STEVE KROG
COMMENTARY / THE CLASSIC INSTRUCTOR

Straight-Ins

Yes or no?

BY STEVE KROG

WE RECENTLY EXPERIENCED A situation at the Hartford airport (HXF) that brought renewed attention to the straight-in approach to land. HXF is classified as a nontowered airport, meaning there is no control tower managing traffic flow.

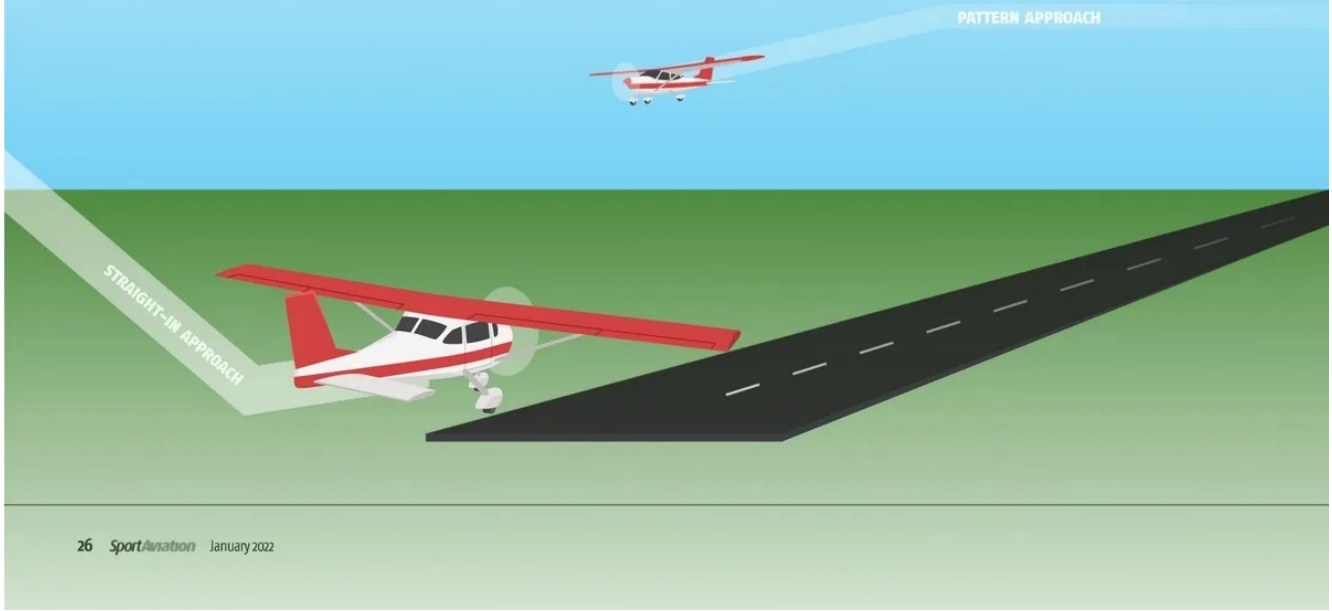
In this particular situation, three aircraft were in the traffic pattern practicing takeoffs and landings. Each pilot was either a student or low-time pilot, and all employed proper radio procedures, called out their positions within the pattern, and maintained safe separation from each other.

A fourth aircraft then made a radio call stating it was making a straight-in approach for a landing and was 10 miles away on the approach. At this point, each of the three pilots already in the traffic pattern increased their position announcements, not only calling out their midpoint downwind position but also calling out their base and final leg positions. None of the three pilots could visually locate the aircraft on the straight-in approach.

At this point, the straight-in aircraft radioed it was now 5 miles out and continuing the approach. No acknowledgment was initiated recognizing the other traffic in the pattern.

Is it acceptable to fly a straight-in approach at a nontowered airport? Is it legal? Safe? If you were flying one of the pattern aircraft in this situation, what action would you take at this time?

The FAA has published Advisory Circular 90-66B, *Non-Towered Airport Flight Operations.* In it, the FAA encourages pilots to use a standard traffic pattern when arriving or departing a nontowered airport. However, exceptions are also offered. The most common is for practicing instrument approaches. It is quite difficult to simulate an instrument approach to near minimums without a 5- to 8-mile final leg. For safety, it is strongly advised that the instrument instructor or safety pilot call out regular position reports alerting other pattern traffic of the practicing pilot's intentions.



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A quick check of FAR 91.113, *Right-of-Way Rules: Except Water Operations*, states: "When two or more aircraft are approaching an airport for the purpose of landing, the aircraft at the lower altitude has the right-of-way, but it shall not take advantage of this rule to cut in front of another which is on final approach to land, or to overtake that aircraft."

Armed with this information, what action would you take if you were one of the three pilots already established in the traffic pattern?

Each of the three aircraft in the pattern employed slightly different actions in this situation. Aircraft No. 1, which was about to turn base when the straight-in aircraft called out a 10-mile final, opted to continue with the approach and landing. Flying a tight or close-in pattern, the pilot performed a touch-and-go landing and departure, and safety never was compromised.

Aircraft No. 2 had just turned onto the downwind leg of the traffic pattern and proceeded flying that leg. Unable to make visual contact with the approaching aircraft, the pilot chose to remain at pattern altitude and perform a go-around.

Aircraft No. 3 was just taking off following a touch-and-go when the straight-in aircraft made the initial call. Pilot No. 3 continued flying a normal traffic pattern and, once established on the downwind leg, began visually searching for the approaching aircraft. Unable to make visual contact, the pilot slowed the aircraft and continued flying an extended downwind leg.

After extending the leg by nearly a mile, the straight-in aircraft was finally spotted. Pilot No. 3 continued downwind until after the other aircraft had passed beyond the third aircraft's wingtip. Then, proper pre-landing action was taken in preparation for an unusually long final approach.

As you can ascertain from this real-life scenario, unnecessary traffic pattern confusion resulted when the straight-in aircraft made the announcement 10 miles out. Knowing there were at least three other aircraft in the traffic pattern, this pilot could have taken action to prevent the confusion. The straight-in pilot could have made the decision to break off the straight-in, join the traffic pattern properly, blend in with the existing traffic, and then land.

STEVE KROG

The straight-in aircraft could also have initiated better communication with the other three aircraft. All were using the radio, so the straight-in pilot was hearing their calls. Why not acknowledge their presence and work with them to make visual contact and then sequence for a safe arrival?

Generally, if the straight-in pilot is courteous and tries to work with the existing traffic, pattern traffic will give way and work with that pilot in return, especially if it is a larger, faster aircraft.

Many of the nontowered airports provide a home base for a number of non-electrical, non-radio-equipped aircraft. They are perfectly legal to operate at these airports. This can present an additional problem for straight-in aircraft, especially if on a 10-mile or more final approach.

The individuals flying the no-radio aircraft are usually quite vigilant about watching for aircraft, often making way for other airplanes so as not to cause any type of conflict or compromise safety. A pilot flying a no-radio open-cockpit aircraft can have eyes moving everywhere, but when making turns from downwind to base and especially from base to final, the lower wing — if there is one — blocks the view of the approach end of the runway.

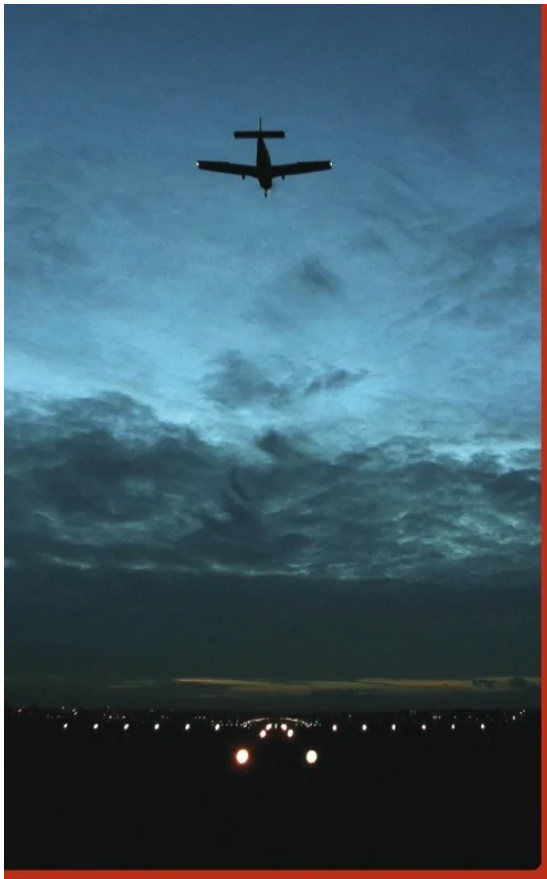
Some years ago, we had an incident at Hartford that proved this point. An individual was flying a no-radio aircraft, and a second pilot was flying a Pitts. The first pilot had a habit of flying long, low final approaches and was doing so on the day of the incident. The Pitts pilot was returning to the airport after practicing some maneuvers. He entered the pattern properly at a 45-degree angle at midpoint downwind. Radio calls were made throughout the pattern entry.

The turn from downwind to base was made, and the pilot was unable to make visual contact with the straight-in aircraft as it was just passing under him on a now short final. The Pitts pilot made the turn onto final, slowed the aircraft, and set up for the landing. Seconds after touching down, a small explosion of wood and fabric took place. When both aircraft came to a stop, there was little remaining of the non-radio aircraft and the Pitts had significant front-end damage. Neither pilot was injured other than being quite shaken by the incident.

Could this incident have been prevented? Absolutely. The straight-in pilot could have flown a standard pattern in this situation.

So, are straight-in approaches to land acceptable? The answer is sometimes yes and sometimes no. Common sense, courtesy, and safety need to enter into the equation when making that decision.

If you want to make a straight-in approach to save five minutes but the pattern has three or four airplanes in the pattern and another inbound, you may want to sacrifice a bit of time for the sake of safety. Not knowing where all of the other aircraft are located but still continuing the straight-in approach compromises safety in a big way.



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Making a straight-in when the airport and pattern traffic is light is certainly acceptable but then use the radio to call out your position and continue to do so as you progress along the final approach. There is no need to call out, "If there is any traffic in the area, please advise." The FAA does not like or recommend using that statement. Neither do the pilots in or near the pattern.

Rather, continue making progress reports, and the other pilots will also do so. Make visual contact with the other traffic. If unable, break off the approach and enter the traffic pattern properly.

Practicing simulated instrument approaches requires an alert instructor or safety pilot. When discussing this situation with one of my instrument instructors, he commented that many low-time student, sport, or private pilots may not understand instrument approach terminology. Therefore, it is important not to confuse the other pilots with detailed statements. A student pilot may have no idea what is meant by "procedure turn inbound" or "KOLA intersection inbound," and therefore will not have any idea where to look for you. It is much safer to state that you are inbound on a 5-mile straight-in simulated instrument approach. The other pattern traffic now knows where to look for you; they understand it is a training flight and will extend a great deal of courtesy and spacing.

The bottom line is to communicate when making a straight-in approach. Courtesy will then be extended by other pilots, which in turn causes safe practices.

Keep flying safe and have a great new flying year. EAA

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