

The Importance of Being Situationally Aware - knowing when to comply and when to question ATC.

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Being "Situationally Aware" (knowing where YOU are and where EVERYONE else is), is important at all times when flying, but couldn't be more so

than when flying in the airport traffic pattern. A busy pattern/airport presents numerous challenges, on a normal day. Combine a clear good weather day, a Bay Area airport, a Sat. or Sun., a few incorrect calls by ATC, and you have a potential for some real challenges.



You can't always count on busy controllers to be correct in their instructions. A few weeks ago, when out with a student at a local Bay Area airport, I was over the runway just ready to touch down, and was told to turn base. Later, I was told to extend my downwind when I was already on base. Did the controller have any idea where I was? Then, as a Learjet came in on a modified downwind heading directly towards us, I was told to immediately head towards the tower, cross over the airport and make a right downwind - just opposite of what my pattern had been. Of course now, I really wanted to know where the other traffic was and that there were no conflicts.

The best thing to do when presented with a busy pattern is to listen to all of the communication to get a visual picture of where the other traffic is and what to expect next. Always know exactly what ATC is telling you to do, and be sure you agree with it, before complying. If you are told you are #4 - cleared to land, but are unsure of whom and where the traffic is that you are following, start from the approach end of the runway and work backwards.

I try to stick to a Rule of 3. If three unusual issues come up while I'm in the pattern, I come back another day.

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