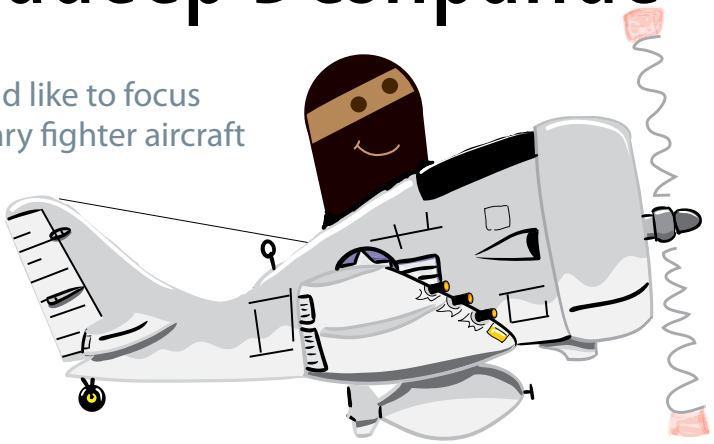
Case Study Comment 3
by Captain Pradeep Deshpande

The subject which I would like to focus on is the control of military fighter aircraft through civil airspace.



Routing of military aircraft through civilian airspace, particularly in the proximity of international airports, is fraught with potential difficulty from both the pilot and controller point of view. Military fighter planes often fly in formation with a single aircraft taking responsibility for ATC communications on behalf of two or more aircraft. Situations may arise where, should the visual contact which is often a necessity when maintaining a compact formation be lost due to weather or any other reason, the attention of the formation leader may get divided between maintaining safety within the formation as well as coordinating the transit through the civil airspace. The formation may even be using two separate radio frequencies at the same time, one within the formation and the other for transit. The workload in the cockpit even during a seemingly routine climb out could be higher in the fighter cockpit as compared to a multi-crew flight deck. This is fully appreciated by the air traffic controllers and therefore, as in this case, the fighter formation was given a heading and a restriction on the altitude to climb to without giving details of the conflicting traffic.

In hindsight, giving some information on the opposite direction traffic may have been a prudent move, however, the controller's decision not to do so cannot be faulted since he had made the required effort to establish the vertical separation.

Not paying attention to ones call sign is a serious yet oft-repeated error. Military fighter missions are generally allotted a 'block' of mission numbers, and these are used in sequence during the course of an exercise. On a day such as this where one pilot flies multiple missions using call signs that are distinguished only by another number, the chances of committing such an error are pretty high. Arguably, on a multi-crew flight deck this error would have been caught in time by the second crew member, but on a single seat fighter the backup does not exist. The safety net for this could have been provided by Yvonne or her supervisor – that however, is another aspect of this case.

A RECOMMENDATION

Procedural control could be used to mitigate the risk of a conflict such as this. A simple solution would be the creation of a transit corridor to the south of the international airport which is relatively free of civilian traffic and also has an adequate number of controllers. This would allow the military jets to transit to and from their exercise area with minimal exposure to the traffic coming in and out of the international airport. Also, restrictions on flight level/altitude could be established to ensure that the military aircraft stay below a certain level whist the civilian aircraft do not descend until they are within a prescribed distance of the international airport. Clearly, radar control provides more efficiency for air traffic control but in a scenario that has an area being coordinated by one agency and controlled by another, procedural control must form the basis for air traffic management. This will not only allow a built-in safety to cater for any delays in coordination but will also give the military fighters some room to manoeuvre should the situation so demand.

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He was a flying instructor and examiner in the military before joining commercial aviation. Commercially he has flown the Airbus A 310 and is currently flying the B 737 800 NG at Air India.
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