A pilot’s guide to staying safe in the vicinity of non-towered aerodromes

The publication of this guide was reported by ATSB on 10th November. Most aerodromes in Australia are located in uncontrolled airspace and consequently do not have an air traffic control presence. At and around non-towered aerodromes, pilots are responsible for making themselves aware of nearby aircraft and maintaining separation. This publication aims to provide pilots with an appreciation of the types of safety events that are associated with operations at non-towered aerodromes, and provide education on expected behaviours to assist pilots in being prepared for the risks.

Generally, operations at non-towered aerodromes can be considered to be safe, but this relies on all pilots maintaining awareness of their surroundings and of other aircraft, and on flying in compliance with procedures, while being observant, courteous and co-operative. Most of the 709 airspace-related safety occurrences reported to the ATSB between 2003 and 2008 at, or in the vicinity of non-towered aerodromes, were incidents, but they also included 60 serious incidents and six accidents (mid-air and ground collisions).

Most of the occurrences involved conflicts between aircraft, or between aircraft and ground vehicles. A large number of these involved separation issues, ineffective communication between pilots operating in close proximity, the incorrect assessment of other aircrafts’ positions and intentions, relying on the radio as a substitute for an effective visual lookout, or a failure to follow published procedures.

This publication looked only at incidents and accidents prior to the introduction of changes by the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) to Civil Aviation Regulation (CAR) 166 on 3rd June 2010, which affected procedures at all non-towered (non-controlled) aerodromes. Although the CAR 166 changes may in time be shown to reduce incidents and accidents, a number of issues highlighted by the occurrences documented in this report persist at non-towered aerodromes which pilots can easily address.

This publication has been released in association with a more detailed and larger report (AO-2008-044(2)) into non-towered aerodrome operations.
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