Non-Towered Airports: Safe Approach

Featuring:
Bob Martens
Mark: In this 10 minute segment, Bob will provide some good operating practices and tips you can use when approaching a non-towered airport.

Let’s say we’ve done our appropriate research before we depart. Now we’re on route to our destination non-towered airport. What are the good operating practices we should use as we’re starting our approach to land?

Bob: There’s a couple of very important things you can do as you start approaching the airport.

First and foremost, maintain a good listening watch. You want to make sure with your planning you understand what the CTAF frequency, the common traffic advisory frequency is at your airport of destination. Or in absence of a CTAF that the UNICOM frequency is readily available to you.

Start listening on that frequency as you approach the airport. You may be able to avoid an extraneous radio call that only compounds the verbiage on the radios.

Listen to what runway is in use, what the airplanes that are in the traffic pattern are using for the runway.

Also listen up on the automated weather sources ASOS or AWOS are in many airports now and will give us valuable weather information that will help prepare ourselves as we approach the airport.

We must remember here, though, that many airports use preferred runways due to noise in the traffic pattern. So even though the AWOS or the ASOS may give us wind direction that favors one runway, if there’s a preferred runway at the airport, that’s the one that people are going to be using. So we have to do our homework and prepare prior to entering the wrong runway.

Listen on the UNICOM or the CTAF for arriving and departing aircraft. Both of them could influence you as you’re approaching the airport.

Try to determine from the other aircraft - before you arrive - what the appropriate flow of traffic is.

One of the other things you can do to help yourself is to prepare your cockpit. Sterile cockpit procedures are very important. We may not be aware of what they are. Let’s draw a clue here from the professional aviation community.

We regulate the airline community to use a sterile cockpit procedure from the time they initiate taxi up and through 10,000 feet. The same is true on descent, from 10,000 feet until their airplane is parked there is no extraneous chatter allowed in the cockpit.

Think about how that can enhance operations in your cockpit, if you are focusing on the details at hand as opposed to extraneous chatter with your passengers. Try to think about and use the sterile cockpit procedures.
Contact the UNICOM or CTAF not less than 10 miles out and request the airport advisory. It’s a very simple call. *Hartford UNICOM. Skyhawk 77H is 10 miles east at 2,000 feet inbound. Request airport advisory. Hartford.*

Mark: Bob, let me stop you for just a second. I noticed you announced the airport and the end of your transmission. Why is that important?

Bob: Mark, you’ll notice at most airports, the frequency congestion is always an issue. It’s very easy for pilots to miss the first or the last couple words of any transmission. By announcing your intended airport both at the beginning and at the end of your transmission, you have a much better chance of effectively communicating with other pilots.

Another thing you can do as you approach the airport is turn on all landing lights and strobes. It’s a tremendous investment. If people can see you, they have a much better chance of avoiding you. Many times airplane profiles are not easy to see, and a landing light or a strobe may help somebody pick you out.

If no response on the UNICOM, if no one is staffing the UNICOM, self announce once again. Simply: *Hartford Traffic. Skyhawk 77H 9 miles east at 2,000, inbound for landing. Hartford.*

It might very well generate a response from an aircraft in the traffic pattern that was reluctant to speak up, wondering whether somebody was actually going to come up on the UNICOM frequency.

Mark: What if nobody provides traffic or landing information? Should I just pick what I think is the best runway based on the conditions and enter a standard traffic pattern for that runway?

Bob: I don’t recommend that at all, Mark. I think there are many, many reasons that the appropriate way to do it is to over fly. Always over fly the airport at least 500 to 1,000 feet above the traffic pattern altitude to determine the runway most in to the wind and see if other aircraft are operating without radio communication.

Compare the airport layout with your airport diagram. Make sure you’re at the right airport.

The overhead recognizance not only checks for other aircraft in the pattern, but it also familiarizes you with construction or obstructions on or around the runway.

Look for suitable landing areas adjacent to the airport. You never know when you might be forced in to an off-airport landing situation.

You also want to have a plan for your takeoff strategy. If an engine fails on takeoff, you need a safe place to put the airplane.

When you’re over flying the airport, at least 500 to 1,000 feet above the traffic pattern altitude, you need to make sure that you’re well outside of
the traffic pattern before you continue your descent. As you are continuing your descent in the vicinity of the airport, I cannot over emphasize the need for clearing.

I recommend moving the wings up and down. Varying your pitch to clear for other aircraft. With the limited visibilities that we have in general aviation aircraft, clearing, clearing, clearing will prohibit us from descending upon another airplane as we enter the traffic pattern.

Always, always use the standard entry, 45° angle to the midfield downwind. It is not a perfect solution, but it gives us a national standard, no matter what airport we go to.

People can always find excuses to do everything other than the 45°, but that only complicates the problems. If everyone does the 45° to the midfield downwind, we have a great expectation of what you're going to do at a traffic pattern, and you have an expectation of what I'm going to do when I arrive at your traffic pattern.

It's very important to be at traffic pattern altitude before your downwind entry. We have a propensity for doing a screaming descent to that 45°, to the downwind entry, and that's very, very dangerous. Diving and entering a traffic pattern in that manner only increases the complexity and puts all aircraft in a hazardous situation.

Mark: You’re talking about a standard pattern here Bob, but I think it’s a fair question – *Can’t I legally do a straight in approach?*

Bob: Mark, it’s legal but it’s not necessarily safe. We give pilots a great deal of latitude in the operation at a non-towered airport, and as long as it doesn’t disrupt the flow of arriving and departing traffic by presenting a collision hazard, yes. You can do a straight in approach.

But it is very, very difficult to effectively clear and ensure your safe arrival in conjunction with other traffic operation to think that straight in approaches are a good way to conduct operations.

Mark: What if I’m doing a standard traffic pattern and somebody’s on a straight in instrument approach? Do they have the right of way?

Bob: No. No, Mark, they don’t. Absolutely not. Standard right of way rules apply and no airman may take advantage of it, so as to present a collision hazard to others.

Straight in traffic should be announcing their position and intentions. But once again, let’s remember there’s no requirement that they even have a radio.

Non-radio aircraft should just absolutely avoid straight in approaches because there’s an excellent chance that no one will know they’re coming.
Mark: If I make a straight in approach, what call should I make on the UNICOM or CTAF frequency?

Bob: If you are going to make a straight in, you need to self-announce your position and your intention.

Distance and direction are very, very important. If you’re an IFR pilot and you’re calling instrument fixes inbound, that’s just not going to help a student pilot on downwind because he has no idea what you’re talking about.

When you are doing a straight in, announce your distance and your direction from the airport so everyone knows exactly where you are.

A word here on communication. We recommend effective communication in the non-towered environment, what’s too little and what’s too much? We have standard calls that we ask people to make. We’re all aware though that on any given Saturday or Sunday, you can’t get a word in edgewise on the CTAF or the UNICOM frequency.

Mark: How true.

Bob: I know that at one airport down in Connecticut several years ago, congestion on the radio got so intense that all the locals had their own discreet frequency that they used when they were in the pattern. Of course, that helped nobody.

We need to look at each situation as unique. We have recommend calls that we’re going to talk about here in a little bit. But there are times when making a call will only make the situation worse, so you need to use good discretion when in the traffic pattern, knowing when to talk and when not to talk.

Let’s also remember that information we receive on UNICOM is advisory only. When we’re in the towered airport environment, ATC communication, instructions to us, must be complied with. On a UNICOM, they are advisory only. We as the pilot in command, must determine what we are being told to do or asked to do by someone on UNICOM is the most safe and efficient way for us to conduct our flight operation.

Two-way radio communication on UNICOM or CTAF is not a regulatory requirement. It’s certainly good operating procedure, but there are still a goodly number of pilots that enjoy flying without their radios, and they’re certainly entitled to do so. Non-radio aircraft, NORDO aircraft, utilize non-towered airports all the time, and have the same right to be there as we do, so we must be cautious.