

'Uncontrolled' doesn't m

Proximity events at uncontrolled aerodromes continue to feature in the stats. Avoiding such occurrences comes down to the fundamentals that we all know, but actually have to *do*.

Between 2015 and 2017, there were 158 proximity events at uncontrolled aerodromes. Each year the number of events increases.

"The reasons," says Ryan Nicholl, CAA's team leader of 125/135 flight ops, "are largely down to a lapse in the basics – situational awareness, lookout, communication, and courtesy."

John Funnell, the head of the committee overseeing safety at Taupo aerodrome, offers even more succinct advice.

"It's all about using your eyes, ears, and the radio to broadcast your intentions. See, listen, and be heard."

CAA Air Transport Inspector, Chris Nicholls, would add to that list, preparedness for the circuit of unfamiliar aerodromes.

"Just 15 extra minutes on the ground before departure is worth bucketloads in safety," Chris says.

"Look at the AIP. Check the runway vectors. Check the direction of the circuit. What's the surrounding topography like? Going there on a Sunday – will there be gliding? Check airline timetables – what IFR flights are likely? Give a local a call and have a chat about what you can expect."

The South Canterbury aero club's CFI and manager, Aaron Pearce, agrees.

"We do have issues with itinerant pilots not following published procedure. Local pilots know their airport well, and most of them, if they're current, can jump in and go.

"But it's when itinerants don't want to use the grass runway – and decide instead to use a runway that's 90 degrees in conflict with the existing circuit – that things get interesting."

CAA chief meteorologist Peter Lechner flies a Grumman AA5 out of Paraparaumu aerodrome.

"It's not a pleasant experience ending up in airspace you are unsure about," he says. "So I try to prepare the night before."

"I check through all the relevant information in the quiet at home, studying the charts, the AIP, and of course, the weather information. As thoroughly as I can, I plan my flight, making sure I see where there might be issues, and deciding what I can do if those issues eventuate."

"The next day, I do another check on the weather, and on NOTAMs."

"If I leave all that homework to immediately before I fly, I don't do as good a job. At the aerodrome there's stuff happening around me, it's harder to concentrate, and you can be antsy to get into the air."

Mike Groome, airport manager at Taupo, says even an unexpected weather diversion to an unfamiliar aerodrome shouldn't cause problems.

"It should be part of preflight planning to anticipate not being able to land at your preferred aerodrome, deciding where else you could go, and what the procedures are there."

Mike says not all aerodromes welcome the standard overhead join.

Photo courtesy of Betty Shepherd



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"Taupo has skydiving operations, so we want aircraft to join downwind, base or final. And that's very clearly stated in the AIP. But not all pilots consult the AIP."

Mike says a substantial number of incidents at Taupo revolve around itinerant helicopter pilots.

"They never seem to read NOTAMs!" he says. "We also have special procedures here that don't allow helicopters on certain parts of the aerodrome, but a few pilots don't read those either."

And sometimes, it's the locals

It's not always itinerant pilots who can heighten the risk of airborne conflict, however.

CAA's team leader of helicopter operations, Grant Twaddle, says sometimes local pilots have a sense of entitlement at their home aerodrome.

"Some think of the airfield as 'theirs' and can lack courtesy when it comes to itinerant aircraft. But everyone in that airspace has a perfect right to be there, and the 'entitled' local needs to show some consideration – if for no other reason than the itinerant aircraft may be bringing in the tourists the local relies on for sightseeing customers."

Grant says complacency is always a risk when pilots are used to flying into and out of their base aerodrome.

"We've had issues with the way some helicopter pilots operate. They've become casual to the point of breaching aerodrome and regulatory procedure, increasing the risk of a serious incident."

It's flying 101

Flying into an uncontrolled aerodrome requires all the basics to be done very well.

One of them is communication.

With operations from Air Nelson to training flights, at Timaru, Aaron Pearce is careful to model good communication to his students.

"When an Air Nelson Q300 is on approach, as soon as they call 'entering the MBZ', regardless of where our aircraft is on that MBZ, we will call them back and tell them that we're a club aircraft and it's a 'dual'. That relaxes the Air Nelson crew a wee bit, because they know it's a local aircraft, it probably knows what it's doing, and there's an instructor on board."

The team leader for the CAA's recreational aviation unit, Jeanette Lusty, says good communication starts even before the flight.

"Get permission to land from the owners of privately owned airstrips, including those operated by the Department of Conservation. It's courteous, but it's also about safety. Calling the airstrip owner ahead of time will let them know what's going to happen at what time in their airspace."

"Because ag work is often at low level, it's essential approaching aircraft, including ag, make the correct radio calls."

Grant Twaddle says even if a pilot uses their radio in the correct manner, they should never assume that means everyone else knows where they are and that they will stay out of the way.

"Pilots must be constantly looking outside the cockpit. And that lookout has to be a structured scan," he says.

"It's no use just quickly sweeping your eyes from side to side, and calling that 'looking out'. The brain won't meaningfully register anything outside the cockpit window."

"You have to look in one sector, focus on that sector, then look at another sector, focus on that, and so on. Scanning properly is very disciplined, and it's also incredibly important."

That advice is supported by Drew Howat, manager of Hokitika Airport. The radio frequency for Hokitika was changed in November 2017, as the area of its MBZ was enlarged.

"Some of our local pilots who were used to transmitting on 119.1," says Drew, "are continuing to monitor that, some are on the new MBZ frequency of 119.8. And some are on the FISCOM frequency of 118.5."

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Raglan aerodrome – there have been 24 reported occurrences there in the last three years.

"We're encouraging them to use the approved frequency, but their argument is that they want to use the one they believe 'everyone else' is on.

"It's a difficult situation, but our advice to them is that for safety, their lookout must be absolutely vigilant – almost treating all nearby aircraft as **NORDO**."

Good lookout and situational awareness often fall victim to a reliance on modern cockpit technology. And Aaron Pearce describes loss of situational awareness as a "huge factor" in near misses at Timaru.

"One of our more alarming incidents was a Cessna 172 versus a Beechcraft. The Beechcraft came in a hell of a lot more quickly than the 172 pilot was expecting.

"But the near miss was really down to both pilots losing situational awareness."

Part 91 mandates flying procedures at an uncontrolled aerodrome – particularly rules 91.223, 91.227, and 91.229.

But Ryan Nicholl says exercising a bit of etiquette never goes amiss.

"We can't cover off every aspect of flying at unattended aerodromes with rules. Sometimes it just comes down to being courteous in the circuit."

How user groups help

At Timaru, the establishment of a user group has made a big difference to the risk of airspace conflict, according to Aaron Pearce.

"It's opened up the lines of communication. There's definitely been an improvement in the way the airfield operates."

To illustrate, Aaron describes how two paramotor pilots came to a user group meeting; the first the rest of the aerodrome users knew of them.

"The paramotor pilots didn't realise how much general aviation there was at the aerodrome, and we didn't even know they existed!" he says.

"I've spent some time on the VNCs with them, so they understand the airspace better, and they've participated in the airspace review.

"There was a 'phantom' paramotor pilot that kept appearing in the MBZ, **NORDO**, and it was these two guys who tracked him down and talked to him about doing the right thing. That's much more effective than me doing it.

"All of that came from being a part of the user group."

At Wanaka, a wider user group has created a specialist airspace body.

User group president, Sue Telford, says the airspace committee meets as frequently as once a month.

"Regular and itinerant traffic coming and going from Wanaka have conflicting flight paths. The specific task of the airspace group is to make decisions that mitigate the risk posed by that."

With almost 40,000 movements a year at Taupo, the threat of airborne conflict is one of the biggest concerns of the independent safety committee there.

"If a pilot needs to be spoken to, it's not me who goes to have a quiet chat," says airport manager Mike Groome, "but a committee member.

"We've found peer pressure is much more effective in getting the safety message across."

"People can do odd things"

Aaron Pearce suggests instructors use the biennial flight review to go over circuit procedures.

"It's essential there's a conversation between instructor and pilot about the appropriate ways to vacate and join the circuit, and of course, the pilot needs to fly a standard overhead join."

Peter Lechner says keeping current is key to circuit safety.

"It's a bit like defensive driving. You do the best *you* can, and you try to anticipate what the others might do.

"Because people can do odd things." ■

Other *Vector* articles to read:

- » "Joining the Circuit at an Uncontrolled Aerodrome" (July/August 2008)
- » "So You Think You Can See and Avoid" (March/April 2015)
- » "Joining Uncontrolled" (March/April 2016)
- » "Q300s at Uncontrolled Aerodromes" (September/October 2016)
- » "Uncontrolled Aerodromes and Drones" (November/December 2016)

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