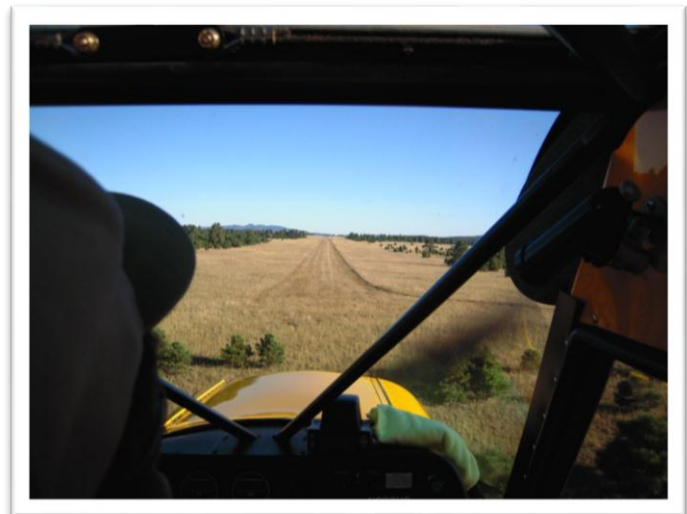


Safety in the Backcountry

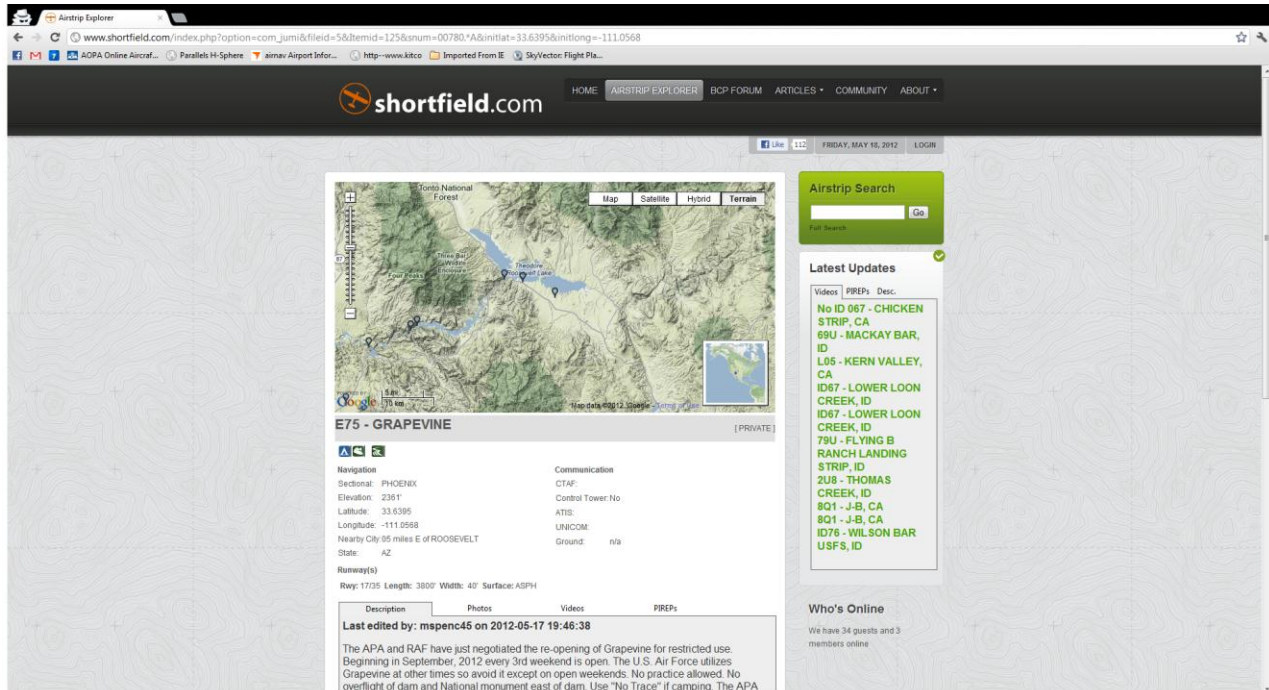
It's a subject that's been written about enough to fill a library shelf, and by folks far more experienced than I. When the FAA's associate Editor, Thomas Hoffman, asked me to write about backcountry safety at the RAF booth at Sun-n-Fun this year, I knew that I did not want to rehash the information we all know is so critically important to safe backcountry flying, things like density altitude, mountain flying considerations, short field and soft field landing and takeoff techniques, and the like. No, I had in mind a backcountry challenge that has reared its head as we build up the backcountry inventory here in Arizona. It's a safety issue that you don't really know exists until you start to fly in the backcountry, and it may not be an obvious safety issue to many of you reading this today. It involves an issue that we are all challenged with and tested on during our run for that first pilot certificate. It is prescribed in the Federal Aviation Regulations under 91.103, which reads, "Each pilot in command shall, before beginning a flight, become familiar with all available information concerning that flight..."

It sounds so simple, but the more I worked with fellow pilots on organizing events at sometimes little known backcountry airstrips the more I realized what a challenge this subject of "all available information" can actually be for the backcountry pilot, that is unless "slim to none" is acceptable on the information gauge for you. There is one particular airstrip in Arizona that has a reputation of being the finest in the state, but if I mentioned its name here you'd be hard pressed to find any valuable written safety information, not even length, prevailing winds, obstacles, or any other considerations for landing there. A telling tale was left behind in the wrecked remains of a 180 at this strip a few years ago; it was simply a magazine left opened to a page describing what an incredible place this airstrip was. Unfortunately, this was very likely all "the available information" that this pilot found for this airstrip. Perhaps, I wondered, if there was more information available to this pilot, could the accident have been avoided? While challenging, it is a perfectly safe airstrip where even an occasional Bonanza can be found visiting. Then, last year, when I heard about another accident at this same airstrip as the pilot community began to discuss it, I heard time and time again, "Oh, he got caught in that down draft that hangs out at the approach end. You just can't drag it in there ya know," and I thought to myself, "No, I didn't know!" Of course, about this time I had to call the District Ranger that I'd been working with in an attempt to bring this airstrip out of the dark, and I really began to realize the challenge that exists in finding important and accurate information on some of these little gems. If you are a backcountry pilot, you've heard about these airstrips from your friends,

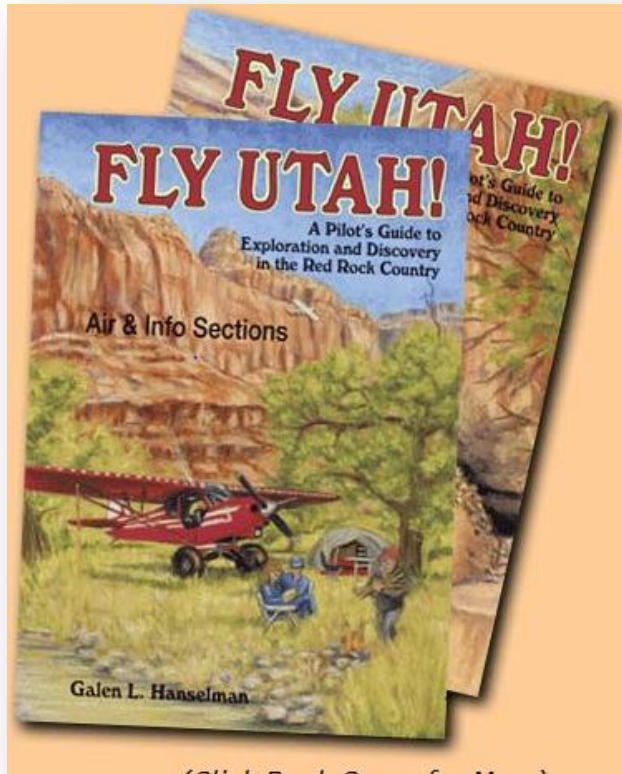


the ones without an identifier, not on Airnav, and certainly not in the AFD! Have you ever tried to hold an event at an airstrip where no CTAF is published?

OK, you've defined a potential problem Mark, but what's the solution? I wish I could say there was an easy solution at this point, but there simply is not; there are, however, some common sense things you can do to increase the amount of information you have to consider on a backcountry airstrip before taking your chances on pure hearsay. The first is to check with your local pilot organizations, especially if you have a backcountry group. In Arizona we've begun publishing pamphlets that convey basic information such as a temporary CTAF for events held at the location, length, elevation, and all the items you'd expect in an AFD, including who to contact in advance if prior permission is required. These are made available through the Arizona Pilot's Association, www.AZPilots.org. Utah Back Country Pilot's provide excellent information on their web site, as does Idaho and Montana. These local organizations are a great model for those in areas that are just growing their backcountry inventory. There are several national organizations such as The Recreational Aviation Foundation, www.TheRAF.org, www.backcountrypilots.org, and one of the best overall databases available at www.shortfield.com



Another source can be the land manager, if located on public lands. For example, the Spotted Bear District of the Flathead National Forest has an informational pamphlet available on the airstrips located within this district. These are available from the District Office, the Montana Pilot's Association, or the Recreational Aviation Foundation (RAF). If it's a private airstrip, of course the land owner would be a great place to get information.



Perhaps one of the most exhaustive sources of information is one of Galen Hanselman's books: Fly Idaho, Fly the Big Sky, Fly Utah, or Air Baja. In some states the departments of transportation, particularly the aeronautics division, if present, maintain a database on airstrips, including back country, or auxiliary landing fields. If you ask your local backcountry organization they will usually be able to recommend a CFI with local backcountry experience, but rather than just talk to this CFI, why not make your first flight into the particular backcountry airstrip with them? That is exactly what I did before attending my first backcountry fly in at the Negrito airstrip in the Gila National Forest in New Mexico.

The long term solution to this challenge is beginning to unfold as backcountry aviation comes out of the woods, so to say, and

becomes more of a mainstream recreational activity and legitimate access method to our public lands across the country. With this trend unfolding, there's less hush-hush and more open discussion about those sometimes elusive, but important, pieces of information about a particular airstrip. You can do your part by becoming part of your local backcountry organization, as well as a national organization such as the RAF.

If nothing else, I hope you'll think twice before landing at a backcountry airstrip when all you have is hearsay, or a fellow pilot telling you, "I went in there. It's no problem!" This may well have been the case when they landed there, but the full picture can only be gathered on an airstrip over time and through many operations at various times of day and season. When there have been incidents at an airstrip, a study of these incidents will almost always be valuable in evaluating the particular issues at that airstrip. If this information can be gathered through interviews with several pilots and condensed into a few simple paragraphs, you have a start at your own safety pamphlet that you may want to make available to others.

Mark Spencer is an engineer working in the radio, radar, and avionics field for over 30 years. As a private pilot and the RAF's Arizona Liaison, he works closely with public land managers and the APA in opening backcountry recreational airstrips on public lands in Arizona.