AIR PROX *Insight*

DIRECTOR UKAB'S MONTHLY UPDATE   June 2023

AIRPROX OF THE MONTH

Never assume — check, check, check

Picture: Shutterstock.com, David Acosta Alley

Finding out the facts is far safer than simply relying on a guesstimate…

We're taught many things in our flying training, and learn even more every time we fly, but one mantra that has always stuck with me throughout my time in aviation (and in other things, for that matter) is 'Never Assume – Always Check'.

How often do we hear (or say) in our daily lives, 'I'm glad I checked'? Confirmation of what we are expecting, or a correction to what we think when we discover the truth, is the whole point of checking – in fact, the checklists we use when flying are born out of many years of lessons from others' misfortune, some of which have been painful.

This month I have chosen an Airprox to illustrate not only this point, but also the importance of keeping others informed about what you are doing. **Airprox 2023003** was one of four examples this month of pilots either doing something different to 'the norm' in the circuit without announcing it and/or not speaking on the radio to confirm the position of other aircraft. It took place at

Fairoaks in January this year after a C152 pilot had joined downwind while a PA-28 pilot was conducting a touch-and-go from a glide approach.

The PA-28 pilot was aware that the C152 had joined the circuit and was now ahead of them in the pattern. However, the PA-28 pilot decided to fly a flapless circuit and approach and proceeded to fly a much 'tighter' circuit than that of the C152. To complicate matters, just as the C152 pilot was turning onto final, the Fairoaks AFISO asked them to change their squawk (in response to a request from Farnborough).

Although this probably led to the C152 pilot not making a 'final' call, the AFISO also issued a 'land at your discretion' to the C152 pilot in the same transmission as asking for the change of squawk, so there would have been an indication to the PA-28 pilot that the C152 pilot was on final.

The PA-28 pilot checked the final approach before they turned, did not see the C152 and assumed it had already landed. So, it seems the PA-28 pilot had

not assimilated that the C152 was on final and turned onto final themselves, rolling-out just behind and above the C152. Happily, the AFISO saw this development and suggested to the PA-28 pilot, in response to their 'final' call, that they go around because they had the C152 just ahead of them. What can we take away from this? Well, the first thing that springs to mind is the 'conforming with the pattern of traffic' rule (SERA.3225).

The visual circuit works well when each pilot follows the preceding aircraft. We often see Airprox in the visual circuit where aircraft come into proximity because pilots fly different circuit patterns and thus geometry comes into play. In this case, the C152 pilot was forming the pattern because they were established on the downwind leg as the PA-28 pilot was climbing-out. Had the PA-28 pilot followed the C152's track and turned base at the same or similar point then the separation would have been more-or-less the same as when the Piper was climbing-out.

Although the PA-28 pilot elected to fly a tighter downwind leg, the crucial thing here is that they turned onto base much closer to the runway than the C152 pilot, thus 'cutting short' their ground track relative to the C152.

The PA-28 pilot clearly had not seen where the C152 was flying on downwind, or where they turned onto base leg, so what would you do in this situation? Well, the obvious answer is to ask the other pilot for their position, but this is something that we rarely see in the moments leading up to an Airprox.
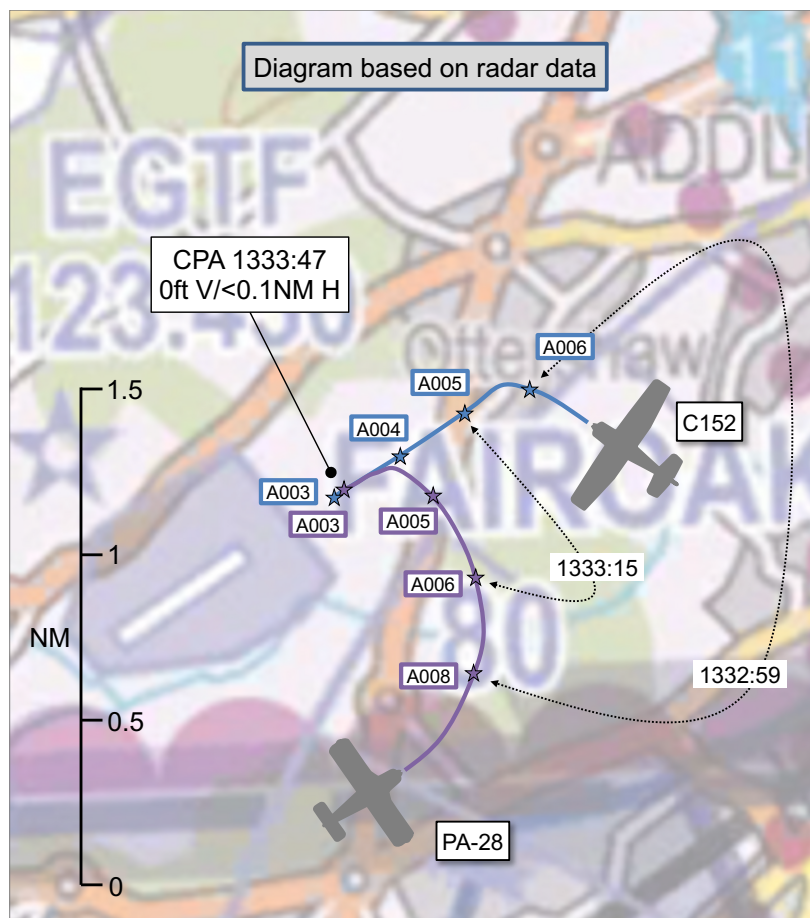
Remember, just because you can't see an aircraft it doesn't mean there isn't one there. If unsure of the position of another aircraft in the circuit, or unable to see an aircraft where you are expecting to see it, ask the AFISO/controller or pilot for a position report. You will then be able to adjust your circuit accordingly even, dare I say, if you still don't see the other aircraft.

Additionally, let other pilots know what you are doing – if you are flying a tighter pattern then say so, it will enhance the awareness of other pilots in the circuit and help them to locate you as they are probably either not looking for you (because you are behind them and following them, aren't you?) or don't think that there might be an issue; if you need to do something to increase your spacing from the aircraft in front (eg by extending downwind) then state your intentions on the radio – that will allow others following you to adjust their plan accordingly.
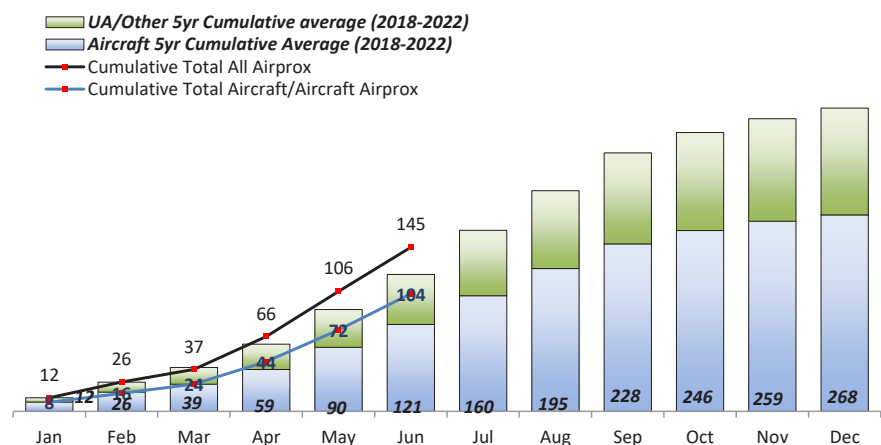
Finally, and returning to the main point of this article, if things aren't as you would expect them to be then don't assume that your mental model must be inaccurate – it is just as likely that you simply can't see what you're expecting to see, so CHECK!

UKAB MONTHLY ROUND-UP

This month the Board evaluated 22 Airprox, including seven UA/Other events, six of which were reported by the piloted aircraft and one by the drone operator. Of the 16 full evaluations, six were classified as risk-bearing – all category B. This month also saw the last of the 2022 Airprox (bar one, where there is a need for further investigation and analysis). The Board made one Safety Recommendation at the June meeting: that *'Gloucestershire aerodrome operator reviews and clarifies the published standard helicopter departure'*.

Diagram based on radar data

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2023 Airprox - Cumulative Distribution

- UA/Other 5yr Cumulative average (2018-2022)
- Aircraft 5yr Cumulative Average (2018-2022)
- Cumulative Total All Airprox
- Cumulative Total Aircraft/Aircraft Airprox

The Board has now started assessing the 2023 Airprox. As the graph above shows, reporting so far this year is well ahead of the five-year average; in fact, it is around 25% higher than at the same point last year, which itself was 15% higher than 2021. This continued increase could be due to many things and, while I'd like to think it displays an increased awareness of (and trust in?) the Airprox process, some part of it is probably due to an increase in the number of reportable events. What have you done/are you doing to minimise the likelihood of your having an Airprox?