

You talkin' to me?

Robert de Niro's famous line in *Taxi Driver* wasn't all that scary. But what is seriously scary for a bush pilot? Even scarier than an engine failure at night when you're dodging CB's and one of your passengers has just been sick? Talking to Air Traffic Services. So who are those monsters you can talk to on the radio, and what are their jobs?

Air traffic services come under two broad headings: Air Traffic Control (ATC) and Flight Information Service (FIS). Usually if you're OCTA you're talking to FIS, and in controlled airspace you're talking to ATC.

ATC

The different ATC functions, and ways you'll address them, include:

Tower

A Tower frequency controls circuit and runway traffic. On the ground your first contact with Tower is at the holding point, and in the air in Class C (radar-controlled) airspace such as Perth, your first contact is close to landing, when an approach controller tells you to contact them.

In some Class D (controlled but without radar surveillance) airspace, where there are no Ground or Approach frequencies, on the ground you'll talk to Tower prior to taxi, and in the air you'll talk to them OCTA when you switch from the area frequency and ask for your airways clearance.

Ground

All Class C aerodromes such as Perth, and some Class D aerodromes such as Jandakot and Karratha, have a Ground frequency. This is the controller who gives you your taxi clearance, whether it's getting to the runway for departure, or getting to your parking spot after exiting the runway.

If there's no Ground frequency, such as at Alice Springs or Launceston, all your taxi clearances will be from Tower.

Approach and Departures

Class C airspace, which is radar-controlled airspace around major airports such as Perth, has Approach and Departure frequencies. Generally all the traffic in one sector will be on Approach, and in the other sector it will be on Departures, depending on which runways are in use. For instance, at Perth, when Runway 03 is active, everyone to the north will be on Departures and everyone to the south will be on Approach. So if you're flying down Route 66, which is mostly south of the airport, when 03 is in use you'll get your clearance from Approach, and if you do the same thing in the afternoon when 21 is in use, you'll talk to Departures. You don't need to remember which is which because Perth Centre will always tell you who to call, and on what frequency, for your clearance.

If you take off from Perth, Tower will usually tell you to contact Departures when airborne: "PGL, contact Departures 118.7 airborne, clear for take-off." You'll switch over and make an airborne report (not a departure report) as soon as practical once you're airborne.

If you depart VFR from Jandakot by day, you have to depart OCTA, which means you don't need to talk to anyone after take-off. If you're departing NVFR you need to get up to LSALT within 3nm, which means you're in Perth's airspace as soon as you climb above the Jandakot CTR, so Jandakot Tower will tell you to contact Approach or Departures when they give you your take-off clearance:

“PGL, passing 1500 contact Perth Departures frequency 118.7.” When you talk to them you’ll make an airborne report as you would if you’d taken off from Perth: “Perth Departures, PGL, turning right, passing 1500, climbing to 4000.” The “passing” bit allows them to check your transponder readout against the altitude you’re telling them.

Delivery

Major airports such as Perth have a Delivery frequency, which is for getting your airways clearance on the ground at Perth prior to departing. You always ask for it before you move, which gives ATC time to get it organised before you get to the holding point. Once upon a time there was also a Delivery frequency for airborne traffic.

Centre

As with most capital city airports, Perth Centre is the frequency you’re on if you’re OCTA within a certain radius of the main airport – 36nm in the case of Perth – unless you’ve been told to contact an ATC frequency such as Approach or Departures. You’ll call Perth Centre for a clearance, they’ll give you a transponder code, and they’ll tell you to call Approach or Departures for your clearance.

You also call Perth Centre on the ground if you’re departing from Jandakot IFR or at night. The time between getting airborne and entering Perth’s airspace on the way to LSALT is not enough time to get a clearance, so you need your clearance before you take off. A helicopter departing from the RPH helipad or the Vulture 7 or Vulture 9 studios also calls Centre for a clearance, because they’re in controlled airspace as soon as they’re airborne.

Approach, Departures and Perth Centre are all based in the Area Control Centre at Perth Airport. But over most of the continent, if you’re in CTA you’re talking to either Brisbane or Melbourne Centre.

FIS

If you’re OCTA and more than 36nm from Perth, the person who’s there to help you is FIS. This may be the same frequency that’s providing ATC to another pilot. For instance, over Brooklands Class C airspace starts at FL125, so Melbourne Centre (120.3 MHz) provides ATC to a parachute aircraft at FL140, but he provides FIS to you buzzing around at 3000 ft.

FIS is not legally bound to provide you as a VFR pilot with any service, but they will if workload allows, and/or if they deem it necessary. A good example is in busy lanes such as around Armadale and Mount Dale, or along the Perth coast. In these areas it’s good airmanship to let them know you’re there. They’ll advise you of known traffic, and they can advise other traffic about you. Also, within radar coverage you can request Flight Following, which is simply a radar surveillance and information service that FIS will provide if their workload permits.

For instance, if you’re one of those pilots who’s brave enough to fly to Jandakot via Mount Dale, a typical call might be: “Perth Centre, C172 PGL, Mount Dale, 3500, tracking for Jandakot via Wungong Dam.” That makes PH CEN’s life much easier than if he/she has no idea who all those little “1200’s” on the radar screen are.

Flying around Mount Dale recently, we were treated to the sound of PH CEN using phrases such as “Aircraft north of Fremantle at 1500, traffic is two aircraft northbound south of Fremantle, intentions unknown.” If those aircraft had all identified themselves, FIS’s job would have been so much easier because firstly, he would have been sure they were listening on the right frequency, and secondly, he would have been able to give them better information about each other.

Two points to finish with: remember the radio is in effect another pair of eyes, and ATS are there to help.