

Landing on Ware Island – A report of poor judgment and safe decision making

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Today, I landed out, with Kai in the back of the Twin Astir, on Ware Island. I recon that the biggest mistake was to not be at top altitude when leaving the end of the cloud street and pushing towards fuzzy looking cumulus clouds near the river. The best decision I made was to stay close to an airstrip, that would allow a safe landing.

Here is how it happened:

After the initial setup of the flying gear and getting the Pawnee, Blanik and Twin Astir out, we ended up ready with the Twin first. The weather was fully developed with dream-like looking cumulus clouds and developing cloud streets southwest to northeast. We made the tow behind Russ at noon in the Pawnee and with his incredible instinct, he dropped us at 2500' MSL in a 5 knot lift - average! We were screaming with joy and left the first lift around 3500' MSL pushing towards the south to get in touch with the cloud street forming there.



No problem at all. The wind was at around 230 with 11 knots so we just delphined towards that direction following the cloud street. We continued straight and only circled, when the vario reached 5 or more knots, which happened twice before we were at the southwestern end of the cloud street.



By that time, Ware Island was our primary divert field about 3 NM west, with Chilton in the distance also visible already. My plan was to continue towards Chilton and make the turn there to go northeast following nice cloud streets developed there. The last good lift of the cloud street was passed by, in an effort to push out towards the river. There, the clouds were torn apart and not crisp at the corners anymore. In my joyous state, I missed that, so pressed on.



Immediately we encountered crazy downdraft, at times more than 6 kts on the compensated Cambridge 302. I pressed on for a few minutes hoping the flimsy cloud would indicate some form of lift, but it was just rough air going up with 4kts for 4 seconds and as soon as the big Twin started turning it would go down with 4-6 kts. After only a few minutes of trying, I headed back towards the last good lift, but by that time, we had lost almost a thousand feet and were in danger not reaching the airstrip again. There were no other landable options toward where the last lift was, so we turned towards Ware Island in the

direction of some more flimsy clouds. By the time we reached something resembling lift, we were down to 2000' MSL (about 1500-1000' AGL there and 1700' above Ware Island). I was able to take on the rough air and averaged about 1 kt up to 2700' MSL before that lift died off. I would have had to move towards the east, the unlandable terrain to get to better developed clouds, but every attempt made into that direction, we encountered a lot of sink and no usable lift. So back towards Ware Island, this time ending up at around 1700' MSL. Again I squeezed the stick and was able to get about a half knot, but this quickly died off. By now the wind was indicated at 235 at 18 knots. Not helping this close to the river. Well we got a good look at the dam and bridge and also the airstrip on the island in the river. After a few more minutes of trying, we made the decision to use the remaining altitude of 1500' MSL (about 1170' above the airstrip) to land at Ware Island. This allowed us to do an entire 360 around it and get a good check out of the strip and area leading into it. Due to the gusty wind conditions at altitude I consciously decided to come in fairly hot (70-75kts) and get across the river fairly steeply with a roundout between the trees, hopefully in calmer air. This worked out well, and I was able to place the Twin smack in the center and float to about midfield. We stopped right in front of the strips owner's hangar. His name is Dr. Richard Meyer.



After unstrapping we spoke with Dr. Meyer and informed him about our situation. I got in touch with Russ and Steve and we arranged for the pickup by towplane, which was graciously endorsed by Dr. Meyer. He was very kind, provided water, conversation and towing support, helping us with his golf cart, to get the Twin through the very wet grass strip to the northern end of the runway.



We briefed our tow out with Russ and had Dr. Meyer provide information on obstructions and jokes about swim vests and water temperatures.

Since the strip was very wet and the air really rough above the tree line, we agreed to lift off as early as possible and stay low to reach about 80 knots to get more authority during the climbout. This also worked well, even though this left us in a position where the only option after an engine problem or rope break would have been to ditch in the river. The rest of the tow went uneventful and we made our way home in the low tow position with ease.

After an uneventful landing in Sylacauga, I spent some good time washing the Twin and getting all the muck out of the wheel fairing (I dropped it and let it dry) and washing the Pawnee.

I (re-) learned a lot from this little episode and would like to share the following **big lessons**:

When following cloud streets, watch out for the end. They end for a reason! Watch for alternatives to the sides where the clouds look solid. Gain as much altitude as possible at the end and then try to jump to the next lift. Make sure you can make it safely to a landable field or airstrip! Cold water surfaces suck up energy.

Finally, I would like to thank Russ for the brilliant towing effort, twice! Also Steve and Jay for arranging the retrieve with minimal impact on the training that day and of course Dr. Richard Meyer for his hospitality and support.