



URGENT CARE



EMERGENCY!

Urgent Care for Your Aircraft

SABRINA WOODS

It is bad when you or one of your passengers gets sick while on your cross-country adventure. It just might be worse should your plane take ill. After all, you are likely to have insight as to what could be wrong with you. Moreover you have the capability of telling your treating physician it hurts “here.” But when that previously cheerful rattle suddenly grows ominously louder, when you struggle to lift the nose despite being fully trimmed up, or when that needle on the EGT gauge all of a sudden reads “tilt,” you’ve got problems. Your plane is sick.

But you’ve planned for this in your “plan B,” right? So you calmly engage in emergency actions, notify air traffic control what is happening, and land the aircraft as quickly and as safely as possible. Now what? You need urgent care for your aircraft.

Preparation is Your Best Defense

The best offense is a good defense. This commonly used adage is applied to everything, from sports to warfare, and it works for cross-country flight prep as well. A good way to build your defense is, prior to starting out on your adventure, have your A&P do a quick check out of your aircraft a week or so before you leave. In particular if your bird hasn’t

been flown in a while, or has only flown for very short trips prior to the transcontinental one. Things you and your technician will want to look over are: verifying time compliance inspection due dates (so they won’t be overflowed); cleaning spark plugs; IFR/pitot checks (even if you plan on flying VFR); making sure gauges and lights are operational; servicing tires, brakes and struts as needed; checking and topping off fluids; and completing flight control checks.

If there have been any major overhauls or repairs recently, you might want to get in a local flight before heading out cross-country to make sure everything is in working order. All of this followed up by a good wash-down and vacuum can go a long way into ensuring nothing unexpected pops up later.

If you rent an aircraft, make sure you review the records to ensure all maintenance checks are up-to-date and to familiarize yourself with what has been done recently. This includes checking for a current annual for the airframe, engine(s) and propeller(s), as well as current entries for the pitot-static system, transponder, and emergency locator transmitter. You’ll want to read over what the last few maintenance “squawks” were and what was done about them. Last, you’ll want to ensure that any active ADs

on the aircraft have been complied with. Ask questions about the things you might be unsure of. It is also a good idea to arrange all of this with your rental FBO beforehand, just in case maintenance logs are kept in a different facility (along with the technician).

After reviewing the records, discuss with the rental facility what their protocols are should you have a problem while away. In some cases and in particular if the issue grounds the aircraft, the owner will want you to simply leave it where it is while they take care of recovery efforts. In those cases, make sure you take into consideration how you intend to keep on traveling in that plan B of yours.

For a personally owned aircraft, prior to your in-depth walk-around (that one where you do much more than make sure nothing has fallen off since the last time you flew her ...) and as a part of the flight planning process, you should compile a list of qualified, competent maintenance technicians along your route that could see to your aircraft's needs should you require it. An Internet search can probably do wonders to start you on your way, but rolling in the help of your home-based aviation buddies is always a great idea as well. Word-of-mouth is a powerful tool and your fellow "been there, done that" aviators and technicians can give you recommendations as to who they know might best suit your needs. Once armed with that ammunition, follow up by doing a telephone consult with each to make sure they are familiar and certificated to work on your make and model. This might seem like a lot of upfront work but if it is a route you plan to do often, you likely only have to do it once. Besides, having vital information such as this is like having a fire extinguisher. For the most part it is just there; but when you need it, you *really* need it.

Next, while maintaining airworthiness certificates on board is mandatory, it is also a good idea to pack in pertinent aircraft manuals and a copy (and I mean copy) of your maintenance logs to get started troubleshooting when you are away from home. It also doesn't hurt to carry a few smaller items along to help your cause. Some suggestions are a small tool kit (ratchet set, pliers, multi-tool, etc.) and hardware set (safety wire, nuts, connectors, etc.), extra oil and hydraulic fluid, spark plugs, bulbs, fuses, and a spare tire tube, to name a few.

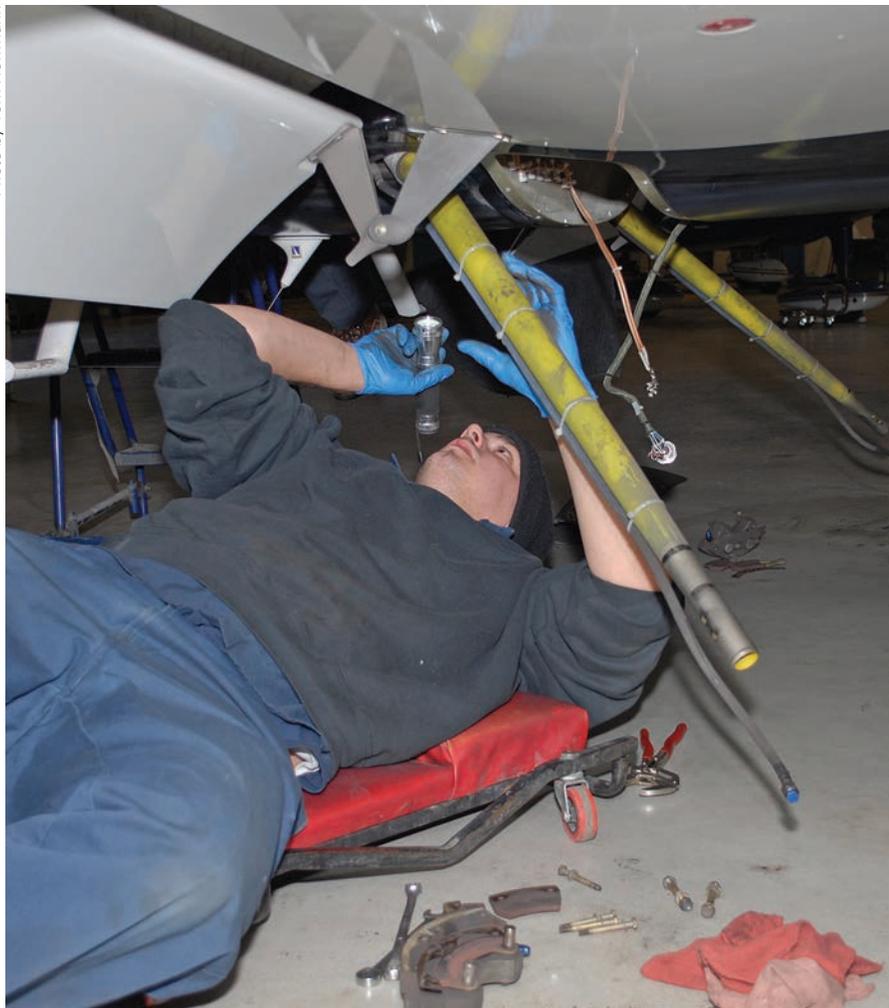
Fly the Airplane

Despite your best intentions and precautions, let's say the worst happens and you end up with a

maintenance issue far from home. First and foremost: Fly the airplane. If there are non-pilot passengers on board, make it clear that sterile cockpit rules prevail. If there is another aviator with you sharing flying duties, immediately identify (if you haven't done so previously) who is the PIC controlling the aircraft while the other pilot runs checklists and notifies air traffic control of the situation. If you have already been in contact with ATC, stay on that same frequency. Otherwise switch to the distress frequency, 121.5. Likewise with your transponder code — if already assigned, don't change it unless your controller advises it. If not on a discrete transponder code, switching to emergency code 7700 will alert ATC that something is amiss.

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Photo by Tom Hoffmann



When planning a flight, make a list of qualified, competent maintenance technicians along your route that could help in a pinch.

Declaring an emergency is viewed with reluctance in some flying circles, but doing so will give ATC the most effective means of assisting you, with services such as the most direct vectors and clearing the airspace to give you room to work. It will also ensure that appropriate first responders will be notified so they can be there to support you when you land.

If things just aren't going your way and you end up having to land in Farmer John's field, you need to contact the local authorities as soon as possible even if you declared an emergency. You will want

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to pass along any information that can help them locate you. After the authorities, contact Flight Service to update your flight plan, the local

FSDO to notify them of the situation (in particular if you, your passengers or your aircraft incurred any damage), and the closest FBO to arrange for aircraft transport once it has been released for service. Then call your mom/spouse/children/best buddy Pat to let them know about your situation. They worry.

After that it is time to ring up one of those technicians you sourced before you started on your adventure, as well as your usual A&P so you all can get to work on diagnosing your issue.

Tell the Doctor Where It Hurts

Determining and fixing what is ailing your bird is sometimes as simple as righting the damage you took after a chance encounter with a migrating flock. And sometimes the issue is much more elusive, such as when the exhaust gas temperature is reading ridiculously high. There are a host of reasons that could cause high EGT but if you track your engine diagnostics via a service or an application, that data can go a long way toward helping you figure out what is wrong.

You are the other main source of information. Everything you have done: all of the inputs you have made and how the aircraft reacted to each — right up until the issue commenced — is vital for troubleshooting. That information is also perishable, so try to relay it to a technician as soon as possible. If time or aftermath of the incident does not permit immediate discussion, make a few notes to keep your thoughts fresh for when it is finally time to sit and chat with the "doctor." Together, you can make sure your aircraft gets the urgent care it needs and you are back to your cross country adventure in no time. ✈️

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