

# Beyond the outcome

by **Bert Ruitenberg**

A friendly warning, dear reader: don't expect any dramatic descriptions in this article about emergency situations that happened while I was working as a controller. If that sort of thing is what you're after, I'm sure there are other articles in this HindSight issue that will satisfy your curiosity. This article will look at what happens after an emergency situation has been dealt with. Boring? Maybe – but if you want to know, you have no option but to read this article anyway.

## Bert Ruitenberg

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As is evidenced by this very issue of HindSight, a lot of attention in the ATC world is currently being focused on the handling of emergencies and unusual situations. And rightly so, I say, for ATC can be a powerful resource for pilots who find themselves in an unusual situation or an emergency (which will be US/E from now on). I'm a supporter of controller recurrent training programmes that focus on US/E, especially where these include sessions in which pilots interact with controllers to analyse and discuss such events. But I'm not sure that everywhere in the ATC world the same amount of consideration is given to what happens in an operations room or tower in the moments immediately after a US/E has been dealt with, i.e. after the outcome of the US/E.

There can be two different outcomes: either the US/E has been successfully re-

solved and the flight was able to make a safe landing somewhere, or the US/E couldn't be resolved and there was an accident. (Admittedly this is a somewhat simplistic view, but please indulge me for the sake of the point I'm trying to make.) Now it's important to realise that US/Es normally don't happen in isolation – there is other traffic in the sector or at the airport that also expects to be handled in a safe, efficient and orderly manner. And this applies both during the "lifespan" of the US/E and after its outcome. So how is your ATC working environment organised to help controllers cope with handling regular traffic after the outcome of a US/E turns out to be an accident?

Issues that should be considered include, but are not limited to, urgent relief from their position for the controller(s) who last communicated with the aircraft that had the US/E; reduction of the traffic complexity, if necessary by establishing temporary traffic restrictions, for the airport or sector(s) concerned; counselling of the controller(s) involved, e.g. through a critical incident stress management programme; conducting an operational debriefing with the participation of

all staff involved in handling the US/E; arranging access for accident investigators to the controller(s) involved; and last but not least, providing factual information on the event and what's being done about it to all ATC staff (or indeed all employees of the ANSP) and the media.

To start with the first item from the list above, there's nothing worse than leaving a controller who just lost an aircraft to handle subsequent traffic at a working position. Even if the US/E aircraft was the only one that the controller was working with, the controller should be relieved and taken to a quiet place to await initial counselling (e.g. critical incident stress debriefing). And please don't let this poor controller wait unaccompanied for the counsellor to arrive – make sure that a trusted colleague is with him/her during that time, if possible.

Meanwhile, the other controllers in the operations room or tower have the difficult task of handling the other traffic as if nothing happened. They prob-





ably will be very much aware of what their colleague(s) experienced a few moments earlier, yet they have to face the well-intended "good day" check-in calls from unsuspecting pilots on their frequencies. Depending on how close they were to the handling of the US/E before it resulted in an accident, they too may require relief from their working position in order to go and receive counselling. But there simply may not be sufficient relief staff available on short notice for that to be realised, hence the second item in the list above: reduction of the traffic complexity. If you can't get all controllers off position after an accident has happened, then at least make their work as easy as possible at such a time.

A further item from the list above is an operational debriefing. This is something I strongly suggest be done after either of the two possible outcomes of a US/E, by the way. Where the outcome was an accident, it almost goes without saying that all staff involved are at some point interviewed by an investigation commission or are at least invited to provide a written statement on their actions at the time of the event. The aim of this investigation of course is to determine what happened, how it happened, and what can be done to prevent a similar event from happening again. But why wait for an accident when your aim is to improve safety?

I submit that there is potentially as much to learn for future improvements

by conducting an operational debriefing with all staff involved when the outcome of the US/E is a happy one. Was internal and external communication adequate during the event? What was it that saved the day? Was the contribution from ATC in resolving the event a structural one, or was it something that strongly depended on the individual skills and knowledge of the controller(s) involved? In the case of the former, was everyone happy with the way things went internally or is there still room for improvement? And in the case of the latter (above), how can that same level of skills and knowledge be instilled in the other controllers?

Earlier I equated an accident investigation to an operational debriefing, but that equation is of course incorrect. To the participants an investigation is often perceived as more threatening than an operational debriefing, and one of the reasons for that is that in an investigation there are usually outsiders involved, i.e. State safety investigators, people from outside the ANSP. And whilst they are working in the interests of aviation safety, they often want to interview the controller(s) involved in the accident as soon as possible after the event, which can cause a conflict with the counselling process and thus be inconvenient for the controller. Or it can even interfere with the controller's private life if the investigators insist on interviewing him or her at their home (be it in person or by telephone). To avoid emotional complications at a time when they are least needed, it is advisable to develop a protocol with

the investigating authority in which controller access is described and agreed, and have it in place before an actual accident happens. And if I may volunteer any guidance for such a protocol, arrange for priority to be given to counselling over investigation, and for meetings with controllers or other staff at a suitable location in an ANSP building rather than at the private homes of those concerned.

The final point from my list above is on communications about the event to the workforce in the organisation. In fact, the communications requirement is broader than just the workforce itself, for after an accident the organisation will be in the media spotlight almost instantly. EUROCONTROL have produced a superb document called "Just Culture Guidance Material for Interfacing with the Media", which I believe provides excellent guidance for ANSPs on how to prepare for having to communicate about an accident, both internally and externally.

In conclusion, in this article I hope to demonstrate that there's more to handling unusual situations and emergencies than "just" the technical ability of the air traffic controllers. Providing recurrent training with tailored simulator scenarios is one thing, but it also pays to give serious thought to managing what happens after the event is over. If you only start thinking about that while an event is unfolding, chances are that you're too late to manage it effectively.