

Front Line Report: It's about time - and how to use it

By Bert Ruitenberg

There's probably an article somewhere in this HindSight issue in which it is stated that it is very difficult for a person to recognise the symptoms of fatigue in himself or herself. Yet I can remember at least two occasions when I knew I was fatigued.

The first one was at the end of a trip to Africa in my days as a member of the IFATCA Executive Board. At that time I was also working full-time as an air traffic controller in The Netherlands, and even though I did enjoy some "special leave" days from my employer to help fulfil my IFATCA obligations, there were periods where my life seemed to consist solely of working days at Schiphol and/or days travelling to and from remote countries where I went to represent IFATCA in a meeting or at a seminar.

One of those trips had been so tightly planned that on the penultimate day I already found myself thinking more and more of the moment when I'd be slumping in my airline seat on the return flight, and hopefully getting some sleep. On the last day of that trip, my tunnel vision narrowed even further, focusing exclusively on the point when I'd be hitting my seat on board the flight home. I don't remember where

I was exactly that day or what I did, but I vividly remember the feeling of only wanting to get on that aircraft and shut down.



**Bert
Ruitenberg**

recently retired from working as a TWR/APP controller, supervisor and ATC safety officer at Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

He was recently appointed as the new IFATCA Safety Coordinator.

which I think is an experience that not many people will have had after a long-haul flight. Yet I've had it a couple of times under similar conditions.

The second time I knew I was fatigued was after an evening shift as supervisor in Approach Control at Amsterdam. I had slept reasonably well the night before, in a not-too-shabby hotel close to the EUROCONTROL Headquarters in Brussels (Belgium). The reason I was in Brussels again was IFATCA-related: there was a EUROCONTROL meeting that I had to attend on behalf of the Federation, and if I could be in my car by around 14:30 hours I'd have plenty of time to drive to Schiphol for my evening shift.

The meeting was rather interesting (which made it a remarkable event in itself, but that's not the point of this story) and I found myself quite engaged in the discussions. I was behind the steering wheel of my car ahead of my self-imposed deadline, and I arrived at the ATC building at Schiphol well in time for my shift.

I think I must have been asleep before the aircraft was airborne, and I didn't wake up until the flight attendant asked me to put the back of my chair in the upright position before landing. I actually felt physically better when I left that plane than I had when boarding it,

That particular shift started off uneventfully, but things began to change rapidly. There was more traffic than was normal for that day of the week, the wind refused to adhere to the direction which had been forecast by the Met Office, and there were technical problems with the flight data processing system – the ATC computer, if you like.

On top of all that we had received the news that an historic aircraft, normally based at Schiphol, had apparently crashed somewhere just north of the mainland of our country. It was on a VFR flight, outside controlled airspace and definitely outside our TMA, but one of our colleagues regularly acted as a volunteer pilot on this aircraft, so im-

EDITORIAL ANNOUNCEMENT:

HindSight is looking for a "front line reporter"

HindSight readers have over the years enjoyed reading the Front Line Report by Bert Ruitenberg. Last year, Bert decided to retire – which surprised us, as we thought he had at least 20 more years to go!

Bert is going to play a role in HindSight, but the Front Line Reporter needs to be an operational controller. This is why we would like to announce a competition for this most important section of HindSight.

An independent jury, including Bert, will select the new Reporter, based on how he or she writes.

We would like to invite everybody who is an active ATC controller and is willing to participate to send us an article of no more than 1,500 words on the theme of "Training for safety" – which will be the theme for HindSight 14.

mediately there were concerns in the operations room that he might have been on that flight.

I can tell you that I was very busy as a supervisor at that time. Not only was I trying to manage the traffic flow, the technical problems and the runway configuration(s) by coordinating the wind developments with the supervisors of the Area Control Centre and the Tower, I also had to put in considerable effort to make controllers focus on their traffic rather than worry about our colleague.

After what seemed like forever we were informed that our colleague had not in fact been on board the aircraft that had crashed, but the crash was confirmed, as was the fact that there were no survivors. The atmosphere in the operations room remained depressed after that message, which is not a pleasant mood in which to deal with more than the average number of aircraft.

My shift that day must have ended at the normal time, or perhaps even a little earlier than that because the night shift surely arrived ahead of time (knowing what had happened). I remember feeling very weary while driving home, yet after I got home I was too exhausted to sleep – strange as that may sound. Before going to bed I sat down at my computer and wrote a personal account of that evening, which seemed to have a therapeutic effect on me, for after finishing writing I slept for a long time.

So, if you think the moral of this article is "don't work for IFATCA", I'd have to say that I saw that one coming and no, that's not what this is about. Or maybe it is – if you consider working for IFATCA a lifestyle choice that I made.

As air traffic controllers we're regarded by "the outside world" as professionals in a job that is undoubtedly stressful,

but that also allows us plenty of free time. And let's face it, the people in that outside world are not completely wrong about the amount of free time we have. Of course, they conveniently overlook our working hours at weekends (a weekend is a strange concept of two recurring days off after five consecutive days of work) and/or on public holidays, and never mind the night shifts we have to work, but still, we controllers do seem to have more free time available outside our regular working hours.

Flexible and resourceful as we are (hey, we're controllers, remember?), we've come up with many ways to put this extra available time to good use. Some of us have side-jobs outside ATC, some of us prefer to live a long distance from the workplace where the quality of life is better. Some of us devote our time to intensive sports activities, some of us volunteer to work overtime as controllers when there are staff shortages. And some of us choose to be active in a professional organisation such as IFATCA. Lifestyle choices, all well and good.

But remember that sometimes, when you least expect it, those seemingly innocent lifestyle choices may turn around and bite you. Spending time away from your primary job, air traffic control, to focus on other activities may (and probably will) at some point interfere with your physical and/or mental resources when you need them most in that primary job. And the way in which a lifestyle based on structural overtime can bite you has been sadly illustrated by the recent developments in Spain.

I was lucky because my fatigue symptoms manifested themselves away from the operations room, but I realise that things could have been different. As regards my IFATCA activities, I learned to manage them a little better by including time for rest and recreation in my planning – in other words, I learned not to automatically accept invitations to speak at or attend meetings. I learned to look after my own well-being as a prerequisite for my activities.

So if I can wrap up this article with a message to all of you out there, it has to be that all controllers must remain conscious of their own responsibilities when it comes to being fit for work. Your employers have the responsibility to provide enough quality time in between shifts for you to get an adequate amount of rest – but it is your professional duty to use that time responsibly. Take care!