

3. Tricky Landing on a Mountainside

Yellowknife, June 1970, twin-engine Beech 18 on wheels.

Near the northeast corner of Great Bear Lake, not far from Port Radium, a mining company, Silver Bear, had a small dirt and gravel landing strip on the side of a mountain. I flew in there only once, but I still remember it vividly.

The strip was very short and very steep. In fact, it was so short that, had it been horizontal, there was no way a Beech 18 aircraft could have landed there, let alone taken off again. A twin-engine Beech required a 1,500-foot runway, and this mountainside track was nowhere near that length. Fortunately, it was so steep that you could stop very quickly by landing uphill.

As with all these acrobatic mountain landing strips, you got only one shot at it. I knew there was no way I could open the throttle again and go around if I wasn't happy with my approach, because I was flying directly towards the mountainside.

The approach was scary: Having no horizon to use as a reference, I simply could not tell whether we were coming in towards the inclined strip at an angle that was way too steep or way too shallow. Rounding off over the threshold and bringing the nose of the aircraft right up towards the top of the ridge for landing seemed totally insane. We ended up touching down about a third of the way up the strip. I then pushed the throttles to wide open on both engines. This would get us as far up the landing strip as possible before I stopped and turned the plane to a 90° angle across the runway to prevent it from rolling backward down the slope. Running the engines at full throttle on a gravel strip is very poor airmanship because it causes whirls of gravel that will destroy the propeller blade tips, but there are situations where you have no choice.

We had landed safely, and my passengers seemed perfectly content. They had thought nothing of the approach and landing, and disappeared for a few hours to blast some rocks, collect ore samples, and check progress on the new silver mine. Finally, they returned.

Now we had to take off. The strip was so short that I had to face



The steep rocky strip has been carved along one of these hills by the Camsell River, near Great Bear Lake.

the plane downhill and immediately open the engines to over-boost, accelerating rapidly but knowing that I wouldn't have enough time to get airborne. As with the approach, I could not change my mind during takeoff. We were gaining speed so quickly on the downhill slope that stopping was impossible. When we reached the bottom end of the strip, the plane had not attained flying velocity, and we rolled over the edge into the valley to finally gain enough speed to start flying.

My passengers may not have realized the kamikaze nature of our landing, but as the plane barreled down the short landing strip at full throttle, with the edge of the mountain racing towards us, they were breathless. I know because I heard them all gasping for air, and breathing very strong sighs of relief when the plane was finally flying again down in the valley.