

Private Flight Following

Flight following..... the days of faxing or phoning in your flightplan to Airways have largely been superseded by online filing which makes things easier for those of us with internet connection and devices, but who still uses Airways for flight following and what do you do when flying in remote areas with no coverage?

The areas I talk about are where both ADSB and cell phone coverage are not going to get to anytime soon, and most likely the areas where, if trouble occurs, you will need a reliable communication device because no-one is going to find you anytime soon.

With satellite options being increasingly popular and affordable many recreational pilots have moved to providers like Spidertracks, tracplus, inReach, V2track and a host of other options. Not only do you get satellite tracking in real time, most of these devices now offer reliable 2-way texting, essentially negating the need for a satellite phone. I have used most of these systems in either an aircraft or ground application, but rather than run through each device (another time perhaps) I will run through a few considerations when looking to move to satellite tracking or if you are thinking of changing providers or device hardware.



Fixed or removable

One of the first considerations is the device hardware and what your intended use is. Will it be fixed in the aircraft or do you also carry out other recreational activities in remote areas (boating, tramping, hunting, fishing etc). There are pros and cons for both options as a recreational user. The obvious advantage of a fixed system in your aircraft is that it is permanently there and usually hard wired so it's always turned on when your aircraft is, you can't forget to take it with you and it won't go flat on you. If you go for a removable device you need to make sure it is well secured in place, with a good view of the sky and you need to be vigilant that it is always charged before setting off. Having said that, if you are disciplined, having one device for all your other recreational activities can be a real advantage.



Network Provider and Plans

Being in the southern latitudes in New Zealand we need a solid network provider, the 'gold standard' is generally considered the Iridium network. Some hardware (such as Spot) use the Globalstar satellite network which can cause reliability issues. Several tracking systems provide a cellular and satellite option that seamlessly connects between the two depending on cell coverage, this can be really cost-effective if doing plenty of hours within cell coverage but for the recreational flyer just be sure to check that a satellite only option isn't in fact cheaper. There are so many plans, fixed or flexible and options depending on the hours you expect to fly, percent of time in or out of cell coverage, intensity of location pings while tracking, and the number of expected texts that it would be difficult to recommend a single option. Just remember it is a safety device and some things are not good to cut corners on – a 2-minute location gives a much smaller search radius than a 10-minute location!



It's not all about you

Believe it or not these devices are not all about the pilot, in fact if you mostly plug and play with a permanent device the pilots interactions are minimal. Who these devices help are the people who do your flight following. These people are far more likely to interact with the software or app than you are, so consideration for them needs to be applied. Do providers have good apps for iOS or Android, and what system does your flight follower use? Most providers will allow a trial of their hardware and apps or perhaps have a look through YouTube for examples, but do involve your flight follower/s. The biggest complaint I have received after changing providers was from flight followers that didn't like the new app or software, something I hadn't considered.



Establish Protocols

If you are using 2-way communicating from your remote spot you will need to establish good protocols between yourself and your nominated flight follower. Are you always going to send a "landed safe" text? If you do, are you going to wait for a reply to confirm they got it? Some text systems show the message has been sent while others don't, and you have no idea. If you are about to start-up do you send a text prior? What happens if you have a take-off incident and nobody knows you were about to be airborne? These different scenarios need to be thought out to protect both yourself and your flight follower from any surprises, and when you have a procedure, stick to it.

And lastly, if you ask anyone to provide flight following for you do your best to make their job simple. What actions do they take and when? If you use your spouse or partner, consider having them 'hand it on' immediately in an event so there is less personal stress involved. Have they got a list of numbers to call, RCCNZ etc? These systems are incredibly useful IF an incident or accident occurs and the whole idea is you want to be found or assisted as soon as possible, you don't want the wheels to fall off that process at the last and most critical phase.