

by LCdr. Mark D. Lane

On a recent flight, I was the copilot for a mission in which we were transporting civilian VIPs from a large, busy civilian airfield to a small, uncontrolled civilian airfield near a military base. Coming from a TACAIR background to the C-9, this was my first experience flying into an uncontrolled field. I had read about UNICOM procedures in the *AIM*, but not recently, and not in detail. As a result, I was only generally familiar with the procedures that general-aviation pilots use constantly. We did not brief anything out of the ordinary for this flight, and I didn't tell my aircraft commander that this was my first experience with a UNICOM facility.

UNICOM Snafu

Photo alteration by Allan Amen

The destination field was equipped with an automated weather-broadcast system, an ILS approach, and an 8,000-foot runway. The weather was VFR with no ceiling, and visibility was more than 5 miles. The winds were reported calm.

We were talking to an approach controller in a nearby metropolitan area who could clear us for a normal visual entry to the field or the ILS approach. The ILS approach was for runway 5, and we were coming from the north. This approach required a long setup.

With the weather reported good, we elected to request the visual approach. I knew I needed to make a number of calls on UNICOM, and the first call should come from a significant distance out (the *AIM* says 10

The controller cleared us to his minimum vectoring altitude of 2,000 feet and told us to report the field in sight. Because the winds were calm, we planned a straight-in to runway 23. I reported our intentions on UNICOM at about 8 miles and still heard no reply. The actual slant-range visibility through a haze layer was more like 3 miles, so by the time we saw the field, we were too high for a safe approach to runway 23. Once we reported the field in sight, the approach controller cleared us to proceed visually and to switch frequencies.

We listened to just the UNICOM frequency. I reported on UNICOM that we were at the upwind numbers for runway 5 and were making a teardrop entry to a left downwind. No replies from anyone.

miles). At 15 miles, I called on our second VHF radio and reported my call sign, position and that I was inbound to the field. I quickly found out the first limitation of UNICOM frequencies. Many fields use the same UNICOM frequency, so we were hearing communications for other fields, some as far as 200 miles away. In other words, the frequency was cluttered. If anyone is working the landing pattern at the destination, they are supposed to inform the inbound aircraft of which runway is in use. No one replied to our initial call, nor for that matter, to any of our subsequent calls.

I called the 180. As we turned off the 180, we quickly found that we were looking directly into the rising sun and, with the haze layer, we lost sight of the runway. We overshot the runway and the aircraft commander decided to wave off. The winds were calm, and there didn't appear to be anyone else around the field, so we decided to continue for a left downwind for runway 23. I called we were entering a left downwind.

I again made a 180 call. At about the 90, we noticed on TCAS that there was an aircraft on the ground at the field. To appear on TCAS, an aircraft must be squawking

Continued on page 32

mode C, so we guessed he must be getting ready to take off. All three crew members in the cockpit began looking for the aircraft on the ground. I knew I was supposed to make a call on final, but I didn't because of the distraction of looking for the aircraft on the ground.

As we touched down on runway 23, I saw a light, single-engine aircraft pull out and line up for takeoff on runway 5! I told the aircraft commander, who did a maximum-braking stop. We didn't know if the other pilot saw us and whether he would start his takeoff roll directly toward us. As it turned out, he did see us, and he exited the runway.

We turned off at mid-field, and as we left the runway, we heard the first call on UNICOM from our destination field.

The pilot of the other aircraft said, "Don't you know how to talk?" Since I had made numerous radio calls, I was confused and simply said, "We made a few calls. Sorry you didn't hear us."

He replied, "Well, I saw you go around from runway five, but never heard anything." He then took off without making any further radio transmissions.

Here are few lessons if you are going to a field with UNICOM.

1. Standard calls from aircraft approaching a field are at 10 miles, entering downwind, turning base and turning final.

2. Civilians don't know what a 180 is. You need to use civilian terms of turning base and turning final.

3. Standard calls for taking off from a UNICOM field are: "Taxiing for runway _____," and "Taking runway ___ for takeoff."

4. UNICOM frequencies are very clear on the ground because you won't hear calls at other fields. In the air, UNICOM is quite congested, and you will have to listen closely to hear calls for your destination field.

5. If the winds are suitable (calm in this case), most pilots will use the runway appropriate to their direction of flight.

6. These operations are strictly see and avoid. Civilian aircraft may operate VFR from these fields without a radio, much less a transponder with Mode C. The UNICOM frequency is an aid to the see-and-avoid doctrine.

I am sure the civilian pilot in this incident never made a radio call that he was taking the runway, because we were close enough to have heard him. The calls he made after the incident were loud and

clear. The time from startup to takeoff for a light civil aircraft can be short, so he probably didn't even have his radio on to hear our calls before the waveoff for runway 5. I think he saw us wave off from runway 5 before starting his engine and assumed we would return for runway 5. He may have heard our 180 call for runway 23 but didn't know what that meant.

While taking the duty, he probably listened for a call from us on final and looked at the approach end of runway 5, assuming that's where we would be. The fact that I omitted the call that we were on final for runway 23 didn't help the situation.

A light civil aircraft at 1.5 miles (the other end of the runway) is hard to see, particularly since it was a white airplane against a white concrete background. The TCAS information telling us that he was squawking helped increase our vigilance for traffic on the surface, but couldn't tell us where on the surface he was. We should have reviewed the UNICOM procedures in AIM before we left on this flight, which would have helped with the non-standard "180" radio call.

LCdr. Lane flies with VR-56.

Turning on the radio is usually part of the pre-takeoff checklist for most civilian aircraft, although pilots usually turn it on before they taxi, if only to listen for other aircraft in the air and on the ground. Of course, at a controlled field, the radios have to be on to talk to ground control.

Most civilian pilots adhere to their checklists with the same dedication as their military brethren. There are, of course, always the few who bypass parts of their checklists. This civilian pilot could be one of them, but for the most part, following checklists is as much a part of civilian flying as it is for those in the military.

Without ground and tower controllers, operations at an uncontrolled field can get sloppy because everyone is left to himself to clear the approach corridor of the runway he intends to take.

The burden was certainly on the people in both aircraft to check for traffic. Of course, the C-9 on final did have the right of way. Check Federal Air Regulations 91.113. The Airman's Information Manual, 4-1-9 also has good information about operating in airports without control towers.—Ed. 🇺🇸