

Query ATC

An ATC Specialist Answers Your Questions

Part 1

by Matthew McDaniel

[Author's Note: The following discussion contains questions submitted by pilots, under the solicitation, "If you could sit down with a professional air traffic controller and ask them any question, what would you ask?" No limitations were imposed and scenario-based questions from actual experiences were encouraged. Identifying information has been removed to protect the submitter's privacy.]

Our Controller, Jesse Belleau, is an FAA Air Traffic Control Specialist at Boston Consolidated TRACON. He has a Bachelor's Degree in Aviation/Air Traffic Management from Daniel Webster College. His primary location is Logan Airport, with services provided to numerous other smaller fields in the greater Boston area, including Bedford-Hanscom Field, the area's primary GA reliever airport. This consolidated facility also includes what used to be Manchester approach control, servicing Manchester, N.H. and many general aviation fields in southern New Hampshire. Mr. Belleau has been an active instrument-rated private pilot for over eight years.



Cirrus Pilot (CP): Thank you, Mr. Belleau, for agreeing to sit down with me for this informal question/answer session. It is not my intention to rewrite any training or operations manuals with this discussion. Rather, I hope to address some specific reader questions that I think are representative of questions many pilots probably have, but were either too afraid or never had the opportunity to ask. Even career professional pilots can never “see it all” and a willingness and desire to learn from the questions, experiences, triumphs, and mistakes of others is a character trait of a good pilot, in my opinion.

Jesse Belleau (JB): I completely agree that an open discussion between pilots and controllers is a very important conversation that allows the opportunity to clear up any misconceptions from either side of the spectrum. I think one of the biggest shortcomings in the National Airspace System (NAS) is the fact that pilots don’t get many opportunities to see the “big picture.” Flight plans and procedures are implemented so that if communication is lost, every person along the entire flight will know what the aircraft should be doing after their last clearance limit. That being said, there are many opportunities for amendments to the flight plan, once airborne, that work for both pilot and controller. From my experience, it never hurts to ask for a “shortcut” to a fix further along your flight plan, because most of the time it can be accommodated. Even if the current controller is not able to approve the amendment, they at least know what you are requesting and can pass the information along to the next controller.

In addition, these open conversations help us (ATC) understand what is happening in the cockpit at certain phases of flight. For instance, many controllers don’t understand quite how intense the workload is on final approach, nor do they understand at which point(s) the aircraft needs to slow down in order to fly a stable approach. These discussions help bring the issues to our attention so we can better accommodate the aircraft and maintain smooth sequencing. As long as there is always a willingness to try and understand the view from the other side, operations can run much more smoothly and efficiently.

CP: Pilots are taught that after landing, they should exit the active runway as soon as practical, at the nearest suitable exit point. Yet, we are also taught to never turn onto a runway without specific permission to do so. If upon landing, the nearest suitable turn-off just happens to be an intersecting runway, should we exit there, or continue the landing rollout to a subsequent taxiway turn-off?

JB: This is an excellent question. There are no specific references to this exact scenario in our procedures manual, but I would advise any aircraft to only use a taxiway, unless specifically told by the controller to turn onto a different runway. A proactive controller should give specific turnoff instructions to each aircraft in a timely manner, but if for

some reason they do not, the taxiway is the safest choice, even if the next available is beyond an intersecting runway. There may be operations on the secondary runway that aren’t broadcast on the ATIS or easily known to other pilots, such as vehicle movement or a partial closer that may make it impassable. To sum it up, a pilot should avoid this action, if feasible, and exit the runway only onto a taxiway. If there is any doubt, it is always okay to query the controller.

CP: We are now living in a world of very advanced navigation tools, even in otherwise basic aircraft. As a result, direct-to clearances have become relatively common. IFR pilots are taught about lost-COMM procedures and memorize canned answers for oral and written exams. Let’s assume an IFR pilot is given a direct clearance to the destination airport (a common situation, to be sure). After accepting this clearance and proceeding direct destination, the pilot experiences a COMM failure. This direct clearance, of course, does not terminate at a published Initial Approach Fix (IAF). In the real and fluid world of ATC, what do controllers really expect of pilots under this scenario?

JB: This is another good question where I can’t give a specific answer from our operating manual. As in normal route clearances that terminate at an IAF, we expect the aircraft to execute the full approach at their ETA when communications are lost. In the real and fluid world of

ATC, we would see the direct-to clearance and recognize that it does not end at an IAF. Since we do not know which approach the pilot will execute, we will protect the airspace surrounding the entire area and any airspace for all of the published missed approaches to that field. At this point, the airspace is being protected just as we would when an aircraft flies IFR into an uncontrolled field, one aircraft in

or out until we receive the call of IFR cancellation. Upon landing, we would expect the NORDDO aircraft to promptly call Flight Service to relay that they have landed safely, not only so we know that the aircraft is okay, but also so we can resume normal operations.

CP: Related to the previous question, another reader asks, “Why does ATC often give a clearance direct to the destination when the destination is in a busy terminal area, and as a result, a reroute will almost always be needed? For example, I often get direct to my home airport (near Chicago Class B), but when I enter Chicago Center airspace, I’ll be given a route that corresponds to the usual preferred route structure.

JB: This is a situation where controllers can’t and don’t see the whole picture. There is usually less air traffic in most en route phases of flight, making a direct to destination clearance feasible. However, the airspace surrounding a busy Class B airport is highly structured and all IFR aircraft enter this airspace on a specific route, altitude, and airspeed. Operations simply cannot run efficiently if this structure is not maintained because the airspace

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is usually just too saturated. There isn't much of a way around the preferred route, so I would expect that to occur every time you approach Chicago Center's airspace. However, the direct-to clearances work once outside the high volume airspace, so whenever departing Chicago Center (or other busy terminal airspace) on an outbound flight, you can always ask for a direct-to-destination clearance on your way out as well. They are excellent amendments to any flight plan during the en route phase of flight but always expect a route amendment to the preferred arrival route around any busy airport. Even though you might not be landing at the primary airport that Class Bravo services, every airport in the area has a specific departure and arrival route to help blend all of the traffic together.

CP: Once I was doing pattern work at a Class D (towered) airport. After several option landings, I reported again on downwind. As with all previous landings, I was cleared for the option and told to remain in left traffic and report my next downwind. After touchdown, I slowed and reported to tower that I would be a full-stop. I was told that my landing clearance had been cancelled on final and that I should have gone around! I was shocked, as I'd not heard the controller's transmission of such, nor

had I responded to any transmission from him since being cleared for the option. My question is, in such a situation, is it acceptable for the controller to simply assume a pilot heard their transmission without a confirming read-back? What, if any, policy changes have been made in this regard in recent years?

JB: It sounds like it was a mistake on the controller's part. The controller is responsible for the hear-back or lack of response to every transmission.



We are never to assume a pilot has acknowledged the transmission unless we specifically get the acknowledgement with the call sign or tail number. If there is no response to our transmission, the pilot did not receive it. A controller initiating a go-around is doing so usually for a very specific reason needing a time-critical response and they should have called you numerous times until they received your response if they really did request you go-around. It sounds like it was a communication-error from the controller's part, and if it was a very necessary maneuver, they would have called you numerous times or flashed the light gun.

CP: I once landed without a landing clearance! It was a LIFR day and the airport was at absolute minimums in fog and rain. I checked on with tower over the Final Approach Fix (FAF). I was told to continue and report two-mile final. As you might imagine, at two-mile final, I was very busy flying the ILS (no autopilot), focusing on my minimums, while looking for any visual cues that would allow me to continue below Decision Height (DH) and land. In the high-workload of it all, I forgot to make the call and landed. Enveloped in the fog, I reported clear of the runway and the controller responded, "Roger, cleared to land, taxi to the FBO, stay



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with me.” Talk about a sinking feeling in my gut! I have always wondered why I’d ever been asked to report two miles out in the first place, especially given the conditions. Under what scenarios would such a report really be necessary?

JB: Usually, a report like that is requested when the controller has some other ground movement operations occurring that might involve the active runway. Once the clearance to land is given, certain activities are no longer allowed until the arriving aircraft has cleared the active runway. A diligent controller should have remembered that you were on final and would have issued the landing clearance before touchdown, regardless if you forgot to report a two-mile final or not.

It is hard to tell exactly why the controller did not issue the landing clearance on initial contact but it seems like a better operating practice for controllers is to issue clearances in a more timely fashion, especially in low IFR conditions. This is a very good example of the necessity for open communication between pilots and controllers because many controllers do not realize how busy a pilot is during that stage of flight and how asking for a two-mile report can add to an already high cockpit workload. This exact scenario brought to any controller’s attention will most likely make them think twice about what they may ask of a pilot during this phase of flight.

CP: [Author’s follow-up to previous question] Under today’s Controller rules and responsibilities, would ATC be required

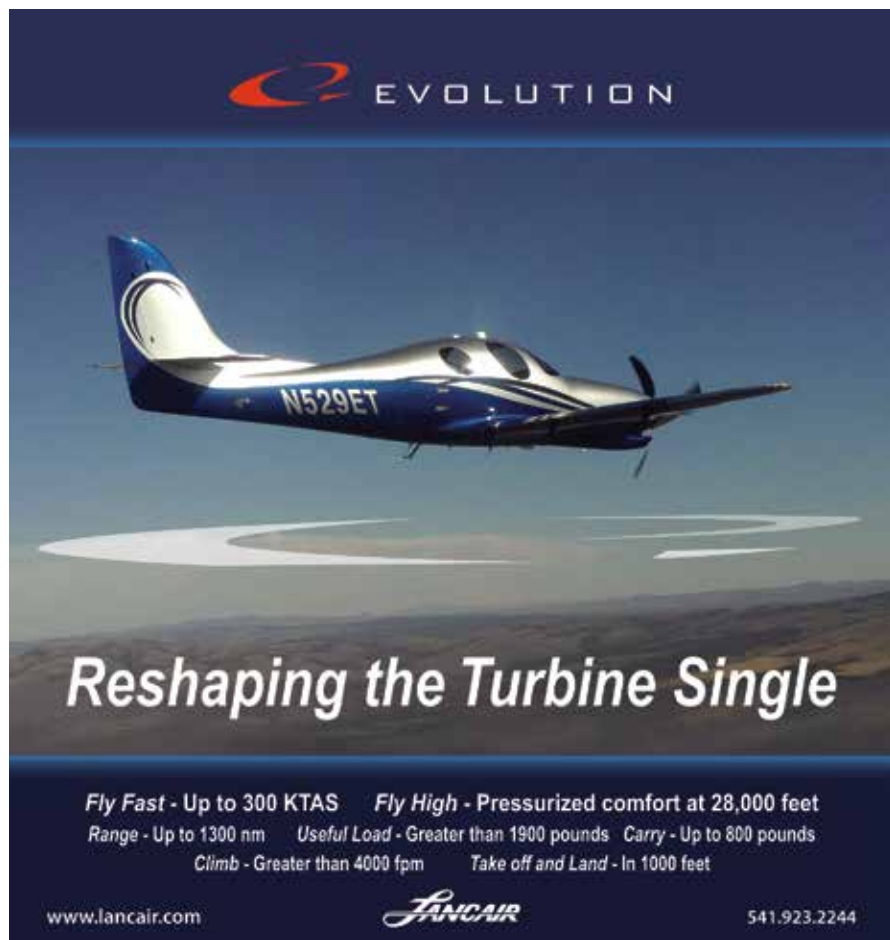
to report this to the FAA? In the past, such “no-harm, no-foul” events were often resolved via a phone call to the ATC facility, some hand-slapping, and a healthy dose of humble pie. What latitude does ATC currently have in dealing with pilots involved in such situations?

JB: ATC does have some discretion over what reports they file and how to do so. Under our current regulations, it is stated that the reporting of such “deviations” is left to controller prerogative based on how safety may have been affected. In this case, the landing sequence was already set and the controller knew where you were on final approach, regardless of reporting a two-mile final. Since safety wasn’t an issue because the controller knew exactly what you were doing, I would like to assume a report wouldn’t be necessary. Given that the controller also allowed you to land without a clearance and didn’t catch that before touchdown, that person may also have received their dose of humble pie and retained that for future operations.

Controllers have a safety reporting system called Air Traffic Safety Action Program (ATSAP), similar to pilot NASA reports, which can be filed anonymously and confidentially. This situation seems like a good ATSAP filing because it documents an area where safety can be improved, yet it also doesn’t directly affect either party involved. This also may be a good report for a pilot to file under NASA, describing how heavy pilot workload is during that phase of flight and how requesting a two-mile final call may not necessarily be the best choice for a controller to make.

In the next issue of *Cirrus Pilot*, we will continue our question and answer session with ATC Specialist Belleau. Our sincere thanks to Mr. Belleau for taking the time to answer our questions, expanding both our knowledge levels and safety margins. **GOPA**

About the Author: *Matthew McDaniel is a Master & Gold Seal CFII, ATP, MEI, AGI, & IGI and Platinum CSIP. In 24 years of flying, he has logged over 13,000 hours total, 5,000 hours of instruction-given, and over 4,000 hours in all models of the Cirrus. As owner of Progressive Aviation Services, LLC (www.progaviation.com), he has specialized in Technically Advanced Aircraft and Glass Cockpit instruction since 2001. Currently, he also flies the Airbus A-320 series for an international airline and holds six turbine aircraft type ratings. Matt is one of only 26 instructors in the world to have earned the Master CFI designation five consecutive times. He can be reached at matt@progaviation.com or (414) 339-4990.*



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