

SID/STAR phraseology issues

Background:

In November 2007 ICAO issued an amendment to PANS-ATM Document 4444 that included new procedures and phraseologies for SID/STAR. The amendment called for Level restrictions issued by ATC in air-ground communications to be repeated in conjunction with subsequent level clearances in order to remain in effect (Para 11.4.2.6.2.5). However, when aircraft are operating on a published SID or STAR procedure and are cleared to a higher/lower level, the aircraft shall follow the published vertical profile of the procedure unless such restrictions are explicitly cancelled by ATC (Para 6.3.2.4 (SID); 6.5.2.4 (STAR)).

It became apparent that the implementation and application of this amendment was at best inconsistent. Some States completely adopted it, some partially adopted it and others did not adopt it at all.

The Problem

The inconsistency of implementation and application of the amendment led to interpretations of the phraseology, which in turn led to assumptions being made by the pilot and/or air traffic controller e.g. **“Climb to level 160”** could mean do not comply with the level restrictions in one geographic area or comply with level restrictions if in another.

This would mean the potential for air traffic controllers to face a loss of separation or for a pilot to face a level bust or worse - this is clearly unacceptable.

The Solution

In October 2009 the IFALPA Air Traffic Services (ATS) Committee and the IFATCA Technical Operations Committee (TOC) held a joint meeting in Las Vegas. During the meeting the situation was fully discussed and acceptable phraseology was agreed upon.

Where level restrictions apply the phraseology would be:

“Climb via/Descend via”

Where the level restrictions do not apply the phraseology would be:

“Open Climb/Open Descend”

The Next Problem

The proposed solution by IFALPA and IFATCA, the two “User” Federations, was presented to the members of the ICAO Air Navigation Commission in 2009. The Commission was initially in agreement but wanted a simulation to take place to ensure there were no safety issues related to the phraseology. The Civil Air Navigation Services Organization (CANSO) undertook to do this using the services of MITRE to perform the simulation. This took until July 2011 to complete and instead of a worldwide simulation being performed; a one day simulation was performed at the MITRE laboratories. This unfortunate change in how the simulation was conducted has led to accusations that the simulation had a North American bias. During the simulation an alternative phraseology for when the level restrictions would apply was considered and that word was “Profile”. It should be recognised that North America has used “Descend via” (for the level restrictions being applied) for a number of years, they have all the risk assessments and related data and it is accepted phraseology on a proven procedure. They are about to launch “Climb via” later this year. It is unlikely that they would consider a change to phraseology at this stage.

The results of the simulation were sent to the Air Navigation Commission (ANC) with a recommendation from CANSO that “Profile” and “Open” should be used. Despite the efforts of the two “User” Federations to settle this matter, the issue has now been referred to an Ad Hoc Working Group to consider possible ways forward. The confusion concerning SID/STAR altitude clearances continues. To the pilot community this is clearly unacceptable.

IFALPA Recommendation

When navigating on a published procedure (SID/STAR/CDO/CCO) and receiving an altitude clearance which is beyond an altitude restriction (for example cleared to 6000 feet in a descent with a restriction to cross a point at 14000 feet) the restriction may or may not continue to apply. If there is any doubt whatsoever, request clarification from ATC.

Some controllers may express frustration with the question but it is vital to make certain that you have the proper altitude clearance.