



NTSB ***SAFETY ALERT***

National Transportation Safety Board



Pilots: Help ATC Help You



Do not hesitate to tell controllers if you have an emergency

The problem

- Pilots may hesitate to declare an emergency to air traffic control (ATC) because they are embarrassed about asking for help or think that they can handle it on their own.
- Even if pilots indicate that they have a problem or need help, the controller may not treat the situation as an emergency unless the pilot specifically declares it as such. ATC can be a powerful tool to a pilot in distress, offering priority handling, information about weather and traffic conflicts, and other emergency services to help the pilot complete the flight safely.
- Controllers may not be pilots or have detailed knowledge of aircraft systems. If pilots are not specific and only provide ATC with minimal information about the situation, ATC might not fully understand the seriousness of the situation and, as a result, may be unable to provide timely, relevant assistance or recognize an emergency.¹

Related accidents

- In 2014, a Socata TBM700 impacted open water off the northeast coast of Jamaica. The pilot and the passenger died. The flight originated from Rochester, New York, and was destined for Naples, Florida. The airplane was in cruise flight at 28,000 ft when the pilot contacted ATC, reported that “an indication” was not correct in the airplane, and requested a descent to 18,000 ft. The controller, unaware of the severity of the problem, instructed the pilot to descend first to 25,000 ft, then, due to traffic, turn left and descend to 20,000 ft. During this time, the pilot became unresponsive. An Air National Guard intercept of two fighter jets was dispatched and followed the airplane about 40 miles northwest of Charleston, South Carolina. Two fighter jets from Florida relieved the two fighter jets; followed the airplane to Andros Island, Bahamas; and disengaged before entering Cuban airspace. The airplane eventually began a descent from 25,000 ft and impacted open water. ([ERA14LA424](#))

¹ In August 2016, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) issued Safety Recommendations A-16-18 and -19 to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regarding emergency identification and response training for air traffic controllers.

- In 2014, a Columbia LC-41-550FG crashed in a residential area near East Patchogue, New York. The pilot died, and the airplane was destroyed. The noninstrument-rated pilot encountered instrument meteorological conditions (IMC) in flight. Although the pilot contacted ATC stating that he needed assistance, when asked by the controller if he wished to declare an emergency, the pilot did not respond and instead told the controller that he would return to the departure airport. Since the controller had reasonable belief that the pilot was able to remain in visual meteorological conditions (VMC) and return to the departure airport, he advised the pilot to change frequencies and provided no further assistance. However, radar data showed that, shortly after the last radio contact, the airplane entered a descending right turn, consistent with the pilot's loss of control due to spatial disorientation. ([ERA14FA292](#))
- In 2013, a Beechcraft H35 lost engine power while in cruise flight and impacted a house while on approach to Flagler County Airport, Palm Coast, Florida. The pilot and the two passengers died, and the airplane was destroyed. The pilot contacted ATC and reported vibrations and an oil pressure problem; despite the fact that the airplane had lost total power, the pilot did not indicate this fact to ATC, and the controller did not request such information. The controller provided the pilot with vectors for an approach that did not allow the airplane to reach the airport. Contributing to the accident, in part, was the pilot's failure to clearly state that the airplane had lost all power. ([ERA13FA105](#))
- In 2012, a Piper PA-28-160 crashed into a wooded area near Parkton, North Carolina. The pilot died, and the airplane sustained substantial damage. While conducting an instrument approach, the pilot began experiencing directional control issues and advised ATC that he had "no gyro." The controller did not understand that the loss of these primary flight instruments would make it extremely difficult for the pilot to maintain the correct attitude and that the pilot would need to reach VMC to control the airplane and land safely. During the accident sequence, the pilot lost and then regained control of the airplane. The pilot did not declare an emergency but asked ATC if he could proceed to the filed alternate airport, which was in VMC. The controller instead prompted the pilot to leave VMC and attempt another approach into IMC, which contributed to the loss of control of the airplane. ([ERA13FA088](#))

What can pilots do?

- If you find yourself in a situation in which you are in distress and need help, do not hesitate to contact ATC and declare an emergency. Remember that, per 14 *Code of Federal Regulations* 91.113(c), an aircraft in distress has right-of-way over all other traffic; ATC can give you prioritized handling if you declare an emergency.
- Be as explicit as possible when communicating with ATC. Inform the controller of your abilities and/or limitations as well as those of your aircraft. Keep in mind that the controller might not be familiar with your aircraft, so be specific!

- Take charge and tell the controller what you need. Do not be afraid to inform ATC that you are “unable” if you are given directions that you cannot comply with in a safe manner, and do not rely on ATC to provide emergency handling unless requested.
- As the pilot-in-command, you are ultimately responsible for the safety of your crew, your passengers, and your aircraft. Remember that declaring an emergency isn’t giving up control—it’s taking control!

Interested in more information?

The following FAA resources can be accessed from the FAA’s website at www.faa.gov:

- The [Aeronautical Information Manual](#), chapter 6, “Emergency Procedures,” describes the pilot’s responsibility and procedures to follow during an emergency.
- The [Instrument Procedures Handbook, Appendix A, “Emergency Procedures.”](#) contains information about the recognition and resolution of emergency situations.
- The [January 24, 2013, “Flying Lessons” newsletter](#) contains valuable tips for pilots (and controllers) about what to do during an emergency and some pilot responses to ERA13FA105.

The following Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) resources can be accessed from AOPA’s website at www.aopa.org:

- The Air Safety Institute created a [video accident case study](#) regarding emergency management and ERA13FA088.
- The October 31, 2014, article, “[Listen to your ‘Spidey Sense,’](#)” and the January 1, 2012, article, “[Don’t Just Shut Up And Die,](#)” discuss the importance of not hesitating to declare an emergency.
- Air Safety Foundation, Safety Advisor, Operations and Proficiency No. 7, “[Say Intentions When You Need ATC’s Help,](#)” details how to have a plan, know when it is not working, and call for help.
- The September 2001 AOPA Flight Training Article/Legal Briefing, “[When Is It an Emergency? You’ll Know It When You See It,](#)” addresses pilot responsibility and how to recognize an emergency.

The NTSB’s Aviation Information Resources web page, www.nts.gov/air, provides convenient access to NTSB aviation safety products. The reports for the accidents referenced in this safety alert are accessible by NTSB accident number from the [Aviation Accident Database](#) link, and each accident’s public docket is accessible from the [Accident Dockets](#) link for the Docket Management System. The safety recommendation letter referenced in this alert can be accessed from the [Safety Recommendations](#) link. This safety alert and others can be accessed from the [Aviation Safety Alerts](#) link.