

Feb. 3, 2019 - The TFR Penetration conundrum ... a total non event

In the 6 decades that I have been flying I have spoken to flight controllers from several different countries, including Canada, Mexico, throughout the Caribbean and even over Cuba. I have landed my airplanes at many large commercial airports, including Mexico City, Montreal, San Juan Puerto Rico, as well as JFK in NYC, Midway in Chicago, Dallas-Fort Worth and DC National In Washington. I have flown in all sorts of weather, day and night, including snowstorms, thunderstorms, icing in clouds, and fog. I have always handled my communications with ATC in a professional and relaxed manner even during those times when things were not always calm and collected. In short, talking to the same professional controllers that would often be handling inbound Delta, American and United airliners intermixed with my Piper Twin Comanche private aircraft never posed a problem. Fast forward to today. While I still fly into tower controlled airports, all of my trips today are conducted during bright and clear daytime VFR (visual flight) conditions. This means that I do not have to converse with the Center and Approach controllers that I would have to if I were on an IFR (instrument) flight plan or were going into some of the larger and much busier Class C or Class B commercial airports.

Down here in South Florida we have to deal with occasional visits by the President to his "Winter White House" in nearby West Palm Beach. During those times a large portion of airspace forms a 30 mile radius circle out from Mar-A-Largo and is generally "off limits" to the casual general aviation traffic. This is known as a TFR, or Temporary Flight Restriction. While normal air carrier, air-freight, air-ambulance and law-enforcement flights continue, many local private pilots are relegated to staying at home while the Prez is in town. Unfortunately Indiantown, my home field, is on the very outer edge of this restricted airspace, which literally cuts my airstrip in half. Since the winter flying season is the most enjoyable, these forced respites are annoying, especially when Trump is down for a long weekend. I have a regular Sunday morning breakfast fly-in, with a bunch of pilot friends, that I like to attend at nearby Okeechobee Airport. While there is a "procedure" which will circumnavigate this restriction I have been reluctant to employ it as I have felt intimidated having to converse with the Palm Beach International Airport Approach Control personnel which could make this happen. This is partially due to the less than sophisticated avionics and communications radio that I have installed in my little Light Sport airplane as compared to the state of the art double redundant equipment that was in my Twin Comanche. Also of concern is placing an airplane capable of less than half the speed of what these controllers are used to into their hectic work load. But, probably the **most** concerning, to me, is the realization that I am simply out of practice talking astutely with these FAA professionals.



On that intimidation front is the fact that if a pilot screws up while inside of the TFR he/she is looking at the possibility of an air to air intercept by one of the F-16 fighter jets that routinely patrol the sky in and around the restricted airspace. No, they will not shoot you down, but they will escort you to a nearby airport where law enforcement will be waiting and you will experience a "world of hurt" due to your intransience. This intercept happens at least once on every Presidential visit and it ALWAYS seems to make the evening news, no matter how common it has become. On more than one occasion, while at my home airstrip I have heard a distant telltale roar of the F-16 Fighting Falcon's 28,000 pound thrust engine as it reaches Mach 1 while hot in pursuit of a wayward general aviation pilot who has inadvertently violated the TFR. While I have no desire of being on the evening news, after two years of this Sunday breakfast inconvenience I decided that I would "bite the bullet" and learn the procedures for a legal TFR penetration out and return to my home field.

This Sunday, May 3rd, was to be Donald Trump's last day in West Palm Beach. It was a simply beautiful weekend day with bright sunny skies and light winds out of the southwest. The first step in securing a TFR departure out of general aviation's airspace restriction encompassing my hometown field of **X-58**, was to call the FAA's Flight Service for a formal weather briefing and to file a VFR flight plan for the 30 mile, 20 minute trip from Indiantown to Okeechobee. The main purpose for a flight plan is to expedite search and rescue in case one does not show up at their destination. These days I hardly ever file this type of flight plan as the terrain that I fly over is almost entirely made up of flat farm or cattle grazing fields and there are airports, both public and private, almost everywhere. And, in the case of the Indiantown to Okeechobee flight I pass a half dozen airports along this route. It takes almost half of the flight time just performing this briefing, but it is a requirement of the TFR penetration procedure. Interestingly enough this same requirement does **not** mandate that you must open or utilize this flight plan, only that you have to file one. The next step is accomplished when you reach your home field, in my case X-58, Indiantown. After performing the pre-flight inspection to assure that the aircraft is in airworthy condition for the flight and that necessary fuel is on board, I had to make a direct phone call to Palm Beach Approach control's TFR operations at the same PBI airport at which Air Force One was parked. I told them that I had filed the requisite flight plan and that I needed a discrete transponder code for my departure, expected in 10 minutes. They gave me a 4 digit code and told me to be sure that it was entered and active prior to my take off. They also gave me the radio frequency with which to contact the Approach controller upon lift off. That was it. Once airborne I gave it a try, but was apparently below their radio range until I reached my en-route altitude of 1,500 feet, when they finally declared radar contact. Whew, no F-16's today!



Another interesting foible to this exercise is that as soon as I get airborne off of Runway 31 at Indiantown, I am outside of the TFR limits so am no longer bound by any of its requirements. Once the controller declared "radar contact", I immediately cancelled my flight following as I no longer was required to be in communication with him. While on a longer flight it might be prudent to stay in contact to be given the separation from other aircraft and for general safety reasons, for this short trip that was not at all necessary.

My breakfast at Okeechobee's Landing Strip Cafe was, as usual, delicious and it was soon time to make the return 20 minute flight back to Indiantown, an almost a duplicate of the outbound leg with the sole exception being that I needed to make contact with Palm Beach Approach control when I reached the 10 mile mark from my home airfield. They gave me another discrete transponder code which would ID me to their controller and advised me to keep it active until I was back on the ground. So, what turned out to be a cause for concern and trepidation turned out to be a total non-event. The flight was enjoyable, the weather was great, the meal was good, and to boot, the evening sunset was another beautiful ending to *Florida in the Winter time*.



It's bacon, eggs & waffles at the Landing Strip Cafe.



Today's sunset view over my backyard lake.