Case Study Comment 3
by Captain Ed Pooley

Here we are looking variously at training standards and training performance as well as being forced to see the valid or invalid budgetary context within which the delivery of the training contribution to safety performance is attempted. And because we have hindsight, we can see whether the judgements on the use and quality of resources needed for acceptable safety performance were reasonable.

Although the main actual risk here is the TCAS-mitigated near miss between the returning 747 and the other traffic, the context for that was an aircraft which we can note was old and assume was not airworthy – hence the engine prelude to and fact of the engine shutdown and turn back. Not a terribly big deal for the Captain at least, since flight on three engines instead of four even at the likely aircraft departure weight makes very little practical difference. But it was obviously enough of a workload increase for the flight crew as a whole for their prompt acceptance of ATC clearances to suffer – and lead to the near miss.

The context for the un-airworthy aircraft is the fact that it was operated by a particular variant of the description 'entrepreneur'. Such ownership is usually inspired not by any desire to make money (if you want to lose money, set up an airline!) but by the 'glamour' of running an airline and the day to day challenge of survival. This is business on a knife edge and some of the names and faces, as in this case, keep on re-appearing. These people know that there is no possibility of any return on the investment made or on the risk taken. The former means minimising the investment and this in turn invites a characteristic series of business management decisions, some of which probably prevailed at the 747 operator in this case study. They are perhaps of only indirect relevance to ATC but as an aside on the premise of possible interest, they include (but are not limited to):

- Run the airline on an AOC provided by a State which doesn't interfere too much and is not greatly concerned with whether the airline has much affinity with its business domicile, provided the necessary regulatory fees are paid.
- Buy or lease old aircraft with low hull values to minimise insurance costs (despite their higher fuel consumption).
- Focus on ad hoc work because of the higher margins it yields relative to the unavoidably high cost of fuel
- Minimise the permanent employee headcount – wherever possible use part time or temporary personnel and maximise the use of contract or self-employed and/or part time or temporary personnel.
- Minimise the cost of aircraft maintenance; avoid long term contracts for it, save money by putting off 'fixes' to known problems and compliance with airworthiness directives until the last possible moment and avoid taking action on any non mandatory Service Bulletins; the next 'C' Check may cost more than the aircraft is worth so expect to cease using it at that point!
- Obtain cabin crew as cheaply as possible and give them the absolute minimum of safety training; most of them will almost certainly not be permanent or even full time employees and so investment in training them for either service or safety is self-evidently a complete waste of money.

Enough about the operation of 'fringe' airlines! There isn't much that ATC can do about them as airspace users except, perhaps, to watch the progress of their aircraft just a little more closely than aircraft of those airlines which

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form a more established part of the ANSP customer base.

Now to controller recruitment and training. Both the balance between the resources devoted to ab initio training versus those devoted to recurrent training and the role of OJTIs bear examination. It seems that the budgets for both types of training may have been set independently despite the fact that the single goal is a known quantity of operationally current controllers. If true, this would certainly represent very poor judgment by senior ANSP management. But rather more fundamental is the notion voiced by the ab initio trainer here that, given enough effort, almost anybody who makes it through this ANSP's selection process can and will eventually qualify as an operational controller – and will not then be 'incident prone'. Any reference to selection based on aptitude – or any thought that it might be relevant – is absent. And yet the use of psychometric profiling of both individuals and jobs is already moving beyond being just a critical element of selection for task-focused professionals towards its use throughout individual's careers to ensure that their attributes continue to match those required for evolving role requirements. Such processes ensure that, as the cliché goes, square pegs (not round ones) are put in square holes which produces happy competent controllers and almost certainly reduces overall training budgets, thus producing happy managers too!

On the operational front, we see an excessive requirement for OJT. We are told that both positions are being run by supervised trainees - and that even two quite small events – a non emergency turn back followed by a single missed clearance – led to a near miss and a need for a single qualified controller to temporarily take over supervision of both trainee-manned positions. It is fortunate that these sectors were quiet. Any attempt to rely on this type of solution extrapolated to, say, the Amsterdam, Paris or London TMAs, would not work and it should not be considered acceptable at the case study ANSP either.

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A RECOMMENDATION

I see an ANSP not entirely fit for purpose. It needs more effective selection processes for prospective new controllers. They should all check out with the required standard after a similar (and reasonable) amount of training and then go on to be comparably successful controllers able to respond similarly – and productively – to recurrent training throughout their careers. Once that's been fixed, some attention to the OJT system is clearly required. OJT whilst delivering ATS should be the exception not the normal condition, just as line/route training is an exception to normal operations for pilots flying aircraft. In other words, OJT should provide the icing on the cake baked in the simulator, not part of the cake too!