

The Manager's Approach



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Columbia & Pine Mountain Lake Airports

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Air Tankers

Have the Right-Of-Way

As everyone knows we are in the middle of our fire season and the CAL FIRE air attack aircraft have been pretty busy. As I write this article, there are four air tankers and two helicopters fighting the Italian Fire just east of the airport. With the fire being so close to the airport the air tankers are landing and taking off about every two to three minutes.

Most pilots know that the air tankers take off on Runway 17 and land on Runway 35. This allows for less taxi time and thus a quicker turn around for the tankers. The OV-10 spotter aircraft usually takes off and lands on Runway 17. Fire fighting helicopters will use the CAL FIRE helipad at the Tanker Base and the airport helipads. News media helicopters use the airport helipads. As you can see there can be quite a bit of aircraft activity occurring in a short period of time with numerous types of aircraft operating from different locations at the airport.

All local pilots should know that Tuolumne County Ordinance 18.16.090 states that "Aircraft shall yield the right-of-way to firefighting air tankers landing on Runway 35 and taking off on Runway 17 regardless of wind direction. Extreme caution shall be used when operating near air tankers." I strongly suggest that all pilots yield the right-of-way to all fire fighting aircraft regardless of which runway they are using. Of course it goes without saying that you should fly well clear of any ongoing fire fighting operation. Do your part by staying out of the way of our operating air attack aircraft whether in the air or on the ground.

Flying Through Smoke

Sometime a pilot may embark on a flight when the weather appears to be clear and stable, but then along the route of flight smoke from a wildfire is encountered. This has recently been the case for many pilots flying between Tuolumne County and Southern California. The Santa Barbara fire has been burning for weeks now and the smoke tends to blow toward the east causing areas of limited visibility and at times obscuring the horizon creating near IFR conditions. Pilots should exercise caution when these conditions are encountered.

Noxious Weed Control

Last year the residents at Pine Mountain Lake donated money to spray the noxious weeds at the airport in an attempt to keep the weeds from spreading. Controlling the spread of the noxious weeds will be a multi year effort due to the nature of weed control. Last year we sprayed using the Ag Department's spray truck. This method was a good first year approach in that it knocked back the majority of the noxious weeds. This year we hand sprayed the Russian thistle and tarweed for better effectiveness and to reduce the amount of spray we use. The spraying took almost four full days.

As I have mentioned before, the effectiveness of weed control will also depend on the adjacent airport residents taking action to control the same weeds on their property. The County cannot spray weeds on private property, but we can assist people with their assessment and approach to weed control efforts on their parcels.

Stupid Pilot Tricks

Something Just Fell Off Your Plane

I received a phone call from a pilot who was trying to locate a piece of his aircraft that had reportedly fallen off his plane at Columbia Airport. The pilot told me that that a person on the ground contacted him via the UNICOM frequency and informed him that something shiny had just fallen off his aircraft. The pilot, not noticing any odd engine instrument indications or any strange vibrations or noises, chose to continue his flight home to his destination. It struck me very strange that even though someone told him that something had fallen off his aircraft and the part was lying on the runway, that the pilot didn't immediately return to the airport to inspect his plane and retrieve the part.

Apparently, the part that fell off the plane was a piece of the exhaust system. Not only was it an important component of the exhaust system, the plane was old enough to make the part difficult to replace due to its limited availability. As requested, I went out to the runway and looked for the missing part but didn't find anything that looked like it came from an airplane much less like a part of an exhaust system. I then inquired around the airport to see if anyone had picked up a piece of an exhaust system off the runway. To my surprise I found the missing part and the person that radioed the departing pilot. We both agreed that in our own minds it was a pretty stupid thing to continue a flight after being told a part had just fallen off your airplane.

Those of us that are or have been aircraft owners know that there are not many parts on an airplane that don't serve some important purpose. Losing anything off an airplane should be cause for concern and immediate investigation, especially if the part was large enough to be seen falling off an aircraft in flight! Continuing a flight under this circumstance seems to show poor judgment at best.

Now, after finding out that the part was a component of the exhaust system, I have to

wonder what could have gone wrong if the worst case played out. I know that exhaust gas temperatures in my plane are in excess of 1,200 degrees F on takeoff. If there is any oil coating the inside the cowling there is a possibility of an engine fire. I also know that exhaust gases are corrosive which can't be good to have flowing around inside the cowling. And finally, if exhaust gases leak into the cockpit the carbon monoxide can asphyxiate the occupants. None of these possibilities sound very appealing to me.

A precautionary landing should be considered whenever something about the flight or aircraft doesn't seem right. A precautionary landing should be performed when you know something is not right, but you don't know have enough information to determine what it is. I know of several situations when someone took off with a seatbelt hanging out a door and the aircraft returned and landed to stow the belt. I have also seen aircraft depart with fuel streaming off the top of the wing and immediately return once informed of the problem via a radio call. Why wouldn't someone return to the airport and retrieve a part that had just fallen off his aircraft, then do a thorough investigation of the problem and determine if the aircraft was airworthy for flight?

As for the piece of exhaust, it was a cabin heat shroud and it appeared to be in very good shape. The clamps that held it in place had come loose. My guess was that the part would cost several hundred dollars to replace. I mailed it to the pilot and never heard from him again. It would have been nice if he had sent me a thank you note with \$5 for the postage.

The Manager's Approach is a monthly publication from the Tuolumne County Airports Director.

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