

TURNS IN THE TRAFFIC PATTERN

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW
ABOUT LANDING AT
UNCONTROLLED AIRPORTS

By Richie Lengel

RELEVANT DISCUSSION:

FAR 91.126(B), 91.127(A), AIM 4-3-1 THROUGH 4-3-5,
P/C GLOSSARY, AC 90-66, FAA-H-8083-16, 8083-25T

LANDING AT AIRPORTS IN CLASS G OR E AIRSPACE — AIRPORTS WITHOUT AN OPERATING CONTROL TOWER:

1. Even pilots on an instrument approach — once they have visual contact with the airport — must follow the regulatory and/or local rules concerning left or right turns in the traffic pattern at airports without an operating control tower.
2. Aircraft approaching to land at an airport in Class G or E airspace must make all turns to the left unless visual markings or lights (or the chart supplement) indicate right turns.
3. "Straight-in" approaches are permitted and are legal — as long as they do not interfere with other aircraft operating in the appropriate left or right traffic pattern.
4. Generally speaking, an approach is

considered to be straight-in if the aircraft is aligned within 30 degrees of the runway centerline at least 5 miles out.

5. However, according to FAA and National Transportation Safety Board decisions, size and speed of the aircraft matter: A Boeing 747 might be in violation if it made a nonstandard turn as far as 6 miles out, while a Piper J-3 Cub might still be considered to be on its cross-country leg at that distance.

6. Aircraft remaining in the traffic pattern should not commence a turn to the crosswind leg until beyond the departure end of the runway and within 300 feet below traffic-pattern altitude, with the pilot ensuring that the turn to downwind leg will be made at

the traffic-pattern altitude. (AC 90-66)

7. Once again, you must make all turns to the left unless visual markings or lights (or the chart supplement) indicate right turns. Even if ATC sets you up for nonstandard traffic on an instrument approach to a nontowered airport, the controller does not have the authority to permit you to deviate from the FARs.

The FAA is very sensitive about this regulation. If you are observed making illegal turns without a valid reason, even a kinder and gentler FAA safety inspector will likely not be amused.

8. You are permitted to make a nonstandard approach from the "wrong side" of the airport for bona fide safety

reasons. Convenience should not enter into that decision.

FAA legal interpretations: John D. Collins, August 8, 2013; John J. Krug (June 20, 2014): ...§91.126(a) allows pilots to deviate from the requirements of §91.126 if "otherwise authorized or required."

Therefore, a pilot approaching to land at an uncontrolled airport may make right turns if such deviation is "authorized or required." The FAA emphasizes, however, that the circumstances in which this deviation from §91.126(b)(1) is "authorized or required" are very limited.

The phrase *authorized or required* itself does not give pilots the discretion to deviate from §91.126. Such deviation must be authorized or required by the approach guidelines of a specific airport or by another FAA regulation.

For example, §91.3(b) authorizes the

pilot in command of an aircraft to deviate from any rule of Part 91 to the extent necessary to resolve "an in-flight emergency requiring immediate action."

Although the decision to deviate under these circumstances is within the PIC's judgment, this determination must be made in good faith based on safety concerns and not convenience; failure to do so may result in the suspension of the PIC's certificate.

NTSB Order Number EA-4883 (March 5, 2001): In this order, the NTSB found a violation of §91.126 by a skydive-plane pilot making improper turns on approach in a pattern because it was "quite obvious that Respondent Van Dyke was in a hurry" to land and did not have any safety reason that would require him to deviate from §91.126. This decision resulted in a 45-day suspension of the pilot's commercial certificate.

In another earlier decision, the board said: "Aircraft making valid straight-in approaches at uncontrolled airports would, nevertheless, be deemed in violation of FAR [now 91.126 and 91.127] if they interfered with other aircraft."

Each pilot of a helicopter must avoid the flow of fixed-wing aircraft. A helicopter operating in the traffic pattern may fly a pattern similar to the airplane pattern at a lower altitude (500 AGL) and closer to the airport. This pattern may be on the opposite side of the runway with turns in the opposite direction if local policy permits. (AC 90-66A, FAA-H-8083-21A)

Pilots circling to land from an instrument approach at an uncontrolled airport must adhere to 91.126 (i.e., all turns to the left unless signals or the chart supplement indicate right turns). Ⓞ

FAA regulations could change at any time. Please refer to current FARs to ensure you are legal.

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