

Flight Who?

Your VATSIM guide to Flight Service Stations and the Flight Information Centre

First Edition

February 2024

Handbook made for virtual VATSIM use only, not for real-world use.
Produced for the Virtual Vancouver FIR. Procedures may vary between FIR.

Foreword

This handbook is hopefully written in a way that allows you as a virtual pilot to understand it easily. If you wanted to read Transport Canada's hard-to-interpret air regs you would do that instead. You are here because you want to learn with certainty, not by guessing.

Once finished reading this handbook, you should be well on your way to knowing how to fly with the services of a Flight Service Station and Flight Information Centre; and if you're not totally convinced, ask a virtual flight service specialist the next time you see one online!

The Flight Information Centre and Flight Service Stations of the virtual skies await your arrival; so, let's get learning!

So, what is Flight Service?

Flight Service can be broken into two main branches; Flight Service Stations which are abbreviated as FSS; and Flight Information Centres, FICs. Both do very different things, which we explore further in this handbook; but the easiest way to look at it is that an FSS is the equivalent of a tower, and an FIC is the equivalent of a centre.

An FSS, for the most part, provides advisory services to aircraft at or near their specific airport. An FIC provides advisory services enroute, as well as helps with making/filing your flight plan.

But what is this "advisory service" thing? Basically, it's telling pilots what the conditions are, and recommending what they do with that information.

You're probably used to a control tower *telling* you what to do; here it will be *suggested* to you. It's more or less the same information being given, it's just up to the pilot what you do with it.

You've probably flown without any ATC, at a completely uncontrolled field before. It's just like that, but you have a friend on the ground giving you some useful information at the same time!

Where to Start...

Let's start at the start. We'll pretend to do a flight, from start to finish, and look at all the possible services we can get from FSSs and the FIC along the way.

Let's go from Nanaimo to Tofino. We'll start by phoning the virtual FIC on the CZVR Discord server. We could also call them over the radio on the Nanaimo Remote Communication Outlet (RCO) for the same service; more on RCOs later...

We are going to tell the specialist from the FIC that want to file a VFR flight plan, and we want a weather briefing for our route. They will start by asking for the necessary information to build our flight plan. This will include, at the very least:

- Our callsign, exactly as it appears on our network connection;
- The type code for the aircraft we're flying, let's say we're in the old Cessna 152, so that would be C152;
- Our points of departure and arrival, so CYCD and CYAZ;
- And our intended time of departure and estimated time enroute, this would be how they calculate our search and rescue time.

You may also want to add in extra things for realism, such as:

- Specific points along our route, otherwise it will be filed as direct;
- Planned alternate arrival airports;
- The code for our NAV/COMM/SURV equipment;
- The colour of our plane;
- And our plane's registration.

Once our flight plan is on file, we can go ahead get our weather briefing. This is going to be a one-on-one, easy to understand overview of everything relevant to our flight's route. Why read NOTAMs when you can have someone do it for you? ...Maybe still read them yourself too, just in case.

Anyway, it will have things like reported ceilings, thunderstorm warnings, high density altitudes, active class F airspace, PIREPs, and really anything else you need or want.

Once this is done, they may issue us a squawk code, if our departure time is soon enough in the future. We can put this into our transponder if we have one. And we might not have one, because a cool thing about class E airspace (which is what FSS airports are in), is that we don't even need a transponder.

This is because an aerodrome advisory service is primarily based on position reports on the radio, rather than RADAR. That being said, most planes these days have a transponder, and most FSSs these days have RADAR; Nanaimo being one of them.

Let's go!

Fun fact. Nanaimo Airport was the first in Canada to get a GND ADV frequency!

So, flight plan is filed, weather briefing is briefed, squawk code is in the squawk box (if we have one); Let's go ahead and depart for Tofino.

First, we'll call the ground advisory frequency, which is a special frequency that very few FSS airports have, but Nanaimo is one that does, because it's so busy. Basically, it's an FSS version of a ground control frequency. It's just an FSS, for planes still on the ground. It gives you all the same info (weather, traffic, and all), and suggests that you use a certain runway and a certain route to get there. Based on the info they've given you, you decide to go with that suggestion. (You certainly don't have to, though)

So off we go, taxiing up to the hold short line. Once we stop, we get asked to switch to the regular FSS frequency, which is what looks after the control zone, or "mandatory frequency area." Their callsign is "Nanaimo Radio." All FSSs have "Radio" as their callsign; supposedly easier to say than "Flight Service Station." They give us some more up-to-date info and say we can depart at our discretion.

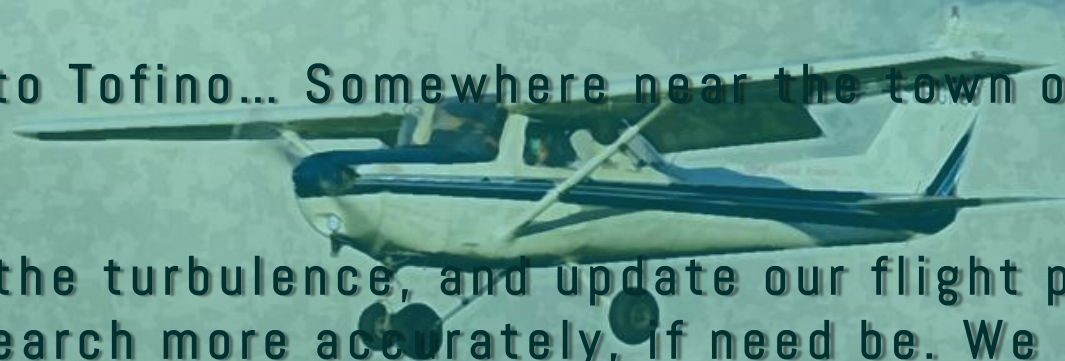
Off we go. Takeoff, turnout, and clear the control zone. It's important for us to tell the FSS when we have left their airspace, so they know they don't have to worry about us anymore. Remember, some FSSs won't have RADAR, and won't know when you've left.

RCO?

RCO... Really Confusing to Operate? Nope! Pretty easy, once you get the hang of it.

Okay, as mentioned, an RCO is a Remote Communication Outlet. It's basically a radio antenna gadget on the ground that can get you in touch with the FIC when you're in range of it (in the air or on the ground).

We're cruising along on our way to Tofino... Somewhere near the town of Lake Cowichan. It's getting a little bumpy.



We want to make a PIREP about the turbulence, and update our flight plan, so search and rescue can focus a search more accurately, if need be. We call up the FIC on the Victoria RCO, or any other RCO that may be in range and tell them we want to make PIREP as well as a VFR position report.

Now here's a tricky trick for you... The FIC that looks after the entire "Vancouver FIR" is called "Kamloops FIC" (because it's in Kamloops); however, the Kamloops Airport also has it's own FSS... They can't both be "Kamloops Radio," so they gave the FIC the awesome callsign of "Pacific Radio." So, that's how we address the FIC on frequency.

Almost There!

VFR position report and PIREP way behind us (If you're not sure how to file those - check the back of the CFS), the gorgeous coastline is in sight, and we're ready to call our next flight service specialist!

Tofino is an airport that has Remote Aerodrome Advisory Service (RAAS), not to be confused with an RCO. Basically, the same service we received from the Nanaimo FSS for our departure will be given here. But instead of a person on-site at the Tofino Airport, it will be given by the Port Hardy FSS at the Port Hardy Airport, on a special Tofino frequency.

So what's their callsign? "Hardy Radio at Tofino."

Call them up, give your normal "inbound for landing" speech, and land your plane! Once we do that, they'll ask if we want to close our flight plan. Yes. We're all done.

Afterword

Congratulations, that's basically all you need to know about how to use flight service. Now you need to go out and get some experience with it. Experience is the most valuable thing when it comes to aviation. That is how you really learn.

You may need to know where to find all the information on an airport. What's their frequency? Where does their control zone end? Do they have a tower or an FSS?

All this and more is answerable with charts. Get your Canadian VFR charts on www.fltplan.com on the left hand menu in "Airport and FBO Info" and "Navigation"

Don't know how to read them? Ask your flight service specialist to guide to some more learning resources!

Thank you so much for reading and being willing to learn!

