

# A Monday in October

By Bengt-Inge Hallberg

The traffic was standing still - an accident? The rain drizzled down the windscreen, but he did not switch on the wipers; he never did until the road ahead disappeared in a wet, dizzy scenario. It is like driving in an aquarium his wife told him, but he didn't care, it saved the rubber for the real rainy periods later...



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This was his first operational shift for two weeks. He had been working as an Instructor at the ATC Academy for the last fortnight. It had been two great weeks with 8-5 work, motivated students, nice fellow instructors from other operational units plus the bonus of Christina in the Cafeteria, always looking good with a smile on her face.

The car park at the Centre was almost full. He had to walk more than fifty metres in the rain - the miserable conditions did not improve his mood.

The controllers entered the briefing room one by one, slowly, a few laughing but most of them quiet, very quiet. Although it was almost 2 o'clock in the afternoon they looked as if they had come straight from bed. Some of them probably had.

The supervisor started the briefing in his normal boring way: weather, runway configuration, staff situation. Finally he reminded everybody of

some important and recent changes in local procedures. New ATS routes, new way points, changes in handover flight levels to the next FIR, updated software in the Centre's technical system etc.. "You can read it all yourself if you have not done so already", he said and closed his book in an unambiguous way. The briefing was over in less than five minutes and the staff left the room in the same sleepy way as they had entered.

Fortunately, he did not need to start working operationally immediately, instead he began to figure out all about the new procedures, especially the handover flight levels - he was always very careful to learn everything properly. Some of his colleagues just put a tick in the box without reading anything at all, completely inexplicable and certainly unacceptable he thought.



## Changes in ATS procedures can be complex. But perhaps we should step back and look briefly at professionalism

The supervisor's voice came on the PA system; "open sector four", He discretely continued reading, an old controller trick to try to get someone else to work instead. He remembered a long time ago when he combined Tower and Approach; he told Tower he worked in Approach and vice versa. It worked until thirty seconds later, when the supervisor repeated the same message. He slowly made his way to the operational room, there was no alternative but to open up the sector.

He got a quick briefing from the sector three/four controller before the split was made. Suddenly, he got four aircraft on his frequency and then another one just airborne with three more waiting in the queue for departure. The first departure called, he cleared it to flight level 120. He instructed another aircraft to contact the next sector but there was no response, he tried again, but still nothing happened, another aircraft called instead. He turned towards the sector three controller "D-Line 868 is still on your frequency, send him here" He looked back at his screen. The departure was not turning.

Back in the coffee room he discussed what had happened with one of the other controllers; "Did you not know that the SID has been changed?", his colleague asked him. "Why did they

not tell us?" he replied, "how could I know? I am just back from the Academy". A third controller joined in "It is always like that, how are we supposed to know all the changes?" When it's time to complain about management, controllers are unstoppable.

### Two weeks later

There were five people in the room, three men and two women. The Chairman of the meeting, the Operations Manager for the Centre, exhaled loudly, stretched his arms high above his head and thanked the other four for their participation. "This airspace update has gone well, the changes have been smooth and efficient" he said and looked towards the others with the hint of a smile on his face; "Not a single incident report so far, congratulations everyone!"

### Editorial comment

Of course, this story is about a common problem. Changes in ATS procedures can be complex. But perhaps we should step back and look briefly at professionalism:

- Pre-shift briefings by Supervisors often seem to be intended to 'tick the box' themselves - this one seems to have been like that....
- Controllers, like pilots, arrive at work 'conditioned' by both large and small matters in their life outside work. In effect, they may walk through the door with a little personal 'baggage' - a miserable autumn day may be enough to affect the attitude to work but it mustn't if you are 'fit for duty'
- Controllers, like pilots, have a duty to keep up with changes that affect their work - how can this be 100% ensured and professional helped with?
- Controllers, like pilots, love to criticise their management, especially to each other - nobody likes to blame themselves....
- Managers must make sure that any issues or incidents which arise in the context of a change management process lead to lessons being learnt so that there is a much reduced chance of repetition - it doesn't sound like that happened here... 

