

## *Off Airport Landings for Helicopters Take Skill and Good Judgement*

*By Terry McDowell*

If I land my helicopter “off airport” in a parking lot, does it void my aircraft insurance? What about the thousands of grass strips we have all over the country? Are they designated on the sectional as an airport? Do they have an identifier? Does this constitute approval for a landing?

Anyone who has flown a helicopter quickly realizes it is a very versatile machine that can take off or land just about anywhere. In fact, this adaptability is what most helicopter operators are after. They are willing to incur the much higher maintenance costs for helicopters than for aircraft in order to obtain the versatility they seek.

The helicopter is a remarkable machine, but it does have its limitations. How do you allow a newly minted helicopter pilot to learn those limitations without jeopardizing safety? This is a root problem for the aviation insurance underwriter.

An airport is defined as an area of land or water that is used or intended to be used for landing and takeoff of aircraft. An airport includes its buildings and facilities, if there are any. The definition of a heliport is similar, but it uses the word “structure” to identify the site where a helicopter takes off or lands. Both are pretty broad definitions.

Sometimes you can't be entirely sure you're landing at an airport. A city or municipality occasionally feels the need to approve any takeoff or landing operations within their geographical boundaries. The various state aeronautics commissions may set airport criteria to satisfy their constituents' requirements. Of course, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is usually the final authority that signs off on any large airports or those for commercial use.

So what is an approved landing site for a helicopter? It depends on whom you ask. The pilot in command ultimately approves the landing or takeoff. He is the one who makes the final decision on the suitability of a landing area. Is the area large enough, and does it have a good approach and departure path? He should use the high recon, the low recon, and the final approach to detect any obstructions in or around the area. He is also the one “on the hook” if something goes wrong.

One insurance company, United States Specialty Insurance Co. (USSIC), sometimes restricts “off airport landings” until the pilot has a minimum of 50 hours in the make and model being flown. Although this may somewhat limit the utility for the new owner, it seems a reasonable approach to me. There is no substitute for experience in the make and model being flown. The restriction forces the pilot to learn the capabilities of a particular type of aircraft in order to acquire the skill and good judgment needed to make an off airport landing. →