

This is ATCcommunication.com audio lesson #11. I'm your host Jeff Kanarish

Let's say today you are flying VFR and you want to pick up flight following from an enroute air traffic control center.

Where can you look to find a enroute center (ARTCC) frequency? It depends on what you have on hand. If you have F.A.A.-printed enroute charts, such as Enroute High or Enroute Low charts, you will find the nearest enroute sector frequency in little "postage stamp" boxes scattered on the chart. Take a look at the illustration of a low enroute chart that I included in the show notes for this lesson, or pull out your own low enroute chart, if you have one. Simply find the box nearest your location on the chart and dial in that frequency.

If you are using Jeppeson products, the Enroute Low charts have the frequencies in boxes on the chart, same as the government issued charts. The Enroute High charts have no frequency boxes on the chart, but there is a table of enroute frequencies in the margin of the chart. This table is just about worthless. It lists frequencies by enroute center, Chicago Center, for example, but there are no locations associated with each frequency. You might pick a sector frequency for Chicago Center that operates from an antenna in Central Illinois, while you are flying in Southern Wisconsin. You have no way of knowing where the sector is located, that is until you try to reach it on the radio. The silence will tell you that you are too far away to be heard, but that is all it will tell you.

Sectional charts don't even have enroute center frequencies on them. If all you have in the cockpit is a sectional, and you want to get in contact with a center controller for, let's say flight following, you will have to do what I did yesterday.

There we were, flying along in flight at 37,000 feet, going from, uh, maybe I shouldn't say that. Albuquerque Center said, "Airliner 1445, contact Albuquerque Center on one two . . ."\*

Oh damn! I just made a big mistake! Captain was flying. I had the radios. When Albuquerque started to give me the new frequency, I reached for the wrong radio tuner and started to spin in the new frequency.

Most aircraft radios have a window to hold a standby frequency and a window to hold the active frequency. Normally, you tune the new frequency into the standby window and then hit the transfer switch to move the new frequency to the active side. When you hit the switch, not only does the new frequency go active, the formerly active frequency moves into the standby window. This is a great feature, because if the new frequency that goes active does not work, you can always hit the transfer switch again and restore the old, working frequency.

Not so on the Boeing 757. On the Seven Five, each radio control head has two windows, but you can tune a new frequency into either one. Instead of a transfer switch, the Seven Five has a flip-flop switch. The flip-flop is a toggle switch that points to either the left frequency window or to the right frequency window. Whichever side the toggle points to is active.

Normally, a smart pilot will put a new frequency into the window not currently active and then push the flip-flop toggle towards that window. A smart pilot will also take note of which side the toggle is pointing to, and then put the new frequency in the side the toggle is not point to.

For some reason, though I've done it correctly a bazillion times, yesterday I rolled the first couple of

digits into the active window. My intent was to roll the new frequency into the non-active side as the controller gave me the frequency. But Head-Up-Butt syndrome was in effect and I ended up trying to enter the new frequency into the window currently in use. Because of my special trick, I immediately cut off the controller before he could give me the rest of the new frequency.

Bye bye Albuquerque Center. I hardly knew ye. And I couldn't remember ye. Which means,

1. I have a non-working frequency tuned in.
2. The non-active radio frequency was also worthless because it was tuned to an enroute sector we left about 200 miles ago. (That's the problem with flying at the speed of stink. Things move away from you real fast!)
3. We use Jeppesen Enroute High charts which don't have center frequencies listed by location, as I mentioned earlier.

However, comma, there was a way out. I want you to know about it should you ever run into a situation where you need to get ahold of Center and you don't have a chart that shows the frequency you need.

On the Jeppesen chart, just above that worthless table of non-located frequencies, over in the margin, it says "For the correct enroute frequency contact any flight service station on 122.55."

Aha! I tuned up 122.55, and played with the #2 VOR tuner to determine our position by radial and DME. (The flight service station specialist will ask you for your radial and DME so he can determine the correct frequency for your location.)

Just as I was about to press the radio transmit button, I heard this on 121.5 on radio #2:

"Airliner 1445, this is Albuquerque Center on Guard. Contact Albuquerque Center on 120.95."

Great. Now the whole world knows I messed up. But, swallowing my pride, I rolled 120.95 into radio #1 and checked in. The controller gave me a new frequency to contact. This time I double-checked the flip-flop switch's position and put the new frequency into the opposite window. (Fool me once, and all that.) Problem solved, almost.

About 5 seconds later, our ACARs box, (that's the digital touchscreen display we use to get and send inflight data over a discrete network,) chimed. There was a message from our dispatcher on the ACARs screen. It said, "Contact ATC on 120.95."

Hard to get lost on the radios for very long when you are scooting along at .80 Mach with 185 people on board. Everyone keeps an eye on you, and let's you know the second you are off track.

Point is, keep 122.55 in mind. It comes in really handy when you need it. Oh, the radio call I would have made?

"Any flight service station, Airliner 1445 on 122.55, twenty northwest of Saint Johns."

"Airliner 1445, this is Prescott Radio. Go ahead."

"Head-Up-Butt 1445 is a Boeing 757, on the Saint John 040-degree radial for twenty-two DME at Flight Level 370. We are looking for the correct Center frequency."

“Airliner 1445, give Albuquerque Center a try on 120.95.” And so on. . .