

Case Study – What friends are for

By Bengt Collin

The Airline Owner (after the event)

He was pleased to have hired Steve as ABC Airlines' Public Relations Manager. Knowing his experience and knowledge was one thing – what happened was better than expected.

The Reunion Meeting

This was his 30th annual staff meeting since being employed by the company. Chatting to some of his former controller colleagues was interesting for about fifteen minutes. The meeting was hosted by THE top manager, a man who had been recruited for his ability to continually reduce costs, an ambitious person with his own career progress as top priority. Following a reception with small canapés and soft drinks (he had expected more after thirty years), the manager made a presentation on how the company had finally turned red figures into black. Pretty boring – nothing about how it was thirty years ago, nothing.

The manager continued explaining how big money would be saved by removing primary radar from approach and area control, they needed to reduce costs everywhere (ex-

cept on management bonuses, the ex-controller thought). His friend on his right began to discuss where to head for once the meeting finished; neither, like most other attendees, was paying much attention to the speech.

The Airline Owner

He was a real self-made man, having started, operated and bankrupted two airlines already. On this third try he had leased three old aircraft from a leasing company based in Arizona. The financial risk was minimal and overall he considered this to be good business; business overheads should be low. Recruiting cabin crew was absolutely no problem; young women obviously liked to become flight attendants for no money at all, asking no questions. The pilots were a little bit trickier, but he knew pilots, pay them enough and they fly almost anything.

The Captain

He did not really understand how this new ABC Airline found him. He had had a long career in aviation, including flying as a Captain on B747s, but that was some time ago. What the heck, this was an offer too good to refuse. His First Officer also had some 747 experience – he could always rely on him if things got difficult.

The ATC Meeting

The Controllers' Union had criticised the decision but management quoted changed international requirements and the present financial situation. The primary radar would be taken out of service the following month. The main

discussion at the meeting focused on the fact that controllers were going to have to start paying for the privilege of parking right in front of the ATC building. They thought the proposed charge was very expensive, the daily rate being equivalent to the cost of a hamburger. Primary radar or not, the convenient parking is always more interesting!

The Journalist

He frequently heard from readers. Most of the time they had little of interest to say but this letter was hot stuff! A former employee at ABC Airline, who had been taken on as cabin crew after being laid off by the national carrier, wrote about serious breaches of safety standards. These included operating full flights with inoperative emergency escape slides stowed in the toilet compartments and about the lack of emergency training procedures. In addition she said that flights had been continued below required fuel limits. She knew this because the pilots had told the cabin crew (although not the passengers) about the risk of an emergency landing. She had recently left the company because she had felt unsafe.

The Captain

The aircraft arrived two hours late. It had had some technical problems at the previous destination and a technician was working in the flight deck. They would have to get going soon, the passengers were already boarding the aircraft. A blond woman dressed in a green Adidas replica jogging suit and red high heel shoes entered the



Bengt Collin

worked at EUROCONTROL
HQ as an Senior Expert

involved in operational ATC safety activities.
Bengt has a long background as Tower and
Approach controller at Stockholm-Arlanda
Airport, Sweden

aircraft, continuous yelling at her young children. This would be a long flight for those sitting near her...

The load sheet arrived. They were operating a charter flight to the south of Europe and, according to the dispatcher, every seat would be taken.

"We still have an unsolved electrical problem, it's tricky to maintain this old stuff", the technician explained to the Captain calmly. "Is this a no-go item or not", asked the Captain. The technician paused for a few seconds before replying "well I guess you could fly with these problems, but I don't feel entirely confident without knowing why we are getting this fault". "OK thanks, let's go", the Captain quickly replied, "we are already late".

The Area Controller

She was in the middle of her shift. Her planner had just left temporarily for a private phone call. The traffic was unusually light and like most controllers she preferred having more to do... Strange I have so little to do she thought; she could overhear the adjacent sector, the west sector controllers sitting on her left side. They were extremely busy with a lot of weather avoidance due to a big thunderstorm. Why don't we have restrictions in place, she wondered. She thought this should happen more often but they were always told that efficiency measured by performance indicators mattered most and besides "you are paid to do this" etc. She never complained.

She had only one real conflict to resolve. Two flights from the west sec-



Considering our Company's minimum fuel policy, this seems to me to be a sensible thing to do...



* Don't even try to find a link between this cartoon and the case Study

tor were expected to enter at different points but at the same flight level. It had to be fixed but no rush, there was plenty of time yet, neither had called on her frequency yet. She would descend one in her sector and let the other one maintain its flight level towards the south east. The controller covering the sector to her north called on the interphone, he had a business jet descending from a high level diverting to an executive airport below her sector. "It's already tried to divert once but couldn't be accepted because the apron was already fully occupied by other diverted aircraft because of the thunderstorm", he added, "I guess you should not turn it too much".

The first of the two aircraft from west called on her frequency, a B738 at flight level 350. The business jet from the north reported on frequency one minute later, descending through flight level 380 for flight level 360. She descended the Boeing 738 to flight level 250. The business jet would pass well behind the Boeing so she also cleared this aircraft to a lower level too.

The Captain

He was thinking about his new boat and his vacation plans. "Is that fault light for the transponder?" he asked his First Officer, pointing at a small red indicator. The First Officer, a younger man still keen to get his first command, looked at the light, "I think so, but I guess the ATC would have told us if the transponder had stopped transmitting, wouldn't they?" "I'm sure you're right" the Captain replied "and anyway you don't fly the aircraft with the transponder do you" he added and laughed. "At least the engines are running, I know that for sure".

The Area Controller

"Control...control, we just passed, just missed a 747 by a very small distance". What was this, who was calling on her frequency, what 747? There was nothing on her radar. "Control, this is Business Jet 123, we narrowly missed a 747 crossing right to left as we descended through flight level 350, we had nothing on TCAS".



Case Study
what friends are for (cont'd)

Her interphone rang; it was the busy planning controller for the west sector. "Sorry, we forgot to hand off ABC654 to you. He has disappeared from our screen, can you see him? He may be in your area already at flight level 350, I think his transponder may have failed".

The Journalist

A short item on his local radio station reported a near miss between two aircraft over the city. The story was broadcast without any comment but it was obviously close – one of the passengers had called the radio station. The airline involved was the same airline he had received information on safety concerns a few months earlier.

As soon as he asked for more information, the airline invited him over. At the meeting the following day he found, to his great surprise, that the Airline Public Relations Manager was a good friend from long ago. Steve and he had been at university together and had a lot of fun. "You have to understand that this incident had nothing to do with us, he said. The crew did not even notice what happened". "Trust me old friend, this airline always puts safety first" Steve continued. He smiled, "but why not discuss it over lunch shall we, we have a lot of catching up to do!

The Magazine Article

"According to well informed sources, human factors played a major role for the serious incident last week. The airline's pilots had no involvement at all. "There was absolutely nothing our pilots could do to avoid the incident, however our airline will continue to focus on safety. It is always our top priority", said Steve Bull, public relation manager at ABC Airlines. "The passengers can trust us" S

Case Study Comment 1 by Eileen Senger

"You are paid to do this" is usually a sentence used to finish a conversation. The ultimate way to bring the discussion to an end.

All the characters in this story are paid to do their job – but do they live up to it according to modern standards? In our corporate world today, we have shifted away from the worker who is really only paid to do his, mostly heavy physical, job. Nowadays we want an engaged employee, who identifies him/herself with the company and, by constructive criticism helps advance the interests of the company. In the aviation world this is taken even further: we are brought up to care. It is part of our training to think further, to see things in context and to identify and address problems and potentially dangerous situations – our "Duty of Care".

The Area Controller in whose sector the Airprox takes place is the only one who can hardly be blamed. The only thing that they could be blamed for is that they didn't



stop their planner from leaving for that private phone call. Then again there was nothing to do and, had it not been the phone call, then maybe it would have been a toilet break or a chat with the supervisor about the break plan. The fact that the controller is alone on position does not contribute to the events happening at all.

The Controllers in the neighboring west sector are extremely busy and because of all that extra workload caused by the thunderstorm, the planner forgets to hand off the 747. Mistakes happen. But this time, there is no safety net to catch it - the primary radar has been taken out of service to save money.

All the Controllers quickly accepted the management decision to switch off the primary radar. Parking fees seemed more important because they affect you every day. The primary radar is "only" there as a backup, hardly ever needed. But then comes this one



Eileen Senger

is an Air Traffic Controller at EUROCONTROL's Upper Area Control Centre in Maastricht. She works in the Hannover Sectors which cover north-western Germany and is an OJTI.