

Case Study Comment 3

by Mike Edwards

What happened next? ...

As the business jet passed the hill upon which Brett and Sid were sitting, the FO, whose name was Dick, said to the Captain, whose name was Dom, "Hey look at those sad anoraks, bet they wish they were up here". Dom did not answer as he was busy trying to raise the Tower but was getting no reply. The frequency was strangely quiet.

The International Tower controller, whose name was Phil le Gap (being of Gallic extraction) phoned the Approach controller to ask for the business jet to be transferred to his frequency. She was leaving it very late this time.

As the business jet popped out of the last low cloud about one mile final, Dick and Dom were stunned to see a departing aircraft just beginning its roll. The conversation on the business jet was something like this:

Dom: Tower Yankee Echo Tango

Dick: Go around

Dom: Tower Yankee Echo Tango

Dick: Go around

Dom: Land

Dick: Go around

At which point the aircraft, whose name was Joey, decided that enough was enough and plonked itself firmly on the runway. Joey chased the other aircraft down the runway but gave up and came to a stop. Dick and Dom's faces were whiter than the snow that was now falling all around them

The Approach controller was pleased with herself as the business jet did not come out the other side "see, knew it would work" she said to her assistant.

This story is about a lack of positive control both in the air and on the ground. The Approach and Tower controllers did what they always did and ignored all of the clues that should have raised the hairs on the back of their necks. There was no defensive controlling. Sometimes we need a reality check about what we are about and when necessary add a mile or a minute for the wife and the kids.

The Approach controller was aware that the business jet was fast and above the glide path. She was concerned for the fuel state of the aircraft and so did nothing. We are there to assist the pilot, not second guess. Tell the pilot what you can see and ask him if he is happy or wants to re-position. The Approach controller was aware that the separation between the An124 and the business jet was eroding, but she did nothing, she did not even tell the Tower controller. Team work guys! Remember that it does not always go okay. Think back to Mexico and the business jet that crashed on approach in similar circumstances. If nothing else, think about your own rear end.

The Tower controller did not change his plan at all, despite all of the pieces that began to stack up against it. A heavy landing aircraft with a pilot that had not planned on being at this airport, plus some other clues:

- decreasing weather, visibility and runway state, possible long landing run, slow vacation, unfamiliarity.
- A business jet that was faster than expected and not on his frequency.
- Decreasing ability to see anything out of the window, your main mode of working.

The final nail that ensured the incident was going to happen – fill the gap – the day job in mixed mode, one in, one out, always fill the gap between arrivals. The gap was going to be tight regardless but in these conditions it was asking for trouble.

The lesson to be learnt – it does not matter if you lose the odd gap. You must be prepared to vary the plan. This is not about pride. You are there to get everybody home safely and never forget it.

As for Dick and Dom, their situation got slowly worse by degrees, the boiling frog, but Dick did not even seem to appreciate the rise in temperature. An unstable approach, or what our friends across the pond call a "slam dunk" and, when the excrement finally hit the fan, a complete breakdown in decision-making. Dick was left with a very strange desire for a herring and marmalade sandwich.

A RECOMMENDATION

When you hear the voice inside your head telling you to make it work, pause, take a deep breath and remember that a few seconds lost is better than the ultimate cost. ☐

Mike Edwards

is Head of Safety Investigation at NATS (the UK Air Navigation Service Provider). He has held this role for 7 years and prior to that he was Head of Investigation at London ACC. He had been an ATCO at Edinburgh and Heathrow before becoming the manager of all student controllers and then a Supervisor at London Terminal Control. He holds a PPL with Group B rating.