nether regions. I started to yell as I approached them at about 50 feet.

Here is a data point for you. If you never have heard your voice change a few octaves as your adrenaline-filled vocal chords attempt to move grazing cattle, then I dare say, you cannot truly appreciate humility nor self-embarrassment. It was the most ridiculous thing I ever have

dipped to within two feet of the turf, and my left wheel rose off the ground as I balanced the aircraft on the nose and right landing gear. The balancing part sounds like skill—it was luck.

As I came into the wind, I centered the stick and rolled to a stop. The kite now rested in a huge muck puddle. My bovine friends hardly noticed the wide-eyed and trembling idiot who had just dropped into their pasture. I sat there for what was probably 15 minutes. I shut down the engine, climbed out, and looked back at the half-mile I would have to drag this cursed contraption to the barn. The dealer—my instructor—landed a few minutes later. I asked him if he would mind helping drag my flying machine to the barn. He rather gleefully explained I should fly it back. I mentioned something about his mental health and his genealogy, while he flew off to retrieve a wrench and a prop-drive belt. He returned and replaced the belt.

I waited until the shaking stopped, and my voice no longer sounded like Bobby Brady, before I strapped in. I pulled the start chord, and the engine whined back to life. I did fly it back and tucked it away.

What I appreciate most about this story is the simplicity of it. There is the simplicity of the guy (simpleton) who decides he is a pilot with inadequate training. There is the simplicity of design, with respect to that aircraft. Up until that flight, I didn't have any real emergency training. There was no discussion of engine failures or ripped sails. It made sense to me that I had to land; the absence of lift made that obvious. It also made sense to me that the engine could not sustain the high RPM for much longer. So I backed it to idle and decided to fix it on deck. The lack of sufficient altitude to turn into the wind alluded to a crosswind landing. The high crosswinds meant, once on the ground, I would have to get the aircraft pointed into the wind or I'd flip it like an excited cheerleader.

I preach basics during preflight briefs, and I try to drive them home during NATOPS checks. I explain the only time you may go wrong is when you try to communicate across species. Had my voice not cracked and had my bovine friends reacted to my cries that they disperse, I might have landed in a stampede. That would have completely changed the texture of this story. I've given up flying ultralight aircraft and now fly the SH-60B. So far, I haven't had to make any landings that might disturb grazing cattle. Knock on cow patties. 🐔

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heard and was the source of great disappointment when the out-of-body experience was over, and I recognized my voice. Evidently, the cows thought it ridiculous as well, for not one of them moved. In hindsight, that was fortunate, because I vertically cleared the last one by six feet.

Surprised by my good fortune, I almost forgot about making a crosswind landing in a 400-pound-motorized kite. As soon as the aft two wheels of my tricycle landing-gear touched earth, I pushed the stick hard right and completed a 90-degree turn into the wind. My right wing