

Amending SARTIME, Term

Forgetful pilots have been tracked down to aero club bars; returning their aircraft to the hangar; and driving down the highway. Why it's important to remember the adage: the flight isn't complete until the flight plan is terminated.

On 16 March 2017, staff at the Lower Hutt-based Rescue Coordination Centre (RCCNZ) were stretched and under pressure.

A cruise ship passenger had been reported as falling overboard and was missing. A person with spinal injuries needed to be rescued from the Nelson Lakes National Park. And three Search and Rescue (SAR) watches were reported as unterminated.

The first unterminated SARWATCH turned out to be the result of the pilot forgetting to cancel their flight plan.

So was the second.

And the third.

Since no event is assumed to be a false alarm, there's considerable energy and cost expended by both the RCCNZ and Airways when a SARTIME expires, with no word from the pilot.

And it's not a rare occurrence.

Airways says it deals with about one such situation a day, and between six and seven per cent of all monthly alerts turn out to be the result of forgetful pilots.

You need to be aware that not cancelling a SARTIME potentially carries a fine of between \$2,000 and \$5,000.

RCCNZ Watch Leader and Senior Search and Rescue Officer, Neville Blakemore, says pilots on a VFR flight plan need to terminate their flight plan, advising the Air Traffic Service by cellphone, online, or by radio.

"Ideally, pilots should terminate a flight plan, or amend it, at least 15 minutes before the expiry of the nominated SARTIME. Virtually everyone has a cellphone, so it's never been easier."

If a pilot is unable to use a radio to contact FISCOM to amend or terminate their SARTIME, the phone number to call if using a cellphone is either 03 358 1509 or 0900 62 675.

The landline number to terminate their flight plan is 0800 NBO PLN (0800 626 756).

How to Use Flight Plans

A pilot must file a VFR flight plan if they want an alerting service – or SARWATCH – provided during their flight.

The VFR flight plan will include the pilot's SARTIME, which is the time they are to call Airways by, when they have landed safely.

Airways' Air Traffic Support Sector (ATSS) Deputy Team Leader, Kevin Holland, says far too many pilots fail to give themselves sufficient time to complete a journey.

"Then, finding they are going to go beyond their original flight time, they compound the problem by failing to ask ATSS to update their SARTIME accordingly.

"Unfortunately, the most common excuse we hear from 'overdue' pilots is that they forgot to amend their SARTIME or cancel their flight plan."

So What Happens When a Flight Plan is Not Terminated?

When a pilot's SARTIME expires without them making contact, the ATSS electronic system highlights the flight information on screen and sounds an alarm.

ATSS staff take initial steps to locate the aircraft by calling the tower at the pilot's destination airfield, asking if the aeroplane has, in fact, landed.

If not, ATSS contacts attended aerodromes along the flight plan route, to establish if the pilot has diverted there, or made an unscheduled landing.

If the aircraft remains unfound, the Airways' flight information officer radios the pilot, and if necessary, makes a general call on all frequencies to any pilots to determine if the aircraft has been seen, or spoken with.

Staff also continue to try to contact the pilot by cellphone. If there's been no contact in 15 minutes, Airways notifies the RCCNZ.

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Rescue coordination staff go into a formal 'alert phase' during which the route and contact details the pilot has provided in their flight plan is used to prepare a search.

Airways' Kevin Holland says pilots who regularly report where they are during their flight, are found more quickly.

"If pilots regularly gave position reports or updated their route – especially in the case of planned training diversions – Airways and RCCNZ obviously have a more accurate idea

inating Flight Plans

of their location. That can save a lot of time when it's needed most."

If, after an additional 30 minutes, there's still no contact with the pilot, RCCNZ increases the alert level. Other aircraft may be assigned to fly the route detailed in the flight plan, and emergency services could be notified.

From this point, RCCNZ treats the event as a full scale rescue operation...

What's In It For You

Every pilot should appreciate the value of filing a flight plan. The SARTIME service incorporated in it means that if the worst

should happen, a search kicks into action the *moment* your aircraft is overdue.

But so as not to sabotage your own excellent decision to file a flight plan, remember to terminate it.

If you think you might forget, try leaving something novel in your car to remind you before you head home – a note on coloured paper on your car seat, or in the cockpit – or a reminder on your phone or iPad.

It will potentially save the country money and valuable resources. Also, your own embarrassment when the country's search and rescue officials track you down to your local café, sipping your post-flight latte. ■



Photo: Courtesy of Wanaka Search and Rescue, Incident Management Team.

The incident management team of Wanaka Search and Rescue works with the police and the NZRCC to co-ordinate, direct and manage search operations in their district.