

INCIDENT

I departed Northam recently with a student in our trusty PGL. Our first waypoint was Dowerin, which as our club president can assure you is northeast of Northam. We were climbing to 3500 and another aircraft broadcast on CTAF saying he was north of Northam, inbound at 5700 on descent. We advised him that we were outbound at 3500.

When we switched one of our radios to Melbourne Centre we heard the controller trying to contact "aircraft north of Northam". Thinking he may have meant us, I gave him our callsign, position and intentions. We squawked ident at his request, which confirmed to him that we were the aircraft he was trying to contact, and he advised us of conflicting traffic. I couldn't see anything, and was looking for the inbound aircraft to our left because he'd said he was inbound from the north. I asked him for his position, and when he realised neither of us had seen each other, he made the sensible decision to level off at 4000, and advised us of that.

ML CEN then talked to us again, sounding worried because he apparently hadn't been able to talk to the inbound aircraft. Shortly after that, he said "Suggest you turn immediately Sir". I then saw the other aircraft, no more than half a mile to our right, at 4000 as he'd advised.

If I'm still learning after all my years of flying, I figure others might learn from little tales like this as well. My observations include:

- It would have been good if the other pilot had broadcast his position accurately. He was northeast, not north. In future, if in doubt, I'll ask for the pilot's last tracking point.
- I didn't hear any evidence that he was monitoring Centre as well as CTAF. He was a 206 so I'm sure he'd have two radios. If you've got them, use them.
- To his credit, when he understood the potential conflict he made the safe decision to level off.
- The person who was most on the ball was Melbourne Centre. It was his call to us that triggered me to talk to the inbound aircraft a second time, which in turn caused him to level off.

The main lesson was the reminder of the importance of the radio, and the use of it by all three of us. Although we can quite legally take off from Northam and fly around without a radio at all, who'd want to do that? It's an invaluable extra pair of eyes. It's harder than many people realise to spot aircraft more than a couple of miles away. "See and avoid" is nowhere near as good as "alerted see and avoid."

Incidentally, if we'd done as Centre advised and turned to avoid a conflict, we would have turned right, which would have been towards the traffic. When two aircraft are approaching head-on, the rules say to turn right. It's not because the pilot sits on the left – helicopter captains sit on the right. So why do the rules say right and not left?