



The nudge in the back

By Eileen Senger

Do you still remember how it felt like when you were freshly checked out on a sector? When the theoretical exams were not too long gone and you knew every dot and every word of the rules and regulations, procedures and Letters of Agreement by heart? When nothing had changed yet?

With months and years passing by and documents being changed almost on a weekly basis this very theoretical knowledge fades, some, that you hardly use more than those that are kept up to date by every day use. But something very important happens instead: You build experience. And the more experience you build, the more you realise you are nothing without it. I wonder, how could I ever survive without it? Somehow I did, partly because of the experience being built whilst still in training, partly because of luck.

In a perfect world controllers would have both: enough experience to fall back onto in stress situations and the flawless theoretical knowledge that once made us pass our written and oral exams with pass marks well above

90%. Instead, if we are honest, most of us know that we have the theory we need for day to day business and, if we face a situation where we are not sure anymore

about the theory, we at least know where to look it up. But isn't that just an excuse to calm our bad conscience?

This is why refresher simulator and theory training is so important. There will always be those Superman types who claim they do not need it, that it is a waste of time and manpower. Maybe they really believe that, maybe it is a defence mechanism because they do not feel good about having to leave their comfort zone. But the vast majority is grateful for this opportunity to go into the simulator and train, to be able to make mistakes without endangering peoples' lives and to be able to ask questions about things they should know - but that have faded. Of course, all of us complain when the deadline for the theoretical knowledge test comes closer and we have to spend some of our precious time studying and recapping. But once it is over, the relief of having passed comes with the calming feeling of having again updated my theory database. I am grateful for this little nudge in the back every year!

When it comes to the practical simulator training different types of people prefer different types of training. There are those that prefer to train their unusual occurrences in a very busy, traffic-dense environment according to the philosophy that if I have to drown in traffic than I prefer to do it in the simulator. They claim their approach is supported by Murphy's

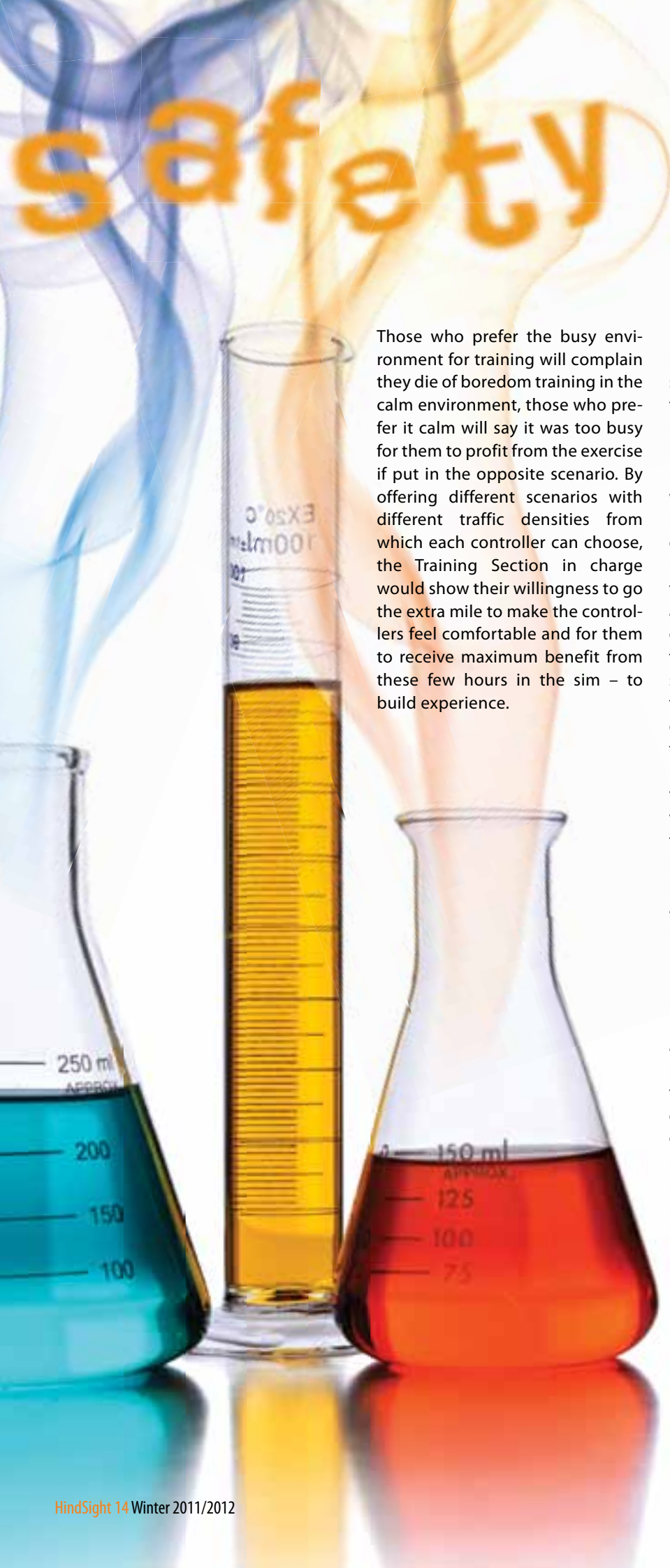
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Law ("What can go wrong will go wrong") as you can usually count on the fact that, when something unexpected happens, you are already busy enough handling the normal traffic. Then there are the more conservative types who prefer the opposite approach with very little traffic so that they can concentrate on every small aspect of the occurrence to be trained. To focus 100% on the holding pattern, fuel jettisoning or emergency descent rather than doing it with 15 other aircraft to be separated, climbed and descended.



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Those who prefer the busy environment for training will complain they die of boredom training in the calm environment, those who prefer it calm will say it was too busy for them to profit from the exercise if put in the opposite scenario. By offering different scenarios with different traffic densities from which each controller can choose, the Training Section in charge would show their willingness to go the extra mile to make the controllers feel comfortable and for them to receive maximum benefit from these few hours in the sim – to build experience.

In addition to the annual theory polish-up and practical simulator session, there is one more aspect contributing to building experience in unusual situations which I consider is important: and that is to share experience from situations where things went wrong, i.e. 'incidents'. Again, if such briefing sessions are offered on a voluntary basis, you will not reach all people and especially not the "Superman" type we met before and who again thinks it is all a waste of time because what could he learn from other peoples' mistakes? But if such a session is included in routine training days, then everyone will be covered. I have always found that a few incidents selected, shown, explained and discussed have been very helpful for my future work and whenever it helps me identify a potentially dangerous situation building up, I silently thank the incident briefing team. A simulator session alone cannot provide that same learning effect.

I feel lucky to work in an environment where it is demanded by the regulator that we train for safety again every year and where the employer supports and accommodates that. Yes, it does take time and it does draw manpower away from Operations but it is a very wise investment in safety. Because a solid theoretical knowledge plus experience plus – every now and then – a little luck, equals safety. **S**