

On Saturday, August 28 at the Santa Barbara Airport, Martha and I were held at gunpoint, ordered from our Cessna 172, handcuffed and detained in the back of two separate police cars.

Later, the Santa Barbara Police told us that a “private company” had called them and reported that N50545 had been stolen and was on its way to Santa Barbara Airport. In fact, the airplane that had been stolen (8 years ago) was a 1968 C150J and the registration for that airplane had been cancelled by the FAA in September of 2005. The registration number was then re-assigned four years later by the FAA to the airplane we were flying, a 2009 Cessna 172S owned by Cessna Aircraft Corporation. It would have taken less than 60 seconds on the FAA website to reveal these facts.

Apparently the Santa Barbara Police took the word of a company they were not familiar with, failed to make even rudimentary checks on the web, confused a 2009 Cessna 172S with a 1968 150J, and on that basis, put us at grave risk by creating a situation that could have been lethal.

The “private company” that supposedly had called the Santa Barbara Police was the El Paso Intel Center (EPIC). In reality this “private company” is shown on the web as a program of the DEA.

The concerning issue to us, as it should be for all pilots, is that apparently nobody is bothering to remove a registration number from the stolen aircraft list when a registration number has been re-assigned. As a result, completely innocent citizens wind up being detained at gunpoint. It appears that there is no system in place to prevent this from happening repeatedly.

We had flown up IFR, utilizing a system in which we gave the FAA our name, address and contact information and announced to the world that we were going to Santa Barbara—hardly, it seems, the way someone flying a stolen airplane would behave.

In many ways the Santa Barbara Police Department could feel set up for this failure, by a system that falsely reported the aircraft as stolen. Had it been a reportedly stolen automobile, they would have verified their facts with the DMV before they took action. But they don't know anything about aircraft. One officer asked me where he could find the vehicle identification number (VIN) for the aircraft. When I said that aircraft don't have a VIN the officer said to me, “Yes they do.” I finally realized he wanted to know where to find the aircraft serial number.

They do not know how to check with the FAA, even though it would have taken only a minute on the FAA website. Plus, they don't know one aircraft from another. But they did not allow this to slow them down on this “opportunity” and they plunged ahead, not knowing what they were doing. As a result, they failed to exercise the standard of care that should be required before you put citizens at gunpoint. After all, we expect the press to confirm outside information they receive every time before they go to print. Shouldn't police departments be held to at least the same standard before they put citizens at gunpoint?

- The Santa Barbara Police case number on this is 62316. The officer, who spoke with us after the fact, is “Clark” and her ID number is 2058. It is likely that the police department has video of this event.
- The stolen aircraft report had been originally made by the McKinney, Texas Police Department (972-547-2809).
- The phone number we were given for the El Paso Intel Center is 915-760-2253.