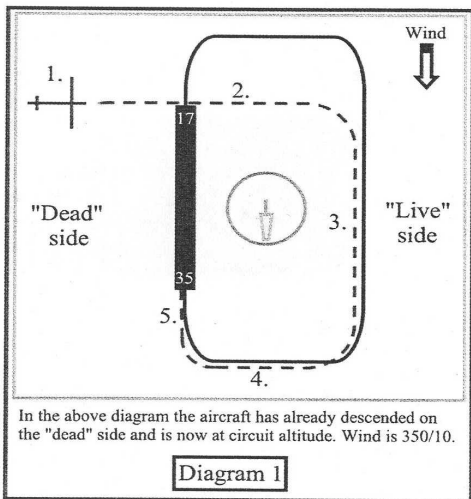


Understanding how to join overhead an unmanned airfield

IT ALWAYS AMAZES me to see how many pilots, and students, do not have a reasonable understanding of how to join overhead an unmanned airfield. There is no doubt that all pilots are at some stage taught the basic idea but at most this seems to be somewhat vague. It could very well be that the instructors themselves are sometimes skimming over this extremely important exercise and even those students that are taught the exact procedure seem to forget all about it as soon as they have their PPL. I have had the displeasure of joining overhead an unmanned airfield where a number of other light aircraft were simultaneously joining and the ensuing melee can only be described as chaotic. Nobody seemed to be too sure exactly what they were supposed to be doing and the whole point of the procedure was lost in the resultant confusion. To say that this was dangerous would be an understatement. The whole idea of having a standard joining procedure for unmanned airfields is to reduce the risk of a mid-air collisions whilst setting the aircraft up for landing.

The basic premise is simple: You want to join overhead the airfield above any other possible traffic, decide on the runway in use, descend to circuit altitude in an area where it is unlikely that there will be any other air traffic below you, and then join the circuit in a way that other possible traffic can be easily spotted.

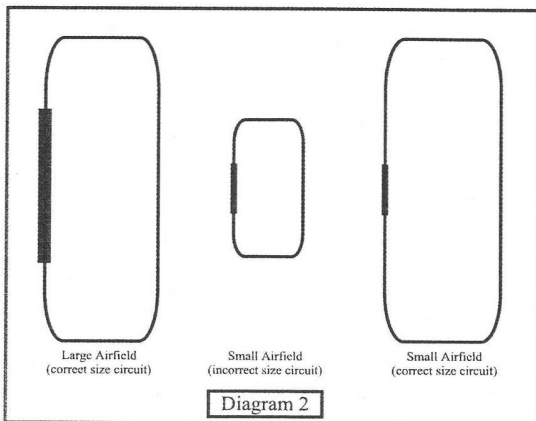


Referring to diagram 1, let us presume you are approaching airfield Putsonderwater from the South (below the diagram). Before reaching the airfield, you will need to descend to 2000'agl and approach with the airfield on your left so that the airfield, and the windsock, can be observed from above the usual circuit altitude of 1000'agl.

In this example, the wind is observed to be blowing from the North, and let us presume that the circuit direction indicators advise that a right-hand circuit (non-standard) is in force at this airfield. From overhead the field, at 2000'agl, you will need to now enter a right-hand turn (all turns will now be right-hand), and route towards the "dead side" of the airfield. Once the aircraft has crossed the extended runway centreline, you can set up a descent, and descend the aircraft to 1000'agl, all the while continuing the slow right-hand turn to position the aircraft at position "1" at 1000'agl. It is at this point, as you approach the "live side", that you will need to become even more vigilant, as you now effectively join the circuit at a circuit height of 1000'agl. You will note in the diagram that the aircraft should join the circuit at a right angle to, and overhead, the upwind threshold. There are two reasons for this: When making your blind radio call, you will be able to give an exact position and it is expected that there is a better than even chance that any other aircraft

already in the circuit will probably be on or near the ground when anywhere between the two thresholds.

As you now approach position "2", be extra cautious. Scan the sky all around the aircraft, including below and above, but especially from the left and ahead. If the area is clear of traffic you can turn the aircraft onto right-hand downwind (position "3"). Right-hand base and final approach (positions "4" and "5") are flown in the normal manner but be extra careful if you are used to flying at a large, manned airfield.



Unmanned airfields are sometimes a lot smaller (i.e. shorter) than you may be accustomed to and this usually leads to a too-high approach. This is due entirely to perspective. You will tend to compare the size of the circuit flown to the size of the runway so of course, with a much shorter runway, then the natural tendency is to fly a smaller circuit. If you refer to diagram 2, the first picture on the left is of a normal size circuit at a large airfield. The second is of a smaller airfield and, as you can see, the tendency is to then fly a "small" circuit, which of course will result in a too-high approach and resultant overshoot or go-around. The idea then, when flying a circuit at a smaller airfield, is to fly the circuit a lot wider than seems necessary (third picture in diagram 2). This usually results in a successful positioning onto a normal final approach.

Remember too that it is vital to "transmit blind" on the designated frequency (usually 124.8 in South Africa) and to make regular position reports. During your flight planning you should check if the airfield you

are flying to has its own designated frequency, as the whole exercise becomes a point in futility if you are transmitting diligently on the wrong frequency. Airfields that have their own designated frequency most often have it printed in large white numbers near the windsock. Another point worth remembering is that at unmanned airfields the transition altitude is 2000' agl and the transition level 3000'agl, unless otherwise specified in the AIPs.

Above all, when joining at an unmanned airfield, be ever vigilant and expect the unexpected. That way, you will most likely stay out of trouble.

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