Case Study Comment 2 by Captain Ed Pooley

Well, my first impression is what a dysfunctional ATM setup exists in this region! No surprise that the need to start some sort of improvement is overdue. However, we only hear of some change planned for the main ACC in the story when a regional solution is obviously required.

Anyway, the new manager has failed to realise that his initial priority should have been not to begin workload measurement or any other part of the change process but to first spend some time gaining an understanding of the status quo. Such insight would have allowed his vision of modernisation can be turned into reality through a change management programme based on the starting point – the people, their approach to their job and everything else about their working environment. And in particular he needed, at an early stage following his appointment, to get to know his management team down to the supervisor level so as to be able to judge their fitness for purpose in their existing roles and their suitability for implementing significant change. An address about a vision should have been merely a prelude not the starting gun on change. Clearly, the wrong person got the new manager's job....

On a more specific failure, the delegation of the premature workload measurement exercise to a contractor appears to have been inappropriately tasked and/or inappropriately briefed. Oversight of the two idiots supplied for the survey work in the control room was non existent thanks to a completely inadequate supervisor. It seems that the same supervisor also failed to ensure that an OJTI did their job properly and, on the evidence available, commanded little or no respect amongst his controllers. Again, the wrong man got the job – or perhaps in this case, his performance had just deteriorated once in post…

But the near miss which represented the immediate threat to safety was nothing to do with workload or efficiency or the civil ATM service generally. It was the consequence of a flight crew error which was made more likely by a frankly stupid system of allocating R/T call signs to military training flights. Whilst there can be no justification for the call sign allocation made, the solution needs to be formulated by the military authorities – for all bases. However, it is obvious that after its first use of the day, a call sign must not be used again that day be a different crew – and unless individual pilots are allocated personal call signs, it should really not be re-used at all that day.

I did wonder about the availability of STCA which wasn't mentioned. Not installed, not operating or not set up in such a way that would detect such a potential conflict?

Of course, Mode 'S' DAPs from the military aircraft could have triggered a quicker warning to the civil controller which may well have provided him with sufficient time to intervene. But then, if the military had fitted a mode S transponder to their fast jets (or even a mode C one), the civil aircraft would have received a TCAS RA if the time-to-proximity threshold had been breached….

Captain Ed Pooley is an experienced airline pilot who for many years also held the post of Head of Safety for a large short haul airline operation. He now works with a wide range of clients as a Consultant and also acts as Chief Validation Adviser for SKYbrary.

Finally, as a observation, I would suggest that it is poor practice to separate a military fast jet (or a pair) by only 1000 feet from crossing or opposite direction traffic. The performance of such aircraft means that by the time the potential conflict has been picked up by STCA or radar observation, there may be insufficient time to pass avoiding action instructions or insufficient time to act on them.

A RECOMMENDATION

The military authority HQ needs to undertake a risk assessment on their operation of fast jets in controlled airspace where the civil authorities provide ATS. In the near term, this might lead to a sensible service-wide policy on R/T call sign allocation and in the longer term, it might result in the fitting of altitude encoding transponders to all their aircraft accompanied by a requirement to switch them on whenever in controlled airspace.