EUROCONTROL guidance notes for pilots

3. Getting Aeronautical Information Before Flight

AIRSPACE INFRINGEMENT

This is one of a series of Guidance Notes (GN) intended to help you keep out of trouble. The others are listed at the foot of the next page.

A major cause of airspace infringement is that some pilots simply do not know that the restricted airspace (airway, control zone, prohibited, restricted or danger area) is there, or that it must not be entered without permission. All national authorities have an Aeronautical Information Service (AIS) whose purpose it to make sure that this information is available to pilots. This Guidance Note gives advice on obtaining aeronautical information before flight.

TYPES OF AERONAUTICAL INFORMATION

Two types of aeronautical information are issued by national authorities. Semi-permanent information is published in the national Aeronautical Information Publication (AIP). Changes to information contained in the AIP and information of a short duration is published as a NOTAM (Notice to Airmen), which is distributed to major aerodromes by telecommunication, and is available to others by fax or on web sites.

THE AIP

The contents of an AIP are specified by international agreement, and are as follows:

Part 1 - General (GEN) contains information of a general nature including national regulations and requirements, especially differences from ICAO Standards; tables and codes; and details of services available.

Part 2 - En-route (ENR) contains general rules and procedures; a detailed description of air traffic services airspace, airways and other controlled airspace; details, including protected ranges, of radio navigation aids; prohibited, restricted and danger areas; and charts depicting airspace reservations.

Part 3 - Aerodromes (AD) contains detailed information about aerodromes covered by the AIP, often including charts of the aerodrome and their approach procedures.

All European national authorities are required to make copies of their AIPs available on-line. Often, registration is required to get access to the data. Free of charge access to the AIPs of the ECAC States is provided through the European AIS Database public user website - EAD Basic.
(http://www.ead.eurocontrol.int/publi-cuser/public/pu/login.jsp)

AICs

National authorities often publish Aeronautical Information Circulars (AICs) to advise pilots of short term changes to AIP information, or just useful advice. These are distributed in paper form and may be accessed from web sites.

COMMERCIAL AERONAUTICAL INFORMATION

The AIP contains full details of all aeronautical information. Most pilots use alternative documentation produced by commercial companies, which is based on information contained in AIPs and is designed to be used in-flight.

Commercial documentation usually covers a broad geographical area (e.g. Europe) and may be divided into information concerning upper or lower airspace. It usually includes en-route charts, aerodrome departure, arrival and approach charts, and booklets (flight guides) summarising important aeronautical information - Including listings of aerodrome characteristics, navigational facilities, communications, as well as general information. A commercial AIS provider uses common format and layout conventions to publish the aeronautical information

for the whole area covered and documentation is usually tailored to the needs of the different target groups of pilots, for example VFR guides do not contain instrument approach procedures to aerodromes.

AIPs are subject to a regular revision cycle (normally 4-weekly), and commercial documentation has a similar revision cycle. Major changes to airspace structure can occur at any time; it is therefore essential to use up-to-date documentation. Like the AIP, commercial documentation has an up-date service - either on paper or on-line.

Several commercial organisations produce aeronautical documentation in slightly different formats. Before buying or subscribing to such information, consider what will best suit your requirements. Visit a pilot shop and look at what is available - if none is nearby, most have good web-sites. Talk to other pilots in your club or at a nearby flying school. If possible, borrow some charts and flight guides and spend time getting to know them before you make up your mind. Then when you have bought your own books and charts, make sure you know your way around them so that you can quickly find all the information you need.

NOTAMs
NOTAMs contain details of information of a non-permanent nature, such as air-shows and parachute jumps, closed runways, inoperable radio navigational aids, military exercises, inoperable lights on obstructions, temporary obstacles near airfields, etc.

SNOWTAMs, ASHTAMs and BIRDTAMs contain details of winter runway conditions, volcanic ash and the passage of large flocks of migrating birds, respectively.

NOTAMs are always written in English (sometimes published in local langauge, too), but shortened using a standard format and codes to ease transmission and to avoid misunderstanding. A NOTAM may consist of up to 8 items (Q, A, B, C, D, E, F & G), but some of these may be omitted.
A quick-reference guide to decoding NOTAMs with several examples is included in the Annex to this GN.

HOW TO GET NOTAMs
Aerodromes with air traffic services usually receive full details of NOTAMs as they are published, and some may have briefing facilities which include charts on which active NOTAMs are depicted.

Many European countries make aeronautical information (including NOTAMs) available free-of charge on-line. An up-to-date list of European AIS web-sites is maintained by EUROCONTROL at http://www.eurocontrol.int/aim/public/standard_page/web_eur.html. Some of these web-sites are a little difficult to use, so it is a good idea to practise before you need the information. You may have to register first, but this is usually free of charge, and once you have a password the NOTAMs are quickly available. Commercial or membership organisations should not be regarded as official sources, but they may provide NOTAMs in an easier to understand format.
Services at different locations vary; make sure you know how to obtain them from wherever you fly to, particularly in a foreign country. When making query into a NOTAM database it is important to specify precisely the route and flight conditions (VFR/IFR), otherwise you will get a huge number of NOTAMs which might not be relevant to your intended flight.

HAVE A SAFE FLIGHT
We hope you have found this useful. Please tell us if you have any suggestions for improvement.

OTHER GUIDANCE NOTES
1. Rules for VFR Flight
2. Flight preparation
3. Getting Aeronautical Information Before Flight
4. Getting Meteorological Information Before Flight
5. Using Meteorological Information for Planning
6. Visual Navigation
7. VOR / DME / ADF Navigation
8. GPS Navigation
9. Getting Aeronautical & Met Information In Flight
10. Entering Controlled Airspace
11. Getting the Most out of your Transponder

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