

The thin blue line

Often when pilots contact me to book an AFR, I ask them if they'd like to practice anything other than the minimum required, and I often ask if they'd like to practice an entry into controlled airspace. Sometimes the reaction suggests I've just invited my victim – oops, candidate – into the Chernobyl exclusion zone, rather than merely past the thin blue lines on a chart. Such is the fear that CTA inspires in some pilots who haven't done it for quite a while.

But it's really not that scary. If you're well-prepared, you only have to ask the controllers nicely for what you want, and then just do as you're told. Easy, right? Here's a refresher for those who haven't ventured past those blue lines on the VTC/VNC/OzRunways/AvPlan for a while.

Preparation means you know what you want, how to ask for it, what to expect, and how to stay ahead of the aeroplane. Let's use an example. You want to, in the words of Chuck Berry, "get your kicks on Route 66." You want to fly from Northam to Jandakot via Victor 66 at 3500 ft. A look at the VTC will tell you the CTA segment is from The Lakes Mine via Helena River Reservoir (better known as Mundaring Weir) to Canning Dam.

So what do you need? Firstly, make sure your charts are up to date. Next, you'll submit an ICAO Flight Notification. There are two types of Flight Notification on NAIPS – the SARTIME one and the ICAO one. If you just put in a SARTIME notification, Airservices assumes you're only putting it in so someone will come looking in the right place for the wreckage when you crash, and bring the right number of body bags, so they only pass it on to CENSAR and not to Perth, meaning Perth won't be expecting you. If you want a clearance, you need to put in an ICAO notification. They're more detailed, but don't be put off if you haven't done one for a while. The great thing about doing it electronically is instant feedback – if you make a mistake, NAIPS spits it out at you, highlights the error, and won't accept it until you've ironed out any mistakes.

More preflight planning: a look at the vertical steps on the chart tells you that at 3500 ft, you'll enter CTA about 3nm SW of The Lakes Mine, so you need your clearance before you reach the mine, and if you don't have it, you'll need to turn around and stay outside CTA.

How to ask for the clearance: basically, how can you help ATC to help you? Firstly, you can ask for the clearance with time and space to spare. When you switch from Northam CTAF, you'll switch to Perth Centre on 135.25, and as per the ERSA entry for Perth, this is the frequency to use to ask for your clearance. Ask for it as soon as you switch to Centre.

What does the controller need to know? Who you are, where you are, and what you want. Aircraft transmissions are in italics; controller transmissions are in bold.

Perth Centre

Cessna 172 PGL

2 nm west of Clackline, 3500

Request airways clearance

That's all they need. You've put in a notification, so they're expecting you, and now you're just telling them you're there. There's no need to ask for frequencies or transponder codes or anything fancy. Just ask them for what you want – a clearance – and let them worry about the details.

Because Perth is a radar environment, the first thing they'll do is give you a discrete transponder code.

PGL, squawk code 0564

Switch your transponder to Standby, dial up the code, and because you read back anything to do with routes, runways or numbers, you'll read back, with your callsign at the end:

Squawk 0564, PGL

After a minute or two, Centre will then tell you they have the little green dot on their screen with "PGL" next to it.

PGL identified, 4 nm west of Clackline

After a few more minutes, they'll probably tell you to change frequency to get your clearance. You've done all the hard work, so you don't need to know the frequency they'll use. Just wait, read back the frequency they give you, and switch to it.

PGL, contact Perth Approach 132.95 for your clearance

132.95, PGL

Approach are expecting you, and they have you on radar, so they know exactly where you are. You don't need to tell them your position.

Perth Approach, PGL, maintaining 3500

PGL, track Lakes Mine, Helena Valley Reservoir, Canning Dam, maintain 3500

There's a route and a number in that, so you read it all back:

Lakes Mine, Helena Valley Reservoir, Canning Dam, 3500, PGL

Then you just need to do what you've promised. Staying on track is important, as is maintaining your assigned altitude. And when you exit CTA just before Canning Dam, the controller will talk to you again:

PGL, clear of controlled airspace, frequency change approved (or words to that effect)

All you need to do is acknowledge and change frequencies – comms back to Perth Centre on 135.25, and transponder back to 1200.

Class D

Perth is Class C airspace – radar-controlled. Controlled airspace without radar coverage is Class D. Jandakot is an example, but let's leave that for another time. Apart from the former GAAP's, other Class D aerodromes include the likes of Broome, Karratha and Alice Springs.

The main differences are that they can't identify you on radar, and they don't have discrete Approach and Departure frequencies. They typically only have Tower. So when you call them for a clearance, it's the same as the call to Perth Centre, but it's on Tower frequency, and they're relying on you to know where you are. Change your transponder code to the frequency for non-radar CTA, which is of course 3000, listen to the ATIS, then call:

Broome Tower

Archer HKA

15 nm southeast, descending though 4000

Received Charlie

Request airways clearance

Then, as for Perth, you just do as you're told. No more frequency changes, and Tower will give you a clearance via a VFR approach point, so make sure you know which point to expect and how to find it using your trusty GPS, OzRunways or, heaven forbid, the VTC and the Mark 1 eyeball!

And if you want to go past those thin blue lines on the chart and you haven't done it for a while, Murray or I will be happy to run through the procedure with you on the ground, or jump in an aeroplane for a quick trip to Jandakot or somewhere more exotic like Rotto.

Kevin