

When Tower Asks You To Call

James Albright June 01, 2021



Tower controller at Schiphol Airport (EHAM) Amsterdam, Jan. 25, 2006. Photo credit: Mark Brouwer

One way an otherwise enjoyable flight can be ruined is when tower or another air traffic control agency says, “...possible deviation, I need you to give me a call when you land, advise when ready to copy a phone number.” It’s rare to have been a professional pilot for more than a few years without hearing the tale of a fellow pilot who was presumed guilty until proven innocent. The good news is that the [FAA](#) is now more interested in prevention of future events than punitive actions. The bad news is that flying remains a complicated business, none of us are perfect, and these “Call me when you land” events will continue.

I speak from some experience, I am afraid to say, having been asked to call 11 times in my short 40-plus-year career. The first six times were flying [U.S. Air Force](#) missions and if I told you about them, Tom Cruise would have to hunt you down and kill you. The next three were when I was a standards pilot for a large management company years ago and was asked to investigate two altitude busts and one gross navigation error. Then there was reaction to an article I wrote in 2015, advising pilots to “Lawyer up;” that is advice I still give but only in the rarest incidents. That leaves just one more event, which was more recent. It was, in fact, just a few months ago.

Don't Panic



Gulfstream GVII-G500 during a TCAS RA event. Photo credit: James Albright

I was flying a local training flight into Portsmouth International Airport (KPSM), Pease, New Hampshire, in February 2021 when we were handed off from Boston Approach Control to Portsmouth Ground Controlled Approach (GCA) while keeping track of several Visual Flight Rules (VFR) aircraft along the Atlantic coastline. It was one of those “clear and a million” days that was a welcome treat after a long, hard winter. We briefed before the flight that VFR traffic would be our primary threat during the day, and that turned out to be true.

We were level at 4,000 ft. when we checked in with GCA and were instructed to descend and maintain

3,000 ft., turn to a heading, and to expect vectors for the approach. As the GCA controller spoke, our aircraft’s traffic alert and collision avoidance system (TCAS) issued a “Descend!” Resolution Advisory (RA) that required immediate action. I disengaged the autopilot and followed the TCAS’s guidance to descend. The TCAS is designed for each aircraft to negotiate a course of action to provide separation, so the other aircraft should have been given a “climb” or other resolution instruction to stay out of our way. Even though the TCAS guidance agreed with the controller’s guidance, there are specific procedures to follow, which we executed perfectly. The pilot monitoring (PM) let the controller know we had a TCAS RA; I immediately executed the guidance to avoid the conflict; and the controller acknowledged. Once we were clear of the other aircraft, the PM let the controller know we were “clear of conflict,” and the controller again acknowledged. Once we were vectored onto the approach course, we were sent to tower’s frequency, and we landed. Nothing else was said of the matter until we debriefed the flight. It was a textbook perfect TCAS RA event on our part.

Two days after the flight, our hangar manager got a call from airport operations at our home base, Hanscom Field (KBED), Bedford, Massachusetts, saying the Portsmouth tower was looking for the pilot in command on that day’s flight. The particulars made their way to me by Friday, and I made the call, which went right to voice mail. So, I had the weekend to wonder what it was all about.

I have an advantage in all this, having survived 20 years as an Air Force pilot where this kind of scrutiny is par for the course. (Air Force Standardization motto: “Eating our young and asking for seconds!”) But still I had to replay the flight in my head, over and over.

Document the Event and Understand the [FAA’s](#) New Motivation

If you find yourself on the receiving end of a “Call me when you land” directive and you know something wasn’t quite up to your “A game,” you should do your best to relive the event and write down what happened. But don’t do this thinking you need to cover up your action or the actions of your crew. This is a chance to recall things while they are still fresh.

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TYPE OF EVENT/SITUATION

ATC Clearance

DATE OF OCCURRENCE 05/07/0300

LOCAL TIME(24 hr. clock) 23:00

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A [NASA Aviation Safety](#) Reporting System (ASRS) submission. Credit: James Albright

I wrote about this delicate game of having to make the phone call in the [September 2015 issue of BCA](#). I made the case that the [FAA](#) is the judge, jury and executioner in most disputes between pilot and controller. I based this on an altitude bust in 1994 where the pilot was proven to have read back the altitude he thought he heard but was still violated because, "An error of perception does not constitute a reasonable explanation for a deviation from a clearly transmitted clearance or instruction." The ruling went on to say, "Inattentiveness or carelessness is presumed."

I was contacted by an [FAA](#) inspector about this. He agreed that "The presumption of guilt definitely used to be the case, sadly." But he assured me things have changed. Their attitude has become, "Please tell me what happened. We are seeking to understand how/why the misstep happened."

We pilots have heard this before. In 1975, the [FAA](#) enlisted the help of NASA to act as a neutral third party to receive and process [Aviation Safety](#) Reporting System (ASRS) submissions from pilots, controllers and other users of the National Airspace System. The intent was very good, of course. Allowing the free, unrestricted flow of information gave the [FAA](#) the data it would not normally get to expose problems and then take the necessary corrective actions.

In return, it was said, licensed pilots, air traffic controllers, dispatchers, mechanics and others would get a form of immunity, a "get out of jail free" card of sorts. But it doesn't really work that way. While FAR Part 91.25 generally prohibits the use of any ASRS submission in any disciplinary action, it does not prohibit enforcement action.

But in the years since, I've heard more and more stories from pilots where the "Call me" event ended with nothing more than, "OK, thanks for letting us know."

Make the Call, Honestly



Credit: James Albright

A few years after my “You are guilty until proven innocent” article, I heard from a contract Gulfstream pilot who wanted me to know about a flight he had to Hanscom Field. He was in the right seat as the pilot flying (PF) and made a perfect pattern entry to KBED. He said he made all the right radio calls and assumed tower had cleared them to land. After checking in with ground control he was asked why he never checked in with tower. It was then he realized he entered the wrong frequency.

He got one of those “Get ready to copy my phone number” calls. He made the call and explained how he missed the frequency by one digit, made all the calls and somehow imagined tower’s response. The tower controller said, “Oh, I guess that explains it. How can you prevent that from happening again?” The hapless pilot said, “Prepare better for an airport I’m not familiar with; let the other pilot know when he is getting behind; and to pay better attention!” The tower controller agreed and that was the end of that.

I spoke with the tower manager about the incident, and he told me that it was a “no harm, no foul” incident so long as the pilot was well intentioned and appeared to be genuinely concerned about doing things the right way. I asked him, “If he showed any attitude, would that have changed your attitude?” At first, he said no, but then he said, “Maybe.”

I was thinking about that incident over the weekend after my latest request for a phone call, hoping I also could come away unscathed. I finally got in touch with the tower manager who told me they wanted to know when and where the RA happened, since neither approach control nor GCA reported it. It was a pleasant phone call and the manager thanked us for coming by his airport as often as we did. “Don’t be a stranger!”

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