

Safety Bulletin

Flight at non-standard levels

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“ABC, Avoiding action, turn left immediately heading 270.”

Words you do not want to hear from air traffic control (ATC).

A recent incident involving two aircraft at 38,000ft (FL380) has highlighted the importance of the Table of Cruising Levels.

The two aircraft were on reciprocal tracks and established at the same cruising level when ATC received a safety net alert to indicate that the aircraft were in conflict. The aircraft maintaining the non-standard level had been assigned that level on departure when the initial track complied with the Table of Cruising Levels. A subsequent change in track direction on the flight planned route rendered this level non-standard.

A change of level was flight planned to correspond with the change in track direction in order to remain compliant with the Table of Cruising Levels. Action was not taken by either ATC or the pilot to change from the now non-standard level to the planned level.

Whilst the Aeronautical Information Publication (AIP) does not stipulate that flight crews are required to request flight planned level changes following a track change in order to continue at a standard level, it does state that pilots must only request a non-standard level when it is essential to the safety of the flight. The flight planning requirement and the requirement to inform ATC that non-standard levels are “Due Operational Requirement” indicate that the intent is that aircraft will operate at standard levels.

The Manual of Air Traffic Services (MATS) instructs controllers to assign cruising levels that conform to the Tables of Cruising Levels. Both AIP and MATS state that ATC will assign non-standard levels only when traffic or other operational circumstances require.

Whenever the flight planned route incorporates a track change which renders their current level non-standard, pilots should expect an instruction from ATC to change level to conform to the Table of Cruising Levels. If such an instruction is not forthcoming pilots should request a level change to conform to the Table of Cruising Levels. If ATC requires the current level to be maintained due traffic this will be communicated to the aircraft.

The Table of Cruising Levels is an important systemic risk control measure which provides a level of resilience to threats and errors, for both pilots and ATC.

Good airmanship includes limiting requests for non-standard levels to those circumstances where it is operationally required and essential to the safety of the flight. It also includes notifying ATC where the operational requirement for a non-standard level no longer exists and being aware of how changes in track may render your current level non-standard.

References

[AIP ENR 1.7 Para 3 Cruising Levels](#)

[AIP ENR 1.7 Section 5 Table of Cruising Levels](#)

For further information

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