

THE STRAIGHT-IN SKINNY

A friend and I were cruising at 8,500 feet in a Piper Arrow, heading for a mini-vacation on the northern California coast. It was one of those spectacular days when all of the clichés applied. The weather really was severe clear. It was as though you could see forever, and it almost hurt the eyes to look that far.

We could easily see the 30-mile-distant Mendocino County Airport, a beige, gravel scar carved out of a coniferous carpet of pine. Our track coincided almost exactly with the extended centerline of Runway 29. The urge to make a straight-in approach was overwhelming. I turned on the landing lights, nudged the yoke forward, and tickled the throttle back a notch. I transmitted our position every minute or so, but the only aircraft in the pattern was a lonely Piper Super Cub on the downwind leg that turned base behind us.

As if to prove the adage claiming that good landings are the result of good approaches, we touched on feathers, an appropriate finale to a perfect flight.

It was perfect, that is, until I shut down the engine, opened my door, and saw an irritated-looking individual stomping toward us from across the ramp.

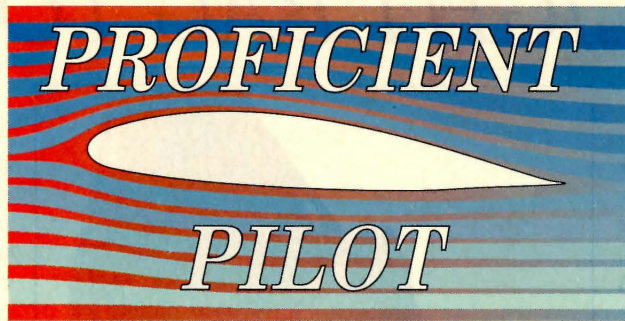
"We don't make straight-ins around here," she barked. "Don't you know that you can get killed flying like that?"

"Not likely," I replied. "We announced our position a dozen times."

"Well, we never heard you. That Cub over there doesn't have a radio."

I wanted to tell her that there is no excuse for not having at least a handheld transceiver to keep track of other aircraft using the airport, but I did not want to escalate her diatribe into an altercation. Instead, I acknowledged that she had made a good point. Somewhat pacified but no less irate, she huffed, spun on her heels, and left almost as quickly as she had appeared.

Like many others, that pilot clings to the popular belief that straight-in approaches at uncontrolled airports are inherently dangerous, that those



who use them are careless and reckless. If the truth were known, however, it probably would reveal that there are at least as many who disagree and believe that the straight-in approach has taken a bum rap.

Those who advocate the judicious use of the straight-in approach usually are reluctant to voice their views. They want to avoid having to defend themselves against self-righteous finger-pointers who regard them as sacrilegious renegades with a wanton disregard for safety.

The straight-in approach is most useful when it eliminates the need to overfly a destination airport and maneuver into a standard traffic pattern at a 45-degree angle. Such a technique can easily add 5 or 10 miles and minutes to a flight. Nor is such a maneuver without its own hazard. Aircraft descending toward the pattern entry point from various directions threaten each other with the potential for collision.

It is interesting that no one seems to complain about those who make straight-in approaches at controlled airports, probably because they

believe that controllers provide separation between aircraft approaching to land. This is a common misconception. Controllers do not separate VFR traffic in the pattern. They instead point out and sequence traffic. This is not much different than what pilots at nontower airports do for themselves by

announcing their positions and intentions on the CTAF (common traffic advisory frequency).

Before accusing me of heresy for attempting to justify the straight-in approach, consider that the FAA recently had an apparent change of heart with respect to straight-in approaches.

After 18 years, the FAA revised Advisory Circular 90-66, which recommends practices for operating at nontower airports. AC 90-66A now states that "the FAA encourages pilots to use the standard traffic pattern. However, for those pilots who choose to execute a straight-in approach, maneuvering for and execution of the approach should be completed so as not to disrupt the flow of arriving and departing traffic. Therefore, pilots operating in the traffic pattern should be alert at all times to aircraft executing straight-in approaches."

In other words, the FAA does not criticize those who execute straight-in approaches as long as these—like other maneuvers performed in the vicinity of an airport—are conducted with care.

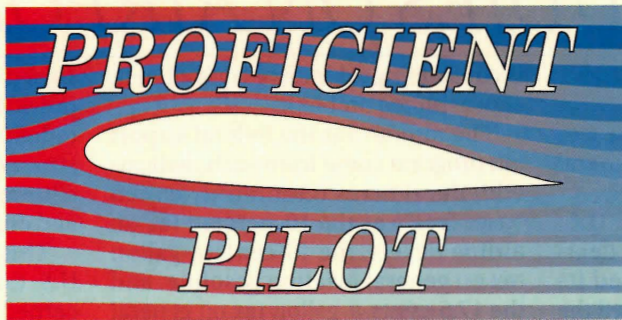
In this case, care requires planning. Whenever I contemplate a straight-in approach to a nontower airport, I tune in the CTAF when at least 20 miles out. This allows me to appraise the traffic situation at my destination. If there is substantial traffic in the pattern, or if I hear the kind of hesitant radio chatter that is typical of student-pilot activity, I cancel my plans for a straight-in approach and enter the pattern conventionally. But if the frequency is relatively quiet and there are no other mitigating factors, I am not at all reluctant to make a straight-in approach—except perhaps at Mendocino; my ego couldn't take another beating like that. □



BY BARRY SCHIFF

MORE STRAIGHT-IN SKINNY

Two months ago, I wrote that the FAA had recently modified its position with respect to straight-in approaches at uncontrolled airports. After 18 years, the FAA revised its Advisory Circular 90-66, which recommends practices for operating at nontower airports. AC 90-66A now states that "the FAA encourages pilots to use



the standard traffic pattern. However, for those pilots who choose to execute a straight-in approach, maneuvering for and execution of the approach should be completed so as not to disrupt the flow of arriving and departing traffic. Therefore, pilots operating in the traffic pattern should be alert at all times to aircraft executing straight-in approaches."

Furthermore, I added that perhaps the straight-in approach has been taking a bum rap and might not be as hazardous as conventional wisdom might suggest.

This triggered a substantial response. Although a few of your letters supported my position, the vast majority did not. What interested me most, however, was that nobody offered any convincing arguments about why a pilot should not make a straight-in approach to an uncontrolled airport. Instead, many simply voiced emotional opposition, and a few resorted to name calling. Having spent most of my life advocating and promoting aviation safety, I must confess that the latter was somewhat painful.

Nevertheless, I try to be objective, so I attempted to learn why the straight-in approach has such a bad reputation.

No one that I contacted at the FAA could provide an answer, but many pointed to a pair of special studies conducted by the National Transportation Safety Board. Titled "Midair Collisions In U.S. Civil Aviation," these covered the three-year period from 1968 to 1970 and are the latest such studies available. They also are the sources for the now-common knowledge that a midair collision is most likely to occur in the traffic pattern of a nontower airport on a weekend during daylight hours in VFR conditions.

During the three-year period, there were 102 midair collisions, of which 42

occurred in the vicinity of a nontower airport. Of these 42 accidents, the majority occurred on final approach. According to the NTSB, this is both expected and logical because final approach funnels traffic to the runway threshold.

It is this last statement that led many to erroneously conclude that straight-in approaches are responsible for the majority of accidents on final approach. This, however, is not supported by the facts. A study of each accident fails to implicate the straight-in approach. Incredibly, most of the midair collisions occurred at or below 100 feet agl. Most of these were caused by aircraft operating in different directions on the same runway and by one aircraft landing on top of another.

Many other accidents were caused by pilots who flew a right-hand pattern when they should have been using a left-hand pattern, and vice versa.

Yes, there were a few collisions involving an aircraft on a straight-in



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approach, but these were significantly outnumbered by the collisions that occurred on downwind and base legs.

Finally, the NTSB made a number of recommendations designed to reduce the incidence of midair collisions at uncontrolled airports. None of these mentioned straight-in approaches.

One recommendation, however, was that pilots make better use of their radios to remain aware of other traffic in the pattern. This led the FAA in the early 1970s to institute the self-announce program. It recommends that pilots transmit their positions to apprise others of their presence. In 1982, the FAA expanded this program to include a common traffic advisory frequency at every airport to enhance the self-announce program.

Many of the letters stimulated by my previous column about straight-in approaches expressed outrage because I had suggested that a pilot flying an aircraft without a two-way radio obtain and use a hand-held transceiver while operating in the traffic pattern of uncontrolled airports.

Although I respect a pilot's right not to have to have a radio, I fail to understand how anyone concerned with safety can have such an attitude. In his letter, Steve Colantuno put it best when he wrote that such a pilot should "join the 20th Century and add his mouth and his ears to his eyes to protect himself and his airplane." Refusing to do so obviously puts others at risk.

I concede the possibility that the jury might still be out on straight-in approaches. If they truly are dangerous as some readers insist, studies must be done to identify why this is so. In the meantime, the FAA has condoned the straight-in approach, and it behooves all of us to exercise the utmost vigilance when operating in the traffic pattern of any airport, controlled and uncontrolled.

I can assure you, however, that I will not make a straight-in approach to Harvey Field at Snohomish, Washington. Robert C. Siceloff of Seattle wrote that if I did so, I would "be shot down." □