

Approach Control Services for the VFR Pilot

by ROBB MARK

Carve yourself
a slice of the pie
by coming across
as a professional

■ Many of us do not get our fair share of services offered by the ATC system simply because we don't communicate succinctly, professionally and aggressively. Some may have a fear of the radio or the people on the ground and others may have never stopped to consider how they sound at the other end. Here are a few tricks of the trade to help you speak up and be heard.

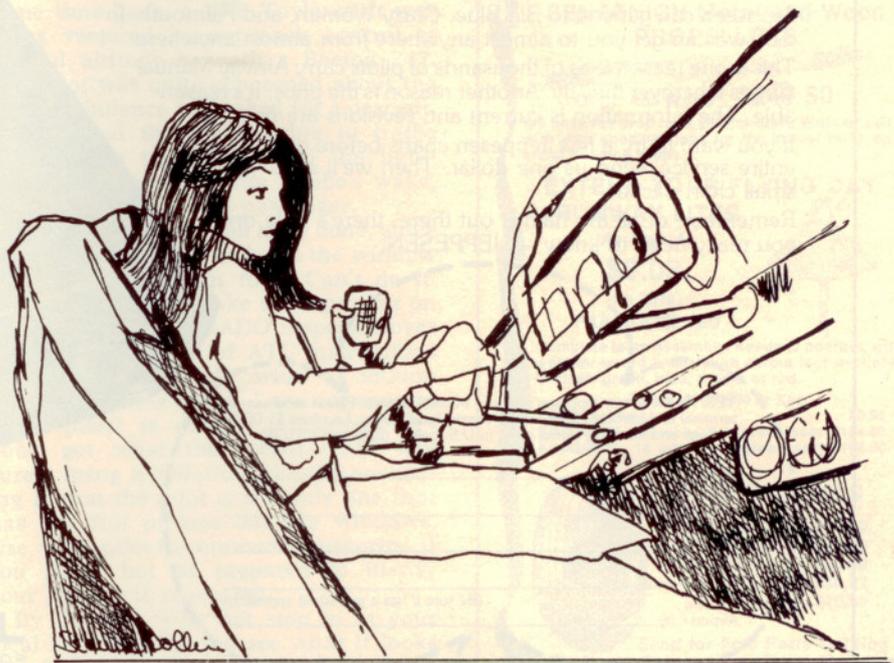
First of all, the authority you put in your voice is important. An instructor once told me that if you sound as though you know what you're doing, you'll be treated that way, and by and large this is true. Don't make your initial call sound like a five-year-old asking for a cookie—put some oomph into it. Make your voice say that you are a pilot and that you have come to

request a share of the service that the system can provide. It will make a difference.

Clear, concise transmissions are next on the list, for the days have long since passed when this sort of transmission is normal: "Chicago Approach Control, this is Bonanza 1669 Whiskey, over."

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What we have here is a failure to communicate for, in about 10 seconds worth of air time, we have told the controller almost nothing that he can use to help us. There really are only a few things the controller needs to know: who you are, where you are, and what you are requesting. If you eliminate all the unnecessary verbiage, you can spit out the entire thing at once and it might



sound something like this:

"Chicago Approach, Bonanza 1669 Whiskey, 20 north of Northbrook at 8,000, squawking 1200, landing Pal-Waukee, request advisories."

Think that's too long? You'll find that it takes almost no time at all and now the controller has something to work with. In a busy terminal area, plan your transmissions for maximum effectiveness—make every one count.

The inability of pilots to comprehend the traffic situation by listening on the frequency is a constant source of irritation to controllers. If you tune in the approach frequency and hear the man talking to one or two airplanes, you can be reasonably assured that he is not busy.

If on the other hand you tune in and hear one person after another trying to talk over each other, or the controller letting go with a nonstop stream of control instructions, you can believe that the man is busy. Don't bother him.

Wait until the congestion dies down a bit, and then give your call.

Let us suppose that you must fly through the area of radar coverage surrounding one airport to land at another airport on the far side, and want advisory service from the approach control serving the first airport. What frequency do you call on if all you have is your trusty sectional chart?

First of all, the approach control facility divides its area of coverage into sectors, each having its own frequency. These frequencies are usually announced on the ATIS of the airport served by the approach control. If you don't have the ATIS frequency, call that airport's tower with your position and ask for the frequency of the approach control sector which would be handling you. Last, but not least, call the nearest FSS.

The various types of terminal radar programs for VFR aircraft have been classified as Stage I, Stage II and Stage III. By definition, Stage I is radar advisories only. Stage II is advisories and sequencing, while Stage III is sequenc-

ing and separation of VFR traffic from IFR and other participating VFR aircraft. Although the other stages of service are used occasionally, Stage III is by far the most predominant today.

What should you expect from approach control under Stage III? Basically, it will vector you to the airport, keep you away from other traffic by using different headings and altitudes and, of course, tell you about random traffic that it sees. First of all, though, the controller must identify you on his radar scope, which he will do by having you set a particular code in on your transponder. When he observes this code, he will advise you: "Bonanza 1669 Whiskey, radar contact."

Be aware now that the phrase "radar contact" only means that you have been identified—nothing more. When you hear, "Bonanza 1669 Whiskey, radar contact, stand by for advisories," you'll know that the controller now is going to tell you about any traffic that in his judgment may be a factor to you. Remember that, while a large aircraft passing across your nose 2,000 feet

above may be startling to you, the controller may not consider it important due to the altitude separation.

Traffic will be called to you with reference to a 12-hour clock with your aircraft's nose being the 12 o'clock position. Here's what it will sound like: "Bonanza 69 Whiskey, traffic 9 o'clock, 3 miles, westbound, altitude unknown."

To you, this means that if you are on a southerly heading the traffic is out your left window and will be crossing left to right. When you are given a traffic call, answer with something such as, "Bonanza 69 Whiskey, looking," or "Bonanza 69 Whiskey, no contact."

Let the controller know that you have heard the call and are looking. If you merely start looking and say nothing until you find the traffic, he will call again and this only wastes time. You are still responsible for looking out of the windows, so don't keep your eyes glued to just one position—keep your head moving.

Inbound to an airport that you are unfamiliar with? Call approach control and advise that you are new to the area and request vectors to the airport; traffic permitting, it will be glad to accommodate you.

Air traffic controllers are human, contrary to some popular rumors, and being human they are limited as to the number of things that they can concentrate on at any one time. By and large, a controller is going to be swamped if he has much more than eight aircraft to talk to.

Traffic advisories are on a workload-permitting basis for ATC. If controllers are unable to continue the service, they are not obligated to inform you, so look out all the windows and use radar as the supplemental service it was designed for.

How about emergencies? Approach control can provide some valuable assistance here if the pilot will just tell someone that he has a problem. This, however, is something that many pilots seem rather reluctant to do; in fact, they tend to simplify their situation too much. For example, a student pilot that is disorientated in bad weather is an emergency whether he believes it or not.

If you are unsure of who to call, just get on 121.5 and call for help—that is what the frequency was designed for. Climb for altitude if possible without going IFR—radar, like VHF radio, is limited to line-of-sight range. If you have trouble raising someone, switch your transponder to code 7700—this flashes a special signal on the controller's scope. Don't wait until your fuel is low to call for help, for you'll only decrease the amount of time that ATC can help you. Talk to someone.

What about the times the system does

not work to our entire satisfaction? First of all, the whole system works rather poorly if the aircraft involved are not transponder-equipped. The much less significant target that the controller sees on his scope is more difficult to identify and track, so if you hear a rather agonizing groan when you say "Negative transponder," you know why.

Another very real problem lately is the rather round-about vectoring that some aircraft are given to their destinations. On a recent trip to the Milwaukee area, for example, I was vectored no less than 10 miles out of my way and made to climb when I was but a few miles from my destination. Aggravating, of course, but ATC has certain separation standards that it must maintain and that often does not work in your favor; however, you do have an out. A phrase that I seldom hear from anyone other than professional pilots is "Negative Stage Three." This means that you will not obtain any advisories, but that you may also go direct at the desired altitude. Try this if the situation warrants, and the system will work for you.

One last subject area that must be covered when talking about any air traffic service is the seldom-mentioned FAR 91.3, Pilot-in-Command Authority. It says that you as the pilot of your Cessna 150, or Boeing 747, have the last word as to the safe operation of your aircraft. If, through an error or lack of information, ATC tries to send you toward a dangerous situation, don't just sit there—say something.

Here is an example. On the east coast some time back, a VFR Taylorcraft was being vectored by approach control at a legal altitude beneath a Boeing 747. The pilot was quite concerned about the wake turbulence and asked for a descent. ATC denied the request due to traffic beneath the taildragger and the light-plane continued into the jumbo's wake, injuring the pilot and passenger.

What the pilot should have done, since he was VFR, was to look out the window and initiate his own turn. Can't do it, you say? I'd rather take an argument on the ground with a GADO inspector over a possible violation of ATC instructions anytime than tangle with a 350-ton monster at close range. I am not encouraging pilots to deviate whenever they don't get what they want—that will surely bring a violation. What I am saying is that the pilot is the only one that has the full picture out the windows. Use your pilot-in-command authority if you must, but be prepared to justify your actions if requested.

By the way, why not stop in at your local FAA facility and see what it looks like from the other side of the mike—I think you'll be impressed, and you'll certainly be welcome. □