Aviation Safety Insights

Hangar Talk

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CIVIL AVIATION AUTHORITY OF NEW ZEALAND
Te Mana Rererangi Tūmatanui o Aotearoa

Before you fly, double check your NOTAMs

A recent occurrence highlights how gaps in the gathering of pre-flight information can quickly turn into in-flight confusion and increased risk.

Before departure a pilot checked weather information and NOTAMs via an international third-party app. A fuel stop at an uncontrolled aerodrome had been planned as part of the route; however, the pilot did not identify a NOTAM relating to aerobatic activity at that aerodrome.

On arrival, the pilot made standard radio calls and joined the circuit, however, an aerobatic box was active at the aerodrome.* Radio calls from ground personnel advising the pilot of the aerobatic operations were unexpected, creating confusion and increasing workload at a critical stage of flight. The pilot subsequently elected to leave the circuit and divert to another aerodrome to get fuel instead.

This occurrence highlights how quickly workload and risk can increase when pilots encounter unexpected operational activity.



Photo: iStock.com/vuk8691

Safety considerations

Good situational awareness starts before the engine starts.

- Multiple sources may be used but always verify these - apps are valuable tools but not the only source. NOTAMs can be identified using official sources like Airways Internet Flight Information Service (IFIS)
- Expect the unexpected at uncontrolled aerodromes - particularly during events, competitions, or seasonal activity
- Ensure pre-flight planning accounts for changes to the flight plan, including fuel requirements when diversions or unexpected changes occur
- Pause if things don't make sense - if communications or traffic don't align with expectations, create time and space, hold, remain clear, or go around
- Reduce pressure early - leaving the circuit or diverting early is a positive safety decision not a failure

The safest pilots don't just gather information, they verify it, question it, and stay ready to adapt.

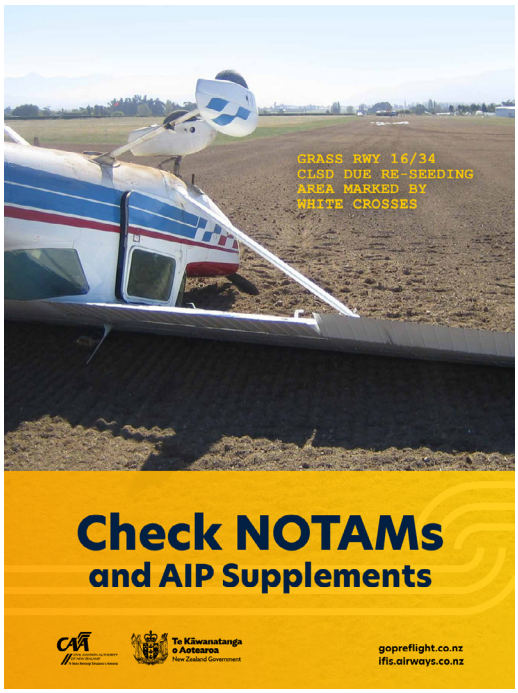
**Where no Temporary Restricted Area (TRA) is designated, there is no formally assigned airspace set aside to manage or contain the aerobatic activity, increasing the importance of pre-flight briefing information such as NOTAMs and Aeronautical Information Publication (AIP) Supplements.*

New Zealand Government
Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa

What's happening

When critical operational information, like NOTAMs, are missed or misunderstood:

- aircraft may fly to an aerodrome without awareness of the operations advised in a NOTAM
- pilots experience unexpected communications or traffic conflicts which may cause confusion
- workload increases rapidly at a critical phase of flight (arrival/joining the circuit)
- decision-making can become reactive rather than planned, and
- fuel reserves may be reduced by unplanned diversions or holding, limiting available options and increasing operational risk.



Busy uncontrolled airspace, such as areas with aerobatic activity, can increase the risk of:

- loss of situational awareness
- airspace conflicts
- disruption to the operations of multiple aircraft, and
- increased reliance on last-minute information.

Why could it be happening

Two common factors are at play:

1. Reliance on single information sources: third-party apps can improve accessibility but may not always present the complete or most current NOTAM picture.
2. Expectation bias: pilots may build a mental model of "normal" operations. When reality differs it can take time to reset and respond.

Other safety reading

- Check NOTAMs and AIP Supplements poster
- *Vector* Online: Don't be that pilot
- *Vector* Online: So you don't think you need a NOTAM?

Key contact:
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