GA1314

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Category: General Aviation

Report Title Overtaken in the circuit

Initial Report

After deciding that this would be the day that I would take my children flying for the first time, I arranged with the tower at [home aerodrome] to make one circuit and full stop landing before then taxying back round, checking the situation on the back seats, and heading off again for a local flight if all was well.

The one circuit and full stop was uneventful, and the decision was made to stick to Plan A and taxy back round to the hold for a short local VFR flight to the West of the airport. We departed and all was well – the children had grins as big as the Cheshire Cat while blissfully staring out the windows. Upon returning to the circuit after about 20 minutes flying, we entered the ATZ from the North West (dead-side) and descended to circuit height. Upon crossing through the overhead, we joined the circuit downwind left-hand for runway [xx]. At this point, I recall that I was told by the FISO that there was one other aircraft on short final and I was "number 2". The aircraft that was on short final landed shortly thereafter.

When late downwind, another aircraft [Aircraft Type] popped up on frequency and reported "4 mile long final". I heard the FISO ask the [Aircraft Type] to "report 2 mile final". After then making my own downwind call and turning base, the FISO passes on to me that another aircraft is on a 4 mile final. Before hearing the [Aircraft Type] on frequency I had assumed I was "number 1", but knowing there was an aircraft out there on long final was now making me doubt this depending on his range and speed.

When descending on base leg, I saw the [Aircraft Type] at about my 2'o'clock and, knowing they would be faster than me, decided there and then to position behind it, keying the radio to inform the FISO as such. I remember thinking that there could be no way it was at 4 miles when originally reported, and by the time it reported "2 miles" (i.e. when it should have been entering the ATZ) it was on short final and I was turning on to final behind it, even by this stage having slowed down as much as possible to allow for spacing.

I followed the [Aircraft Type] in and did my best to slow up, but eventually had to go around anyway, partly owing to them taxying right to the far end of the runway, which I know they were fully entitled to do, but riled me a little at the time having just been overtaken by them in the circuit.

After another circuit, our landing was uneventful and my young passengers were still very pleased about their first flight with Dad.

I subsequently called the tower for a debrief and was told that the [Aircraft Type] (who was on an IFR flight from Liverpool) had somehow mistakenly established himself on the ILS approach for [nearby airport] who were not best pleased about this given there was a jet inbound and so vectored him away and handed him off to [home aerodrome], hence the first call he made was "… <call sign>, 4 mile long final". The FISO on duty was a bit perplexed by this too and agreed that he should have joined dead-side and integrated with the circuit, as per the aerodrome's procedures. The FISO added that sometimes there has been known to be confusion with how the handoff is given to IFR traffic; if [nearby airport] say something along the lines of "you are cleared to enter [home aerodrome] VFR", this can be assumed by some to mean "cleared to land" and obviously results in confusion when they discover there is other traffic already in the circuit. The FISO said that this type of thing does occur reasonably often, usually with faster aircraft joining via [nearby airport].

The FISO suggested, as per their procedures, that if spacing with an aircraft ahead is insufficient, that the base leg is extended on to the dead-side before reintegrating with the circuit again. But in these circumstances when already descending on base leg and only then seeing the other aircraft which was much closer than had been reported, what I did was correct.

The published procedures for [home aerodrome] state that long finals may be possible dependent on circuit traffic, but those joining from the [nearby airport] CTR should normally join overhead at [height] and descend dead side to integrate with the circuit traffic. This certainly did not happen in this case and, while I empathise with the [Aircraft Type] pilot who was probably under a high IFR workload in a fast aircraft anyway without being additionally chastised by ATC, I think only highlights more strongly the need for all pilots to understand their destination aerodrome procedures and obtain a full and detailed briefing beforehand if unfamiliar.

I think it also impresses upon pilots the importance of safe slow flight techniques to assist in the integration with other circuit traffic and an unknown aircraft appearing ahead. Sudden control inputs here to try and correct the situation when already flying slowly at only 800' AGL could have had disastrous consequences.

Comment

The situation was not specifically one of having been 'overtaken in the circuit' but there was certainly a potential conflict between the reporter's aircraft on base leg and the other aircraft on 'long' final. This situation of straight-ins versus circuit traffic is one that often causes concerns and needs careful consideration by both aircraft commanders to ensure that the aircraft integrate with each other. Ultimately, it was for the other pilot to conform with or avoid the pattern of traffic formed by other aircraft in operation (as required under SERA.3225(b)) when they joined long final

but, in this respect, the only 'priority' that can be applied *per se* is to the aircraft that is the lower on final. To be fair, the situation the reporter faced with the erroneous call by the other pilot will not have helped their ability to plan for deconfliction. More generally, although not the case in this incident, such circumstances could also easily result at mixed-use airfields if larger aircraft such as Bizjets for example conduct straight-in approaches where it is probably preferable that the lighter aircraft gives way (even if they were not specifically required to do so) because the prospect of larger aircraft trying to conduct visual circuits is probably a worse outcome.

The other pilot's mistake in wrongly making an approach to the nearby airport will no doubt have flustered them, and it's easy to think that they might then have been task-focused on making their subsequent approach perhaps to the detriment of their appreciation of other traffic in the circuit. The reporter saw and acted on the potential conflict, which is all that can be asked, and they adopted exactly the right mindset in making sure that they avoided the other aircraft rather than 'standing on' their track and flying into conflict. Whether to slow down or go-around from base leg is a decision that is situation dependent, but great care needs to be taken when slowing down in such circumstances so that the stall is not approached (especially if you then need to turn onto final). We all need to think about what we would do if confronted with another aircraft as we position on base leg/final, and an early decision to go-around is often the best course of action so that a subsequent stable approach can be made using the normal parameters. This is not to imply that the reporter had pressed on in this case (although they probably could have gone around earlier from base leg) but it might be that they had been lulled into a false sense of security by being informed that they were No2 to another aircraft on short final that they had then seen land (even though AFISOs cannot give sequencing instructions) and so the inference that they were now No1 might have influenced a decision to go-around later than desirable.

On a final note, this incident could easily be classified as an Airprox (albeit one in which there was no risk of collision due to the reporter's actions), and CHIRP strongly advises pilots who encounter similar situations to make a report to the UK Airprox Board (UKAB) who will be able to investigate the incident with all the resources that they have available. They can review radar traces, measure the separation between the aircraft and will likely be able to get the other pilot's perspective of the incident and whether they saw you. The UKAB will also log the incident and draw any valuable lessons from it, which is important in their work of trying to reduce incidents in future. Reporting to the UKAB is simple, either use their website www.airproxboard.org.uk or their app which is available by searching for 'Airprox' in the appropriate app store. The UKAB are a friendly bunch who will be very keen to progress reports and will provide you with a fuller resolution than we at CHIRP can.

Key Issues

Dirty Dozen Human Factors

The following 'Dirty Dozen' Human Factors elements were a key part of the CHIRP discussions about this report and are intended to provide food for thought when considering aspects that might be pertinent in similar circumstances.

Pressure – compulsion or anxiety to satisfy demands (especially after having made an error like an approach to the wrong airfield)

Awareness – inputs not assimilated or sought (positive check of the circuit if joining straight-in)

Communication – information flow (confusion about the position call of the other aircraft)

pressurePressure

loss_of_awareness Awareness

poor_communication Communication