

# Cross-Country to a New Home Field

Tom Witkin

The Pilatus B4 rolled to a stop on the centerline of the long concrete runway. I got out, took off my 'chute, and saw Orange Municipal's yellow airport truck charging down the strip toward me. My landing was without incident.

Just one thing: Sterling, Massachusetts (3B3) is my home field, 25 miles to the east southeast of Orange (ORE). After nearly 40 years of flying gliders, this was my longest cross-country, and my first landout. My goal to make it to Orange, then continue southeast to one more airport, then back to Sterling, would have to wait for another day.

A few years ago, I made my first ever excursion outside a final glide to Sterling. Sitting high over Mt. Wachusett, which sits between my home field and Gardner airport 8 miles further northwest, I contemplated leaving the lift to fly over that airport. More butterflies

fluttered in my belly than I ever experienced shooting instrument approaches in the soup. Perhaps a combination of hundreds of landings at strange airports in power planes, and a little voice saying, "Don't be a wimp," won the day. I headed to Gardner. Over the field, too low to fly directly to Sterling, realizing that landing there was no big deal, the tension flowed away like the heat of a steamy day when you jump into a cool lake. The club tow-plane could retrieve me. I hung out in zero for a while before finally working enough weak lift to climb out. It was liberating.

This past winter, I was determined to prepare for some longer flights in the B4, GBSC's highest performance club ship. Regularly, I flew tasks in Condor, studied an excellent book, *Advanced Soaring Made Easy* by Bernard Eckey (no, it's still not easy), and perhaps most importantly, purchased the components I would need to be able to pee in flight.



Didn't make it to the red lines, just the purple. Mt. Wachusett is the black dot (elevation 2,006 ft) between Sterling and Gardner.

Good soaring was forecast for my planned flight to Orange and beyond; lift better than 3-4 kt throughout the afternoon and light winds aloft. It would likely be blue. My decision-making cues came from our club's two cross-country mentors. Our chief pilot, Roy Bourgeois, lectured us about the good soaring potential on blue days. 60% of his many thousands of cross-country miles have been on days without cu's to mark the lift. Rick Roelke, a true expert in the micro-weather patterns of soaring, talked to us about flying to another airport, making it your "new home field," then going on to the next. Rinse and repeat. So, what if you have to land?

Early in the day it was clear that conditions were not as strong as forecast. One of our pilots, Lew, had to re-light, and right after release I got shot down within 500 ft of pattern altitude. Finally getting back to 5,000 ft AGL, I headed for Gardner, my first "new home field" along the way. Working some blue thermals, I made it easily at around 2,500 ft. It took a while to use the widely spread out lift to get to 5,000 ft, and a safe glide to Orange.

Beyond Gardner onward to Orange, only a few butterflies flew around my stomach as I passed another milestone: I could no longer see Sterling. I could see the reservoir just to its south, so I knew where it was. But the runway and hangars were invisible. With no clouds to point out thermals, I snaked over potential ground sources of lift; the buildings in the town of Orange and a nearby solar farm. Nothing. Gardner had receded into the distance, no longer one glide away. It was time to head for Orange airport while I had enough altitude. There were no good-looking fields nearby for landouts.

At 1,200 ft AGL with no hint of lift, it was time to commit to landing. Checklist complete, gear down confirmed a dozen times, I entered the pattern and ended my flight.

Len Badow, the airport manager, helped me push the glider onto the grass and gave me a lift to his office on



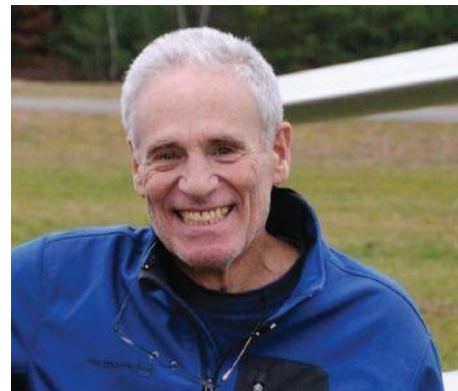
the other side of the big airport. He was thrilled to see a glider there for just the second time in his 30 years at Orange. I made my call for a retrieve, and 45 minutes later Richard showed up in the “Bird Dog” to tow me out, with Len there to run the wing. While I was waiting, I had called my wife to tell her where I was. “You are not!” “No, really.”

For all those years of flying and instructing in gliders, I had been content with good climbs, 2-hr-plus durations, and small cross-country forays a little past Gardner, 14 miles to Sterling’s northwest. I was a “local,” not a cross-country, pilot. Now, after a mere 25 mile cross-country to Orange – not even a roundtrip – I was surprised to

get congratulatory messages from club members who routinely fly hundreds of miles.

Perhaps Greater Boston Soaring Club’s cross-country pilots, members of our “great white fleet,” just liked the idea of a “local pilot” stretching out, being willing to end the flight away from home, beginning to appreciate what they do all the time. And maybe doing it in a well-worn, metal ship with an L/D of 35:1 – when it was new – reminded them of their earlier soaring days.

One of the messages came from chief pilot, Roy: “Well done! It gets easier the more you do it, Tom.” I can’t wait.



*About the author: Tom instructs with the Greater Boston Soaring Club and serves as the club Safety Officer. Though a CFI-A, he has forsaken powered flight. Mostly retired from high-tech marketing, he mentors start-ups and works on STEM education issues. This is his first item in Soaring that isn't a limerick. ✈*

## CALL FOR SSA DIRECTOR NOMINATIONS

This is the official call for nominations for the upcoming election of Directors representing SSA **Regions 7, 9, 10** and **11**. Directors will begin serving January 1, 2020 through December 31, 2022.

This notice also serves as a **SPECIAL CALL** for nominations for **Region 5** to fill out the term expiring December 31, 2020.

SSA members may nominate a member from their region to serve. Candidates must be nominated by at least three current SSA members from their region. Nominations may be submitted in writing, SSA, P O Box 2100, Hobbs, NM 88241, fax 575-392-8154 or email to Denise Layton ([dlayton@ssa.org](mailto:dlayton@ssa.org)). The nominations must include the name of the nominee and the nominator.

After the nomination deadline, all nominees will be notified. Ballots and accompanying biographical information will be mailed to the voting members of each region for any regions with contested races.

The nomination deadline is **August 1, 2019**. For further information, contact Denise Layton, 575-392-1177 or [dlayton@ssa.org](mailto:dlayton@ssa.org).

