

Emergency call on 121.5

I have in my office a radio scanner that is set for 122.9 and 121.5 (the emergency channel). I can hear the local pilots come and go from our airport on 122.9. And just in case someone ever makes a call in an emergency on 121.5, I can pick up that too. Every once in a while I can hear a jet make a test call on 121.5 and it sounds like they're Canadian pilots.

The third week of March in 1999 was very nice, much sun and afternoon temperatures were in the 60's. Quite a few airplane owners were out stretching their wings. I was sitting at my desk when I heard a loud - clear voice on the radio: "Aircraft calling on one twentyone decimal five please repeat your message." A Boeing 747 jet enroute from Seattle to New Jersey had picked up a distress call from an airplane on the ground. He was repeating all of the other end of the conversation, so I could get a grasp for the situation in "real time". They said they were in a Cessna on the runway at Benchmark, Montana.

Benchmark is a 6000 foot long paved runway in the remote backcountry just west of the Rocky Mountain Front and just south of the Bob Marshall wilderness area. The elevation is 5434 feet above sea level. The Benchmark strip was built in the 1960's as a staging area for fire fighting retardant planes in the wilderness area. There is a road into the strip but it is a summer-time only road.

The Cessna pilot said that they were snowed-in and couldn't leave the runway. They were getting cold and didn't have adequate clothing. They wanted the airliner to relay a message to the Cascade County (Great Falls, Montana) Search & Rescue department, telling them that they needed help. And he also asked them to call his wife and tell her that he was okay. About that time the Great Falls Flight Service got involved on 121.5, although we couldn't hear them - just the 747, and said they would take care of the calls. Because the 747 co-pilot repeated everything I could "hear" both sides.

I wondered what kind of weather these guys had gotten into in the mountains. Benchmark airstrip is about 80 miles east of here and our weather was just fine, unlimited sunshine and about 65 degrees. Maybe a localized snow squall had dumped some snow on them? Maybe they'd been there overnight? Bad weather didn't seem to be fitting into the story quite right.

Soon after I bought my T-41B Cessna I had Rocky Mountain Avionics on Glacier Field near Kalispell install a voice-activated intercom system in the plane. Strangely my #1 VOR radio quit working after they had done their work. I called Mitch, the owner, and told him about the radio not working. He told me to fly the plane up and they'd take a look at it. It turned out that the technician had clipped

the power supply wire to that side of the radio when he was cutting a tie-wrap on a bundle of wires. He spliced the cut wire but it took him about 2 hours to find it.

While the wiring was being repaired I was visiting with Mitch. We got into a discussion about output wattage of radios in planes. Most radios in small planes, he said, were either 5 or 8 watts. But he noted that the big jets had 40 watt radios. He said and that you could hear them for 100 miles or more. That piqued my interest and I told him the story from the week before about the Cessna on the Benchmark airstrip and the relay by the 747's pilot. I commented about how well the voice from the 747 came in on my scanner. Mitch laughed and said he knew the pilot of the Cessna and the rest of the story. He didn't know about the distress call on 121.5 to the jet though.

It turns out that the Cessna was a 182 owned by a customer of his from Great Falls. He had gone out for an afternoon of fun flying in the mountains. Flying over the Benchmark strip he could see snowmobile tracks on the runway. Making a low pass, it looked like the snow was just a couple of inches deep. He decided to land. Fortunately he didn't nose the 182 over when he landed. The snow was at least a foot deep and when he came to a rather quick stop, he was stuck.



Two pictures of the Benchmark airstrip. The upper photo shows the length of the field looking to the northwest (the Cessna is just above the N49885 placard in my plane). The lower picture is of the snowbound plane, crossways on the runway.

The road into the area wasn't open yet either and they were many, many miles from "civilization". They got on their radio and made a call on 121.5 to an overhead jet for help and that was the conversation I heard on my scanner.

As it turned out, a Search and Rescue helicopter from Malmstrom Airforce Base in Great Falls was dispatched into the strip to pick them up. But they had to leave the Cessna 182 in the middle of the runway. Since it is a paved strip he couldn't sink any tiedowns into the ground either. The next day winter returned to western Montana with high winds and snow.

Several days later the weather was very nice and Jim Tlumach and I decided to fly over and take a look at the Benchmark strip. Sure enough, on the east end of the

30 runway, there was a red and white Cessna 182 in the snow. It looked like they landed right on the east end of the strip and rolled just a very short distance. For whatever reason the plane was sitting crossways on the runway too. I wondered if they were able to maneuver the plane on the ground at all or if it was slung sideways during the deceleration on landing? Either way, it was stuck tight until the snow melted.

Dan Lilja
Plains, MT