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Proper Traffic Pattern Procedure Is Crucial

by Harry Kraemer

It was a hot, hazy Sunday morning. I was in the local airport traffic pattern with a student practicing touch and go landings. My student had just executed a perfectly squared downwind turn when out of the blue came another Cessna. Much to my surprise, it turned out to be another touch and go airplane that we were previously following. He was taking a cross county trip in the pattern! As far out as he was I assumed this was his initial entry into the pattern. I was furious when the control tower reprimanded my student and me for cutting him off. It was at that point that I realized that other pilots may not realize how crucial proper procedure in the traffic pattern is.

As aviators, pilots must take off and land at airports every day. The practice becomes routine, and we may become complacent. Being a Gold Seal Flight Instructor and an FAA Accident Prevention Counselor, I teach traffic pattern operations daily. I instruct my students to be safe pilots; safe pilots adhere to the rules. I have compiled some suggestions to assure uniformity and safety in all traffic patterns.

The purpose of an airport traffic

pattern is to provide for an orderly flow of traffic around the airport down to the runway. If a descent is necessary, plan the descent so the aircraft is at pattern altitude prior to entering the pattern; it is considerably easier to see other traffic at the same altitude than to look for it above or below your

aircraft. For recommended entry procedures consult the Airman's Information Manual.

Once you are in the pattern the proper distance from the runway should allow you to make the runway at the best glide speed should the engine quit. Engine failure most frequently occurs when making power adjustments, as in the traffic pattern.

Lycoming, one of the best known airplane engine manufacturers, suggests that it would be helpful to standardize the instruction of the use of carburetor heat in the landing configuration when using a float-type carburetor.

Remember ground reference maneuvers? The traffic pattern is the most practical one. Always correct for wind drift! When making turns in the pattern keep in mind when the wind is behind you groundspeed increases so this bank

is the steepest, and on the reverse side, when the wind is in front of you groundspeed decreases requiring that bank to be the most shallow. Be aware of the bank angle and use caution because stall speed increases as the angle of bank increases.

In a "no wind" situation the directional gyro can be helpful in executing square turns. On crosswind and base the runway numbers should be off the miniature airplane's wing tips. On upwind, downwind and final the runway numbers will be off the miniature airplane's nose and tail.

It may not seem as consequential to follow every procedure in the traffic pattern to the exact letter. A downwind leg that is a little too wide may not seem like a big problem.

The traffic pattern was established for a reason; the reason is to provide for the smooth flow of traffic and uniformity while operating within the pattern. It provides for the safety of all pilots within the area. Take advantage of this! Follow these suggestions to facilitate traffic pattern operations. Good luck and friendly skies to you!