

Well, that did *not* go as planned.

Take-off in the 1-26 was straightforward. No issues at all. I even remembered to call out “200 feet” out loud. I got off tow at 3000 feet, northwest of the airport, with the airport in sight. Naturally, I found myself in 400 fpm sink, so nosed down a little to power through that, and in short order found exploitable lift. A few minutes later, I was back at 3000’ (AGL, 3400 indicated). I was feeling pretty good about my flight, but also thought that prevailing winds, which at take-off were pretty much across the runway (left cross-wind), would have taken me farther north and west, so I decided to head back in the general direction of the airfield.

The key point here is that I thought I knew where I was. I didn’t.

I recalled that the body of water to the west of Van Sant had a “pointer” that pointed back towards Van Sant, so I looked for that, and (again) thought that I saw it. In retrospect, I was either looking at the wrong “pointer”, or mother nature now has it pointing elsewhere. But I used that small inlet to guide where I looked for the airfield.

At this point, I had plenty of altitude to play with, and there was still lift to be exploited, so I wasn’t terribly concerned. I figured that by heading back in the generally correct direction, I would soon spot the airfield, and could then again go lift-hunting.

Between 3000’ and 2500’, I continued looking in the direction in which I expected to see Van Sant. A couple of times, I thought that I spotted it, a bit farther south than I would have thought, but I had plenty of altitude to get there. Turns out, it wasn’t Van Sant.

Between 2500’ and 2000’, I continued looking for Van Sant, but also came to recognize that I had better also start looking for alternate landing spots, just in case. I spotted several, one that looked particularly wide open and flat.

When I got down to 2000’ (indicated), I knew that I had to commit to landing, so abandoned looking for the airfield.

I had seen a pretty sizable, recently mowed field, adjacent to some tilled farm land. No power lines in sight. Trees, yes, but not terribly tall. I saw that I could land into the wind on this field, and so adjusted my pattern and did a right-hand landing pattern, touched down more or less where I had planned, and rolled out, stopping just a few feet into the tilled farmland.

Ok, now what? I have never landed out before, and I wasn’t entirely sure precisely where I was. First, I phoned Marty to let him know what had happened, that the plane was fine, and other than being embarrassed for losing the airfield, I was fine. Because the plane appeared not to have suffered any damage, I thought that perhaps we could get a tow plane to fly over and get me aloft and back to Van Sant, Marty spoke with Bar and John to find out if it was legal in PA to do an aero retrieve if the property owner said yes and if the field was found to be acceptable. They advised that this was possible.

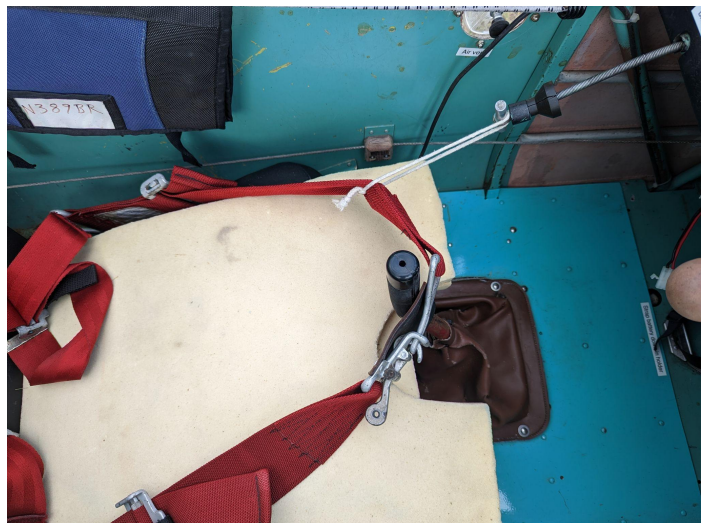
While Marty was working things through at Van Sant, I walked over to a nearby house. They were very nice, and let me know that they do not own the property where I had landed, but kindly drove me over to one of the owner's properties. There I got the phone number for the owner, and called him. His wife answered, and after a moment or two, she said that her husband would head over to the plane.

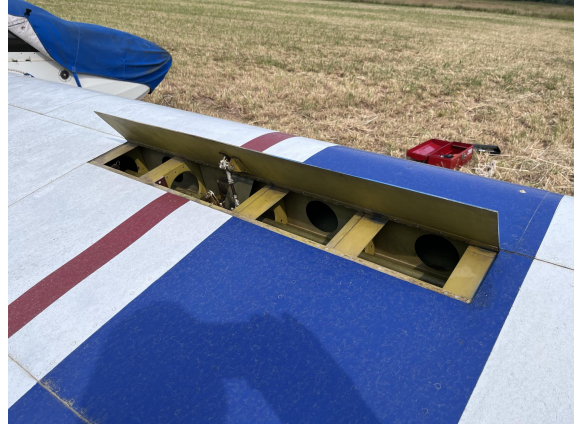
The owner could not have been more gracious. It turns out that the spot that I landed did no damage at all to his planted crops, and the mowed field was a hay field. The owner agreed to allow us to fly out of there if we felt it safe, if I signed something to absolve him of any liability.

As a result of Marty's discussions at Van Sant, two of our Van Sant tow pilots, John and Tom, came with Marty via car to the off-field landing site and Bar also flew overhead to assess the field. Based upon these findings the decision was unanimously made by the tow pilots, Marty, and me that an aero retrieve would not be possible because the field was too short for a safe aerotow.

The plan for retrieving the plane is now for me to call George Taylor tomorrow (Monday), to discuss plane retrieval.

Meanwhile, Marty and I collected some club tie-downs, 1-26 cover, rope, etc., and along with some very helpful screw-in tie-downs that Bar provided, anchored the wings, nose and tail, and improvised how to keep the dive brakes open as well as keeping the elevator secured. The plane seems pretty well secured, and we put its cover on as well. Also, we pointed it into the direction of the forecast winds.





I will work with George, keeping Marty et al informed along the way, and will assume responsibility for any costs incurred in retrieving the plane.

Looking back at this while it is still fresh, I can see that I went wrong by assuming that I knew my relative position to the airfield, *and did nothing to challenge that assumption* until it was too late to do so. At the first inclination that something did not look right, I should have flown in a gentle circle. I have no doubt that by doing so, I would have spotted the airfield, with plenty of altitude to carry on lift-seeking. By assuming that I knew in general where I would find the airfield, I looked broadly in the direction that I was flying, not realizing that the airfield was already behind me.

I will keep the club informed on next steps with plane retrieval, and of course will welcome anyone who cares to join the fun, to help in getting the plane on George's trailer or truck.

While I was obviously not happy about needing to land out, I can say that it was not remotely a panic-inducing experience. Had the terrain not been so congenial, though, I'm sure that I would feel differently about this. Once I committed to landing, having selected the field, the landing itself became neither difficult nor dangerous.

And if you are committed to landing out at some point, I encourage you to find a spot with an adjacent road, to make retrieval as easy as possible. We lucked out on that score here.



