

Glider Emergency Landing Fields at Somerset Airport

When learning to fly gliders most students will experience a simulated rope break when their instructor pulls the release around 300 feet above the ground at the departure end of the airport. You'll turn around and land back on the runway. And the instructor is there to make sure it happens correctly.

If tow planes are kept in good working order, have gas, towlines are checked regularly and connected to the glider correctly a premature release is a rare occasion. But it does happen! In 25 years of flying gliders it's happened to me 4 times. 2 tow plane engine problems and 2 real rope breaks. Are you going to know what to do when it happens to you? Because it will sooner or later!

There are two things you need to do.

- 1) Expect that it might happen every time you take off.
- 2) Know what to do when it happens.

By expecting it I mean that you should be thinking about it as the glider starts to move down the runway. It could happen in 10', 100' or 1000' along the roll. It could happen 10', 100', or 1000' in the air. If you are thinking about it, when it does happen, it's not a surprise.

Knowing what to do when it happens is the next step. Do you go straight ahead? Do you turn around or do you go a little left or right. Of course the weather and terrain dictate what you will do. What would you do while taking off on RW 26 at Somerset airport?

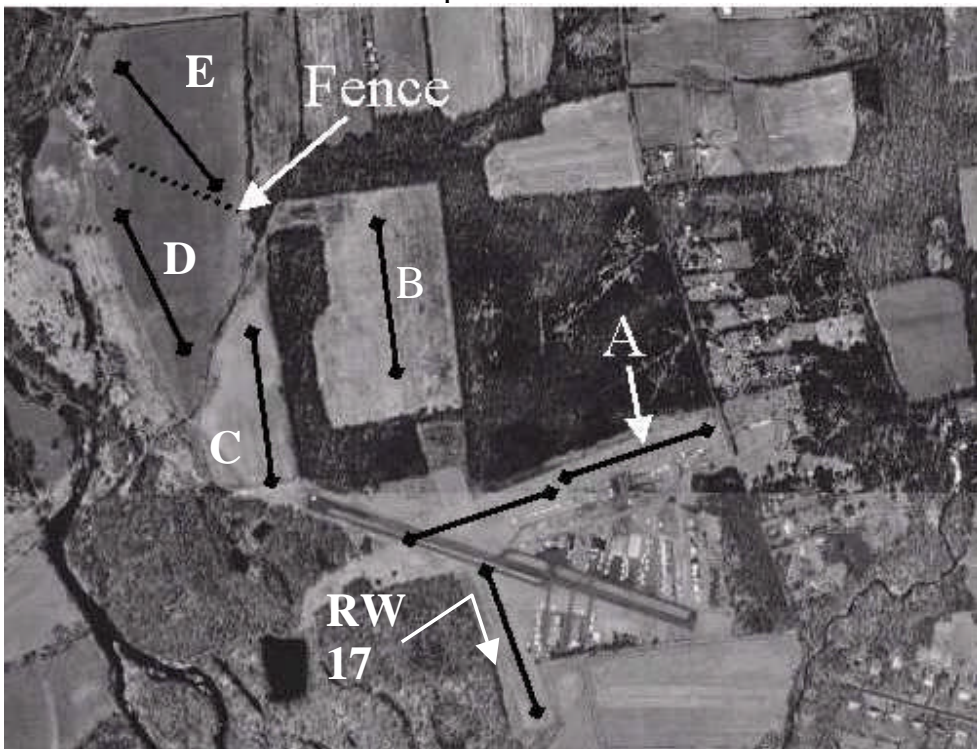
Unfortunately most of us only think that the problem will happen at 300' and we'll just turn around. You need to know what to do wherever it happens. What if it happens at 100' just as you start the right turn or at 700' and you are out over Rt 78? The standard answer is "...well I'll just go to the emergency field." Which one? Do you see the cows? Do you see the trees? Do you see the fence?

Below are several photographs taken of the emergency fields off the end of RW26 during September 2004. If you fly regularly at Somerset airport you

should take the time to get an up close and personally look at these fields yourself. Did you know that there is small fence across the main large field?

This first image is a satellite view of SMQ taken some time ago. I use it to show the relative positions of the fields and the normal landing zone on RW 26. The line “A” identifies the normal, average distance most people use to land on RW 26. That same line is then laid down over other possible landing areas.

Satellite View of Somerset airport



This next image is taken from the southern end of field B. Some time ago it was used as a cornfield. Now the weeds are between 2' and 5' tall. They are very difficult to walk through and the ground is not very smooth. It would take a 4-wheel drive vehicle to traverse it. It is large enough to land in but it would be a difficult retrieve. Some minor damage would happen to the glider during the landing and retrieve.

Looking north from southern end of field B



At the northwest end of field B there is an opening big enough for cars and a trailer but the wings of a 2-33 would need to be removed. It can be accessed from driving out the far end of RW 30.

Exit from field B



The large field off the end of RW 26 is actually 3 fields. Fields C & D are separated by a stream with a line of trees growing around it. Both are land able but C is rough. You don't want to hit the trees.

Stream With line of 20' tall trees



Line of 20' tall trees around stream



Fields D & E are separated by a small electric fence. There are two lines of nylon rope with thin wire intertwined in it. I think the rope would break if you hit it and the wings would knock the metal polls down. This would cause minor damage to the glider, break the fence and upset the owner. The last thing you would want to do is hit one of the cows. This would cause serious damage to the glider, really upset the owner and the cow.

Electric fence



Electric fence



Cows move between fields D & E



The gap between the trees at the end of RW 30 is about 200' wide. The wings of a 2-33 are about 53' so you could go through it. I have. However the area at the end of RW 26 and near the paved RW has several water drainage areas. You don't want to roll into them. It will call serious damage if you are moving fast.

Gap in trees about 200' wide



Drainage area



Lastly I think many people forget about RW 17. It is an easy place to get to from a left turn before the tow plane heads to the right after takeoff. You can even turn back to it without having to make the full turn back to RW 8. Whatever you have to do don't let it be a surprise and when you're on the ground stop rolling as quickly as you can.

Ron Caruso 9/28/04