

Those Helos Weren't There a Minute Ago

by Ltjg. Matthew Crump

In the spring of 1996, I was a low-time civilian pilot looking for any opportunity to get in the sky and build flight time in the Cessna 170B. One Saturday, the conditions were not ideal: VFR, with ceilings at 3,000 feet and five to six miles visibility. My young daughter was with me, sightseeing and messing around. We'd been flying for about an hour when I decided to bounce a few times at Parker County Airport, which is outside the Dallas-Fort Worth Class Bravo airspace and 11 miles west of NAS Fort Worth. I had my anticollision lights on and was squawking VFR, but not talking to Fort Worth Center or Approach.

I approached the uncontrolled field from the west, and the wind was out of the south. My instructor had taught me that the 45-degree-to-downwind-pattern entry was almost always best. I planned to overfly the field west-to-

east, 500 feet above the pattern altitude, before dropping down to enter. I called CTAF for an airport advisory but got none, so I announced my intentions. Since very old airplanes without radios often use Parker County, I was aware that someone could be in the pattern and not hear me, so I kept looking below as I crossed the field.

Obviously, I was looking down too much. When I finally looked up, my windscreen was filled with two CH-53E Super Stallions booming along in the opposite direction. My heart came into my throat, both from fear and from the negative-G maneuver that followed. I passed perhaps 200 feet beneath the leader.

I continued my pattern entry, turned south, and looked to my right to see what the big helos were doing. They hadn't deviated from their course one bit. I don't think they ever saw me. I gave up on my bounces and landed. I shut down and walked it off, showing my daughter some of the interesting old planes and waiting for the shakes to pass.

The encounter took only a few seconds, but the lesson was huge. I thought I was controlling every risk as I approached the field: I was communicating, squawking and doing my best to be visible and predictable. However, focusing on where I would be in a couple of minutes, I aborted my scan of where I would be in a few seconds. With a closing speed of perhaps 230 knots, those 53s got real big, real fast.

The Super Stallion drivers also seemed to have been VFR, or they would have known I was there. They were flying over a published (and highly visible) airport under 1,500 foot AGL. Nothing wrong with that, but it should certainly be an area to expect the presence of bug-smashers. Next time you're in that situation, tuning up the CTAF wouldn't be a bad idea, and keep your eyes open. 

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