ATC Communications Part 2 2016

This is a follow up to Dave Penney’s excellent article on ATC communications at KOAK.

The magnetic fields of the earth change over time, and since runway headings are magnetic headings (within 10 degrees), the runways are occasionally renumbered to reflect the changing earth. The old runways numbers 27L and 27R are now 28L (two eight left) and 28R (two eight right). The previous runway 29 (two niner) is now runway 30 (tree zero), runway 33 (tree tree) remains the same.

When calling ground for VFR taxi, it is not necessary to add your equipment suffix, such as /U (slant uniform) or /A (slant alpha). All aircraft arriving and departing Class C airports are required to have a Mode C transponder (this will upgrade to ADS-B in 2020), so you would not need to say that you are /U (slant uniform). (Exceptions to the Mode C requirement when flying in and out of Class C can be made in advance.) It is not important for them to know what navigation equipment you have onboard for VFR flights, such as DME (/A) or GPS (/G). It is, however, required for IFR flights.

Oakland’s two former towers have closed and have merged into one very tall tower, but they do still use two separate frequencies, 127.2 for the south field (runway 30 where the airliners land) and 118.3 for the busier north field, runways 28R, 28L, and 33. If flying from OAK to SQL or PAO you will talk to North Tower first and then be handed off to South Tower.

When holding short of a runway, ready to take off, the correct phraseology is now: “Holding short of tree tree, ready for departure.” The old way was to say that you were ready for *take off.* However, since you are not actually ready to apply power and takeoff from that exact position, and to avoid confusion with an aircraft actually taking off, the term that should be used is ready for *departure*. The tower will then clear you to take off, and you can repeat back that you are cleared for takeoff. This also helps pilots and everyone be more aware that a plane will be lifting off the runway when hearing the words *take off*.

The former “taxi into position and hold” has been changed to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standard of “line up and wait.”

When “handed off” to another controller, such as being handed off from tower to NorCal departure when departing Class C airspace, and when being handed off on arrival from NorCal arrival to tower, instead of saying “with you”, it is better to say your altitude. “NorCal departure, Cessna seven tree niner uniform lima, two thousand.” Or Oakland Tower, Cessna seven tree niner uniform lima, two thousand fife hundred.” Since the pressure changes as we fly along our route, so will our altitude, unless we change the pressure indication on our altimeter. That’s why when getting a handoff to a departure controller, they will always give you the current altimeter setting. When you let them know your altitude they are able to check that your altimeter readout matches their radar indication. If it is off by more than 200’, they may ask you to “stop altitude squawk”. In this case you would turn your transponder to ON, rather than ALT (altitude).

The approach frequency listed and typically used from the Livermore area is 125.35

Previously when calling ground or tower or NorCal with your initial call using your entire call sign, you would wait for them to shorten it to the last 3 digits. Now, if they have read it back to you correctly the first time, you may shorten it yourself. When checking in with a new controller, use your entire call sign with the first call. Also, your first call to a controller will include the name of the controller, such as “Oakland Ground”, “Oakland Tower”, “NorCal Departure”, but after you’ve established who you’re talking to (and that you’re on the right frequency!), there is no need to repeat the name of the controller in subsequent calls.

Try to avoid saying “over” at the end of your call. Just stop talking. However, if you’ve stopped talking and taken your hand off the mic, don’t try to add something else, because most likely they will think you have stopped talking and will have started their end of the conversation. If this happens, all the other pilots except you will hear a loud squeal, and garbled voices, which isn’t very pleasant.

There is an ongoing debate about whether or not to call with all your information the first time you call in, such as to ground, or to approach control. Some controllers prefer you to say the entire call, and some prefer you to say just your call sign, followed by “request”. I’m in favor of the first approach. I think it opens up the airways by limiting the back and forth chatter. One recommendation is that if it’s busy, just use your call sign followed by “request” and only use the full call with who you are, where you are and what you want, when it’s not busy. If the controller can get back to you right away, they will. Or they may continue with the workload that they currently have and when they are able, they will get back to you. They may say, “Aircraft calling over San Pablo Bay, say call sign only.”

When you do have a handoff, there is no need to repeat your entire request, such as where you want to go, or your current location, since they already know, but now is the time to make a new request. For example, NorCal approach’s job is to get you to 28R, so they will give you the instructions on how to enter the pattern, such as, fly to the Mormon Temple at or above 2,500, make right traffic 28R, or enter straight in for 28R. They are not really interested in the fact that you might want closed traffic, or that you may want a different runway, such as 33, or the low pass 28R, full stop 33. However, tower is interested in this, and they’d like to know sooner rather than later so they can accommodate you, if able. If you want something other than landing on 28R, a good time to tell them is with your initial call. “Oakland Tower, Cessna seven tree niner uniform lima, two thousand fife hundred, request closed traffic on 28R”, or “request low pass 28R full stop 33.”

The biggest request that the controllers have is that you actually listen to what’s going on before you call them. They (rightly so) get irritated when a pilot “steps” on them (tries talking when they are, resulting in the annoying squeal and garbled talk and then they have to repeat what they said.) You also need to wait for the conversation between ATC and another pilot finishes before you key the mic with your request.

When cleared to land, you must always read back the runway number. “Cessna niner uniform lima, cleared to land two eight right.” Or, “Cessna niner uniform lima, cleared for the option two eight right, cleared to land, tree tree.” The clearance for a low approach must also be read back. “Niner uniform lima cleared low approach 28R, cleared to land 33.”

Typically in closed traffic you will have a discreet transponder code. Currently you will squawk STBY on the ground (that will change in the future when tower gets the equipment to use ground surface radar), and always squawk ALT when cleared for takeoff unless otherwise instructed. Typically at Class D airports such as LVK, HWD, and CCR, they will ask you to squawk VFR (1200) and possibly squawk standby (STBY).

When in the pattern on 28L, we no longer report “United”. There is a big hangar abeam the numbers (when you are directly across from the 28R numbers painted on the runway.) They no longer ask you to report abeam the hangar, however, if you haven’t received your landing clearance by then, it’s a good time to remind them where you are, by saying, “niner uniform lima, abeam the numbers” or with an alert in your voice “niner uniform lima, final!”

Since the OAK and HWD towers are so close, they used to pick up the phone to arrange your handoff. Now, all handoffs, including this one, are done electronically.

Liz Sommers

Chief Pilot