



FastRead

ALPA Air Safety Alert: ATC Communications *Tuesday, September 23, 2008*

It appears some FAA facilities have recently imposed a “no tolerance” policy on their controllers when it comes to pilot interactions and understanding of ATC instructions. FAA managers have ordered controllers to report any and all pilot deviations regardless of the circumstances, even if no loss of separation has occurred. Despite claims to the contrary, this is a significant departure from the past in which pilots and controllers were able to resolve any confusion or misunderstanding on their own that did not involve a loss of separation.

An additional point to remember is that if you read back a clearance in error and the controller does not correct the error, the blame (and the deviation) may be pinned on you unless the read-back error was clearly heard, but not corrected, by the controller. While this may not seem fair, the FAA has taken this position in some enforcement actions over the years.

We have already seen a quick uptick in ATC-related NASAP reports due to this, and expect the trend to continue. ALPA Air Safety strongly suggests the following strategies:

1. Utilize the phrase “**say again**” if there is any question of heading, altitude or airspeed numbers in a clearance. Make the controller restate the clearance; don’t repeat back what you thought you heard if there is **ANY** question. After hearing the restated clearance, make sure you read back the full clearance.
2. Be wary of multiple clearances which contain combinations of heading, altitude and/or airspeed. We are seeing numerous errors here, particularly during the busy departure phase. “Say again” can be quite useful here as well.
3. Be wary of discretionary descent clearances (e.g., GIBER at FL230 inbound to DTW) which crews could “set and forget,” particularly in certain advanced glass cockpit aircraft which will not arm and capture a top-of-descent point. Also, be attentive to any associated speed restrictions.

4. If a potential deviation occurs and you are given a phone number to call once on the ground, do not discuss the event or engage in any extraneous or unprofessional conversation during the phone call. Give them your name, flight information and contact information only. Contact ALPA Air Safety or ALPA Legal if you have any questions.
5. Should you find yourself facing a possible deviation, file both a NASAP report and a NASA form. You can file a NASAP report through ATLAS and a NASA form by accessing <http://asrs.arc.nasa.gov>, or just Google NASA ASRS and you'll get right to it. Reports should be complete, factual and professional. ALPA Air Safety or ALPA Legal will gladly answer any questions or review a report should you desire such.

The controllers are being put in a very difficult position here, as this renewed emphasis on deviations adds to an already untenable workload at many facilities. We need to keep ourselves safe and avoid deviations while remaining professional and courteous at all times.

Capt. Richard Pauly
Central Air Safety, Chair

F/O Brit Etzold
Central Air Safety, Vice Chair