

Do it yourself!

AFPEX brings DIY flight plan filing ever closer; Tony Purton* explains how to use the system

On 28 January 2009 NATS introduced, at rather short notice, an on-line flight planning system AFPEX (Assisted Flight Planning Exchange system). All flight planning in the UK is now being handled through a single Parent Unit which manages and operates the AFPEX system and is located in the NATS Air Traffic Centre at Swanwick near Southampton.

The change was announced to pilots in NOTAM B0084/09 issued 19th January. AIP Supp 5/2009 and AIP Supp 6/2009 issued a month later on 26 February set out the implementation instructions in the form of Amendment No.4 to UK AIP ENR 1.10 to be issued on 9 April 2009.

Pilots are now expected to file their own flight plans on-line, either direct from a personal/club AFPEX account or through an ATSU with an AFPEX terminal. Although faxing a Form CA48 to FBU Swanwick is still theoretically possible (see para 1.7.5 and 1.7.7 ENR 1.10 AL4), para 1.9.1 indicates that the provision of a Faxing Service will apply only to "visiting foreign pilots and UK pilots who have no access to the Internet". Recent experience shows that faxed flight plans are regarded by NATS as a 'measure of last resort' and will be rejected if Swanwick believes the

originator has access to AFPEX. Filing a flight plan by telephone is no longer an option, and there is no provision for the use of e-mail.

Since AFPEX is now the *de facto* AFTN message distribution facility, it is to be found at all UK ATSUs, who therefore have an AFPEX filing facility at their fingertips. Connection to AFPEX is also freely available to all UK-based licensed pilots and flying groups via www.flightplanningonline.co.uk.

The prospect of a busy ATSU abandoning airfield traffic duties to file a flight plan on line via AFPEX for a pilot is unlikely. Any use of the ATSU's AFPEX terminal for filing flight plans will probably mean the pilot typing the flight plan into the control tower AFPEX system, if it is convenient to do so without disrupting the ATSU's traffic duties.

You can use AFPEX to file your return flight plan before you leave the UK, or from any available Internet access point.

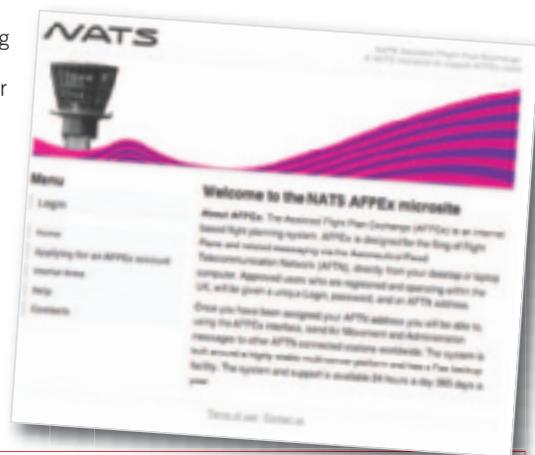
Check the diagram below – it provides a simple overview of what this means in flight planning terms.

The change to on-line flight plan filing was prompted by BT withdrawing its support for the telex/teleprinter network that formed the aviation messaging

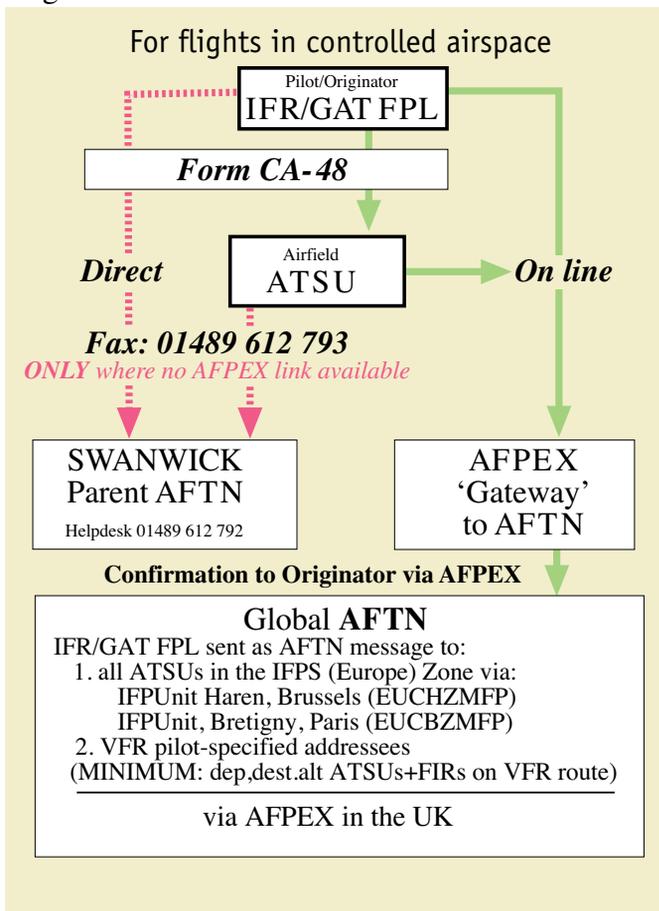
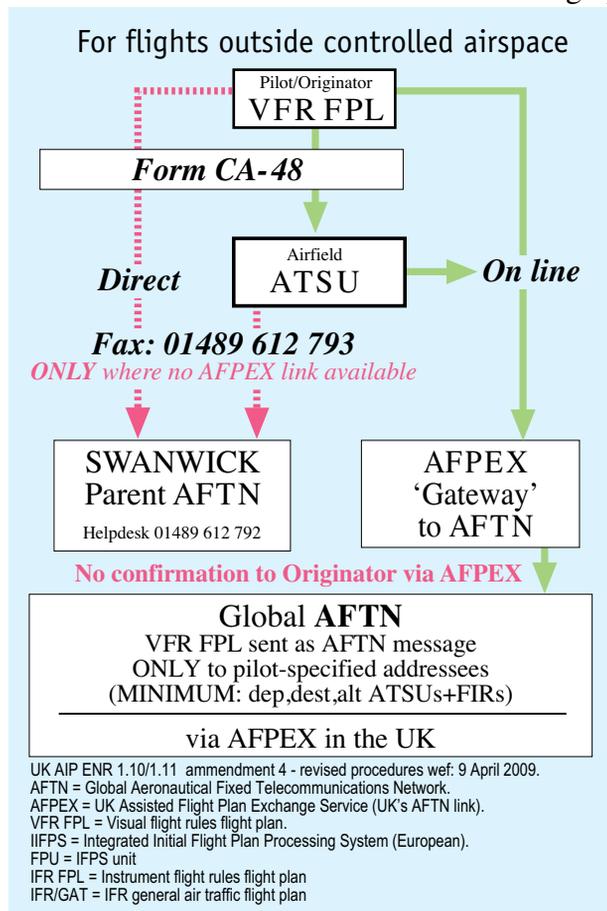
network AFTN (Aeronautical Fixed Telecommunications Network) from the 1950s.

The increasing popularity of the Internet has seen a number of aviation functions moved to that medium – weather, NOTAMS, airport information etc. NATS started their telex replacement project back in 2003 and have devised a web-browser-accessed, wholly-implemented, stand-alone program based on a Java application to operate on a PC. AFPEX is primarily a 'gateway' to the AFTN. AFPEX-filed flight plans go directly into the AFTN network without any further human involvement to be distributed as an 'AFTN message'. This speeds up the filing process and, of course, reduces the NATS staffing cost of providing the free flight planning service required by their CAA licence.

On-line AFPEX presents the familiar Form CA48 layout for completion. A VFR flight plan will only go to those addressees specifically selected by the filing pilot. In VFR flight



UK online flight planning - UK AIP ENR 1.10 amendment 4 www.flightplanningonline.co.uk



planning mode, AFPEX automatically enters coded addresses for departure, destination and diversion airfields into boxes at the top of the form as they are entered in Box 16. However, the coded addresses for the FIR boundaries entered in Box 18 must be manually selected from a drop-down VFR address list of COUNTRIES [including the UK]. In the French FIR address, the AFPEX user is also instructed to manually enter into the address box the repeat ICAO designations of any FRENCH departure, destination and diversion airfields followed by the code ZPZX. VFR routing information is more for safety/search purposes than anything else and does not give rise to any addressing issues.

On-line IFR flight plans are automatically addressed into the IFPS (the European Integrated Initial Flight Plan Processing), but where mixed VFR/IFR flight plans are filed, the addressees for the VFR portions of the flight (usually departure /diversion /destination ATSUs and any relevant FIRs) must be entered by the pilot.

Hopefully further development of the AFPEX system will result in more automatic VFR flight plan addressing from information entered into the Form CA48 on-line format, especially for FIRs and the repeat addressing of French destination and diversion airfields.

Since the AFPEX system will only accept information in a particular format, pilots will be required to use these formats in completing the on-line AFPEX flight plan. The essentials are:

- Box 7 Aircraft ID GXXXX no dashes or gaps
- Box 8 Aircraft type – see drop-down list [a PA28 is a P28A!]
- Box 13 Departure airfield – ICAO 4-letter identification code
- Box 16 Destination and alternates – Ditto
- TIMES 4 figures with no gaps or dots
- Box 18 Estimated FIR boundary times EET/XXXX0930
- Box 19 Endurance 4 figures no gaps or dots

The Swanwick FBU helpline on 01489 612 792 will patiently help you get to grips with the system – as we old stagers call it 'providing every assistance short of actual help' (i.e. they'll help you do it but they won't do it for you). After all, it is a lot less difficult than any 'glass cockpit' differences training!

VFR flight plans are not acknowledged, However, the submitted flight plan will appear in your AFPEX account 'Sent' box, and if its in there then it will have been sent to all the addressees you have specified on the address line. You can also print a copy of it from here. To positively verify promulgation of your Flight

Plan as an AFTN message you can check with your departure/destination ATSU that they have received it, or telephone the Swanwick Parent Unit.

AFPEX provides facilities for activating flight plans via a Departure 'DEP' message, modifying flight plans via a Change 'CHG' message, Delaying flight plans via a 'DLA' message and Cancelling flight plans via a 'CNL' message.

If after filing a Flight Plan you decide not to go after all you must CANCEL that Flight Plan even though it has not been 'activated'.

Flight plans can only be ACTIVATED (opened) after take-off. This is normally done by your local ATSU sending a 'DEP' message via AFPEX. If you are departing from a non-ATSU field you either have to get some 'trustworthy person' on the ground to notify the Parent Unit/AFPEX helpdesk of your take-off time, or you can do it yourself by contacting the local FIR once airborne giving them your take-off time and asking them to 'activate' your Flight Plan through the Swanwick FBU.

Once activated, a Flight Plan must be CLOSED whether the flight is completed as planned, you divert to another airfield, or you return to your starting point.

When you arrive at your foreign destination you *must* make sure that the ATSU there CLOSES your Flight Plan. If not, it is your responsibility to close the Flight Plan with the local FIR within 30 minutes of your arrival, or notify Swanwick.

When returning to your home UK airfield you *must* CLOSE your return Flight Plan within 30 minutes of your arrival either through the ATSU, by telephoning the Swanwick FBU or by asking the local FIR to do it for you when you are overhead your UK destination.

FAILURE TO FILE a Flight Plan could result in your being intercepted by a military aircraft (either abroad or in the UK) and instructed to land at the nearest major airfield to explain yourself to police officers.

FAILURE TO CLOSE a Flight Plan could result in a large bill for the rescue services who will have started the emergency procedures to locate your missing aircraft.

DO IT YOURSELF is the UK flight planning regime of the future. Better get used to it!



Abroad, the familiar manuscript FPL form still seems to be in use – for now.

CAA SAFETY SENSE LEAFLET 20c - also refers.

*Tony Purton is a PPL based at Denham. Aged 74, he has ten years flying experience and had amassed 650 hours ■



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