

Farmer Fields Forever

By LtCol. Peyton DeHart, USMCR

*"Keep an eye out for enough
flat ground to swing blades*

*without hitting anything,"
I told the frontseater.*

“Lower...slower...land” (the helicopter pilot’s mantra when encountering lowering visibility and ceiling). Pulling collective and climbing into controlled airspace is one way to cope with impending IFR conditions. But, another way is to get closer to the ground, slow to compensate for degraded visibility, and land in a safe spot if the situation becomes untenable. Your current fuel state, possible destinations, crew configuration, or aircraft capabilities tend to dictate the smartest course of action.

At the end of a Boy Scout Jamboree static display, I grabbed my copilot and headed home under increasingly threatening skies. We hopped into the Cobra’s cockpit, made an impressive departure in front of the aspiring naval aviators, and climbed to FAA-legal altitude for our flight home. A number of miles passed under the nose as the aircraft brushed the bottom of the weather ceiling. Then, drizzle cut our visibility, and we slowed to avoid running into uncharted towers. We further were disconcerted to find the ceiling was on a slow slant toward intersecting the horizon. We descended when we had to, until we found ourselves at altitudes over the treetops and following roads.

We poked through promising paths of country roads and soon realized fuel loomed large on our list of concerns. What should we do about our fuel situation—land and wait out the weather, or find a place to sleep? The average warm front moves over the ground at 10 to 20 knots, and fast cold fronts push 25 to 30 knots, so most weather problems resolve themselves by the mere passage of time. You must be convinced you have time to wait for the weather to clear—trust me, you do.

When we had gone down a few roads and found further passage blocked by clouds that touched the treetops, our meandering through

the murk had ceased to be fun.

“Keep an eye out for enough flat ground to swing blades without hitting anything,” I told the frontseater.

“Does that count, ahead?” he responded.

“A baseball field—perfect. Little League won’t be playing in the rain today, anyway,” I said.

We flared, landed at the shortstop position, and shut down. Looking toward home plate, through the backstop fence and across the road, we spotted an unprepossessing storefront.

“Let’s walk across the street to whatever store that is because we’re going to fog up the inside of the cockpit sitting here,” I said.

We got out and walked over to what turned out to be Zeb’s Bar-B-Que.

“Might as well get some food and eat slowly; we’ll be here a while,” I offered.

I’m happy to report that Zeb and his kin make really fine barbeque, with a pepper-vinegar-based sauce. The meal and a lot of sweet iced tea occupied the balance of our afternoon. An hour before sunset, the no-go time, we called the weather folks, walked outside to verify the favorable forecast, and said goodbye to Zeb’s. We climbed into the Cobra and headed home to brightening skies.

I’ve landed in a few fields over the years, found great barbeque and beef on the hoof (in separate instances), and will make the next unplanned landing whenever weather dictates. That’s better than hitting trees, towers or terrain. 

LtCol. DeHart flies with the 4th MAW.

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