Taming the Non-towered Babble

How to speak like a pro in the pattern

JIM ALSIP

H. Dean Chamberlain photo

Although radio communication is largely optional at many non-towered airports, proper use of this tool is one of the most helpful things a pilot can do to enhance aviation safety. The key, though, is *proper* use. When we babble with extraneous, unclear, or incomplete information, we are misusing the radio and taking time away from pilots who might urgently need to address a dangerous situation. The common traffic advisory frequency (CTAF) is used to assist pilots in identifying where they are in the traffic pattern and is community property for all pilots. Accordingly, we must not only adhere to established rules and recommended procedures, e.g., those set forth in the *Aeronautical Information Manual* (AIM), but we must also be courteous and respectful of our fellow aviators.

Who, Where, and What

Like any other radio call, your transmission at a non-towered airport should be brief, clear, and, above all, informative. Here are a few tips for meeting these goals.

First, a good radio call in a non-towered Visual Flight Rules (VFR) pattern begins with the name of the airport you are calling and the word "traffic" to address your fellow pilots. Remember that radio transmissions from more than one non-towered airport can be heard on the shared frequency, so repeating the airport name at the end of your transmission saves a lot of confusion. Flying into the airport at Okeechobee, Florida, for example, your radio call typically starts with the words, "Okeechobee traffic," and ends with "Okeechobee."

The second item in a good radio call is self-identification. The AIM (Chapter 4-2-3) recommends transmitting your make, model, and complete "N" number. In a busy non-towered pattern, however, you may wish to supplement this information with a brief description that will help visually identify you to others. For instance, you might say something like, "blue high wing," or "yellow *Cub*."

The third element is to state where you are, so others will know where to look for you. The position report should include both distance and altitude, such as: "seven miles southeast at 2,500." If you are familiar with local procedures, it may be helpful to report your position relative to a known landmark, much as you would use visual checkpoints when establishing two-way radio com-

Okeechobee traffic, Red RV 3345 Delta, 10 miles south, 2,300, landing Okeechobee.

munications prior to entering Class C airspace. At Indiantown, Florida, a typical call for the VFR pattern might be something like, "three miles west, over the bridge, 3,000."

The last part of a proper radio call is to state your intentions, e.g., "landing Indiantown."

Quiz Time

Now for the quiz! Using the tips we have already discussed, look at the following three sample transmissions and select the radio call that best follows the suggestions provided above:

1. Okeechobee traffic, RV 3345 Delta is 10 miles south of the Okeechobee Airport. We will fly over the airport, then do a tear drop to enter the left downwind for runway 13. Okeechobee.
2. Okeechobee traffic, this is RV45 Delta, 9.6 nautical miles south, 2,300 feet, landing on runway 13 at Okeechobee. (Can you tell that this pilot has a GPS navigator?)
3. Okeechobee traffic, Red RV 3345 Delta, 10 miles south, 2,300, landing Okeechobee.

Ready for the answer? I would choose response number three. Your selection might be different, but I hope it is not number one. Here's why. From 10 miles out, you cannot know the situation at the airport. Even if you did, it could change before you arrive and require you to adjust your pattern entry. Also, the amount of babble in this response fails the brevity test.

Too many pilots think it sounds cool to "take the active," but this transmission violates the prime directive—provide useful information.

Choice two is okay, but the precision of 9.6 nautical miles provides more detail than your fellow aviators need. Think about it this way: If you heard this transmission, would it really make a significant difference in when you expect to see this aircraft in the pattern, or in where you would look in an attempt to spot it? Rounding up to 10 miles, or even rounding down to 9 miles, is fine.

Forbidden Phrases

Here are a few of the "bozo" radio calls I most want to banish from the airwaves. I offer them in good humor, but with the hope they provoke both a smile and a promise to avoid them in your own transmissions.

"Any traffic in the pattern please advise."

We have all heard it, but that doesn't make it right, and it certainly doesn't make it useful. The AIM (Chapter 4-1-9) specifically states that this call "should not be used under any condition." It is also common sense. Consider what would happen if everyone in the pattern responded to this call:

"Aircraft coming in, N3345 is left downwind."

"Aircraft coming in, N152SC, is left downwind, number 3."

"Aircraft coming in, high wing turning base to final."

"Aircraft coming in, Cessna 310 holding short for aircraft on final."

"Ahhhhh, this is the guy coming in, you all stepped on each other, please say again."

The correct technique is to tune your radio to the correct CTAF frequency and then *listen* to develop a mental picture of traffic in and around the pattern.

For More Information

AIM: Chapter 4 – Air Traffic Control

AIM: Pilot/Controller Glossary

AOPA/Air Safety Foundation: "Say It Right" seminar

"Piper 1234, taking the active for departure."

Too many pilots think it sounds cool to "take the active," but this transmission violates the prime directive—provide useful information. Before you make such a transmission, consider how useless it is to an arriving pilot who is listening for information on which runway is in use. By speaking only of "the active," you are contributing to communication clutter by forcing the new arrival to separately request this information. The "taking" phraseology can go, too. To sound like a pro, try this version: "Okeechobee traffic, Piper 1234, departing runway 13, Okeechobee."

Mile-by-mile position reports.

Recently, I flew over a busy airport with a frequency shared by at least two other airports. There was a lot of radio traffic. The pilots of two RVs started to announce themselves about 15 miles out, and they continued to make mile-by-mile position reports for the next five minutes. In between, they exchanged even more detailed position reports with one another. Even worse was the pilot who started announcing his arrival from 12 miles out at 3,500 feet. He made calls every two miles, every 500 feet, and at every turn and position in a full and extended pattern. During this highly celebrated approach, I flew an entire aerobatic sequence, descended to pattern altitude, flew the pattern, landed, and taxied to my hangar. I heard him announce final as I shut down my engine.

Common Sense and Common Courtesy

The next time you fly into a non-towered airport, apply critical thought to your radio techniques and transmissions. You will sound like a pro when you identify yourself, say position and altitude, and state your intentions in as few words as possible. In short, if you have something important to say, say it. Otherwise, listen and learn.

Jim Alsip is a NAFI Master Aerobatic Flight Instructor. His e-mail is isjim@dylanaviation.com

IFR Operations in the VFR Pattern

In the words of Helen Woods, a Washington, DC, area flight instructor:

"There is nothing more frustrating than to have a pattern full of students on a sunny day when a pilot practicing instrument approaches comes barreling in on an approach, making all of his position calls in IFR terms. If I don't have an approach plate out, I don't even know where he is half the time. What about my poor primary students?

"The purpose of the radio is for communication, and you can't communicate with others unless you are speaking a common language. It is amazing how many high-time pilots and CFIs haven't figured this out. There was actually a 'Safety Talk' given by one of these pilots last summer on "IFR terms that VFR pilots should know," with the sub-text being that "they should know these terms so they can stay out of my way." When I put up my hand and asked how he thought it applied to a 15-hour student pilot, I was told that all student pilots should attend this talk, so they, too, could understand this pilot on the radio and stay out of his way.

"Because I hear this sort of thing on the radio so often, I have to wonder about what instrument pilots are learning when they train. I hope instrument instructors will stress that an approach clearance from ATC when operating in and around a non-towered airport pattern does not constitute permission to abandon the courtesy, common sense, and AIM-recommended practices that help us safely share the skies."