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# Eerily empty airspace

## FAA ordered all planes grounded for two days after 9/11 attacks.

By NICHOLAS BERGIN  
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Silence.

A complete absence of aviation radio chatter and roaring plane engines is the most striking thing Keokuk Airport Manager Greg Gobble remembers from the days following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

"It was a pretty interesting time that week. Just everything quiet. It was pretty unnerving," Gobble said during an interview Thursday. "If you look up now, it's just kind of commonplace to see contrails in the sky where the jet airliners are flying. It is just something you are used to, and to hear chatter on the aircraft radios. When it's normal, you just tune it out. But after 9/11, it was silent, and you didn't see those contrails."

In the immediate aftermath of the coordinated suicide attacks on the World Trade Center's twin towers and the Pentagon, the Federal Aviation Administration ordered all flights grounded. For two days, only military planes and specially authorized flights were allowed in the air.

Just as commercial flight has changed in the wake of those attacks, so has general aviation and the world of private flight.

The term general aviation encompasses all flight other than military and commercial. It accounts for about 88 percent of all aviation in Iowa, including hobby fliers, agricultural sprayers, emergency medical helicopters, corporate fliers, charter planes, aerial survey companies and law enforcement, said Tim McClung, the planning and outreach manager for the Iowa Department of Transportation's Office of Aviation.

There are about 5,000 registered aircraft in Iowa and between 5,000 and 6,000 pilots, McClung said.

"One of the largest differences you will see is there has been a complete change in the culture around aviation in terms of security," McClung said. "There has developed a new culture of heightened awareness. That is not only amongst pilots, it is also amongst airport

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John Gaines/The Hawk Eye  
Trenton Kessler, flight instructor for Jet Air Inc., makes his way around the red lines of the restricted area for commercial flights put in place after 9/11 at Southeast Iowa Regional Airport Thursday in Burlington. Kessler provides flight training and charter flights from the airport.

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employees, the general public and law enforcement officials. There is just more of an awareness, an alertness, to look out for odd, suspicious behavior."

The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association has teamed up with the Transportation Security Administration to create a nationwide Airport Watch Program, which boasts more than 600,000 pilots acting as eyes and ears to watch for and report suspicious activity.

Unlike commercial flight where those packed into planes generally are complete strangers, in general aviation, people flying together usually know each other and each person's reason for flying.

Those who frequent Iowa's smaller airports generally know what type of behavior is typical and what may be suspicious, such as someone taking pictures, asking probing questions of pilots and trying to hitch a ride, McClung said.

Gobble took over management of the Keokuk Municipal Airport and the company responsible for fixed base operations there, Lindner Aviation, in 2000. He first heard of the 9/11 terrorist attack on the radio while driving to work that day.

A decade later, Gobble said he is in regular contact with the TSA and DOT's Office of Aviation, which assists in disseminating information to airports and helping local officials implement best security practices.

"We're constantly in touch with TSA. When we get inquiries on flight training, if anything looks suspicious, we refer that to the TSA office in Des Moines," Gobble said. "We have to work with TSA now regarding our flight training. We have to keep records, and they will periodically come and review records of all our renter pilots and student pilots."

All flight instructors and flight school employees are required to complete education on security practices. All potential students who are not citizens of the United States have to go through TSA security and background checks before they are allowed to take flight training, McClung said.

Once in the air, the biggest change for pilots since 9/11 is the more frequent occurrences of temporary flight restrictions.

Temporary flight restrictions, TFRs, are basically bubbles of space in which planes are not allowed to fly.

"Those didn't exist pre-9/11," Gobble said.

"When Air Force One flies, there is restricted airspace around the airplane. When the president is on the ground, there is a restricted area around where the president is," Gobble said.

Also, the airspace over large events, like an Iowa Hawkeye football game, are considered off limits to air traffic.

Violations of flight restrictions are taken very seriously. Being caught flying in a TFR is like getting "a speeding ticket on steroids. It is a situation you don't want to be in," Gobble said.

Depending on the situation, it's not unheard of for private planes that accidentally violate a TFR to be intercepted by military aircraft and escorted away, Gobble said.





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