

PLUG IN A PORTABLE COM

If you do any kind of real flying, you probably have a portable com transceiver floating around in the flight bag. If not, you should, and it should have fresh batteries. For this kind of storage and infrequent use, traditional alkaline batteries will offer a better shelf life than rechargeables. This helps ensure the unit has enough juice when you need it.

Portable com radios for the aviation frequency band have come a long way and some, including Sporty's SP400, at right, come with full navigational capabilities—including a glideslope—that are worthy of shooting a real approach. But as good as the technology has become, these portable talkers have limitations you need to be aware of. In particular, most handhelds' low power output could make them nearly useless at distances greater than a couple of miles, even at altitude.

Consider that most panel-mounted transceivers transmit 10-plus watts of power. Portable radios don't come close to that. Face it, a watt or two of power broadcasting from a portable rubber antenna inside an airplane's cabin isn't going to offer huge amounts of performance. That's why any chance of talking and receiving as far as a panel-mounted transceiver will require an external antenna. This doesn't have to be a costly affair.

One option is to install an inexpensive antenna system dedicated for portable use. The only real expense here is opening the interior to mount the antenna and run coaxial cabling to a convenient location in the cockpit. A simple metal element antenna is around \$100, while fiberglass whips are closer to \$200. Some installations include a panel-mounted antenna jack while others simply have antenna cable coiled up in a map pocket ready for quick connection. Rare is the interface that has a portable and panel-mounted radio sharing a single antenna—you'll need an expensive splitter for this and it just isn't worth it for rare emergency use.

Speaking of splitters, Bendix/King once offered an antenna splitter for its KX-99 portable com, which is long since discontinued. This adapter splits the antenna connection between one of the panel-mounted com radios and the portable. The adapter box has a mini-jack for plugging in the antenna input of nearly any portable com. Given the popularity of the KX-99 once upon a time, shops may still have these splitters hanging around and may have removed them from some installations. There are other similar designs as well. While not my preferred method (the adapter adds another point of failure in the antenna system), a splitter offers an inexpensive option for talking the distance in an emergency.

A beneficial time to install an auxiliary com antenna system is when the aircraft is already opened up for other work. If your shop is installing new primary com antennas, there's usually no reason not to utilize one of the older antennas for emergency use. If you are pulling out a now-useless Loran-C system, this leaves an open antenna location for installing an aux com antenna—your shop can even use the existing coaxial cable. There's no need to get fancy, you just want reasonable amounts of range from your portable and an external antenna will deliver.

