

# The friend

by Bengt Collin

## Wednesday 6 May 1987

My best friend is Fredrik. We normally see each other every day, today is no exception. We either play outdoors or at my parents' house, never home at Fredrik's place. While I am the only child, Fredrik has one younger brother and two older sisters. His parents don't like us being there, they never say so but I can feel it.

Fredrik arrive at 10am. The weather is sunny and warm, we move outside to play. We can't agree on what to do, finally we decide to start with Fredrik's proposal, then continue with mine; land hockey played with ice hockey sticks on the walkway in front of my parents' house. After we finished Fredrik's boring thing, he said he should return home for lunch. He would never have lunch with his family at 11am! OK, I tell him: "If you leave now, I will never play with you again". Fredrik left. A promise is a promise.

## Thursday 7 May 1987

Fredrik arrived at 10am as usual. I always keep to my promises. Fredrik left disappointed, I will never play with him again.

## Tuesday 14 December 2004

I am looking forward to getting my first tower controller licence. The volume of traffic at the airport is not large, but



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at peak hours it can be quite challenging. The job is interesting and my colleagues seem to be OK, although I haven't seen much of them yet.

After finishing my training at the ATC Academy, I started the local on the job training two weeks ago. Today we have classroom training. The classroom is different – the room is relatively neutral, with grey floor and light green walls. In the first corner to the right from the entrance someone put a statue of a cat. It is yellow.

The teacher explains low visibility operations, mostly focusing on how to maintain the throughput in poor visibility. "We have a labelled surface movement radar", it's called advanced SMR" the teacher explains. "Sometimes the throughput is slightly reduced in CAT II conditions, but that is because of the increased distance between the landings, it has nothing to do with the ground movements". "The advanced SMR is nowadays called A-SMGCS".

I ask how it works. Does the system label aircraft automatically and how about vehicles? "We label the departing aircraft and also the vehicles manually" the teacher continues looking at the cat statue rather than me. "This is no problem really, you will see for yourself when we get up in the tower".

## Friday 6 May 2005

Today I receive my full rating for the tower. It's a sunny warm day, I am very happy to finally be allowed to work on my own. At the end of my shift we will have a short feedback session with the training department.

My last instructor, Peter, was a bit different to my earlier ones. He will retire in a couple of years. Peter has a reputation of being able to "move the traffic"

– you'll never see any long queues for departing traffic when he is in charge of the runway. He tells me to not be too serious of how to label the aircraft, "the labelling is not really reliable anyway". He also instructs me to leave the stop bar for the departure holding in the off position. "I know we should use stop bars H24, but the HMI will drive you nuts, believe me", he adds and laughs. Peter is a nice person always full of anecdotes.

At the feedback session I do not mention anything about Peter's different views on how to handle the traffic and equipment. Being a completely new controller I do not like to start a big discussion, after all, perhaps Peter's way of working is the best way of doing things – he should know with all his experience.

## Wednesday 7 September 2005

The two Inspectors from Headquarters arrived Monday lunchtime two days ago. I gather from Peter as we and two other colleagues have a coffee together that the common view of the Inspectors is, if not entirely negative, along the lines of "they do not know anything". "They haven't worked operationally for ages, besides that they do not know how we have to make shortcuts to maintain the throughput", explains Peter. The other controllers agree – Peter has a strong character.

As I understand it, the purpose of the visit is to help us rather than check for mistakes, but I could be wrong. How do we really operate the traffic, do we have the correct procedures and more important, do we follow them.

## Thursday 8 September 2005

"I still do not understand how you can maintain the throughput in low visibility", one of the Inspectors asks. The



full report is expected in around two months' time so this is just some preliminary thoughts and questions in a briefing for ATC and the airport.

There are five people at the meeting. Apart from the two Inspectors from the headquarters, the other participants are the ATC Manager, the ATC Operational Manager and a representative from Airport Management. The room is a small rather warm room without windows. The Operational Manager's mind is far away. He is thinking of his upcoming vacation in Malta which will be nice and warm.

"According to ICAO Document 4444, the SMR is only there to assist the controllers' external view, not to replace it", the Inspector continues. The ATC Manager looks on his Operational Manager waiting for a reply. Nothing happens. The silence is broken by the Airport representative; "Why be so strict, after all it is about avoiding delays, something that everybody knows is important". "We need to think about our reputation. If we start delaying flights, our airlines may look for other options, other destinations and the finances are tight". "We always do things safely", the Operational Manager adds. "Efficient doesn't mean unsafe, safety is our top priority" the ATC Manager continues.

After the two Inspectors had left, the airport representative asks how this would affect them in the future. She

was really worried. "Forget about it" the ATC Manager replies. "When we get their Report we read it, reply that we appreciate all the good advice and then continue as before. We have always done that". "Besides that the operational personnel are completely uninterested in anything written on a piece of paper - can they read?" The ATC manager laughs. The others laugh too.

#### **Monday 3 October 2005**

Fredrik, my old friend from my home town, started his on the job training today. I didn't know he had also become a controller, it is a complete surprise to me. We have had no contact whatsoever after he left that day in the '80s.

He is transferring from a small airport in the south and I understand he has moved here with his wife and two kids. He will have the same instructor I had, Peter.

#### **Friday 9 December 2005**

One thing that confuses me is that we don't use the conflict warning system for the runway. Our union representative advised us today at a meeting to keep it switched off. "It gives a lot of nuisance alarms. If you miss a real one and a serious incident happens, you'll never have any guarantee that it won't be used against you". "Better to be safe than sorry" the union representative continued. Outside the mist and drizzle continued, this will be a long winter.

#### **Thursday 30 March 2006**

The weather is still terrible – drizzle and fog. Outside we can't see anything but grey cloud. The aircraft and vehicles are somewhere down there but fortunately we have our ground radar – although it is full of distorted returns due to the weather.

I am working as the ground controller. Fredrik is in charge of the runway. It is in the middle of the morning peak with a lot of arriving and departing traffic. The supervisor tells us that he has received a alert about the function of the threshold lights. He says that a vehicle needs to check out exactly what the problem is. Strange – why can't they check the lighting systems without entering the taxiways and runway, especially during low visibility operations? It must be possible to do that. The assistant controller in charge of vehicles and incoming phone calls replies to a call from a vehicle asking for clearance to enter one of the taxiways parallel to the runway. I can hear the call, we do not use headsets. "It's OK", I tell the assistant controller before he asks for permission. "Thanks" he replies and gives the clearance to the vehicle.

I have two departing aircraft taxiing out which are well behind the vehicle. I can see it on one of the many screens in front of me. Peter is busy, I can over hear the transmission from an inbound flight. He passes the spot wind and gives a landing clearance. The vehicle is driving north towards the holding point.



### Case Study The friend (cont'd)

"Tower, an aircraft just passed close above me", we can all hear the upset voice from the vehicle driver. "Where is he", the assistant controller shouts out loudly in the tower; it's a question for nobody, just an expression of desperation. "He should wait at the holding point".

Everything is silent in this situation. It's like everything has stopped momentarily. Or perhaps it's because we don't know really what's happened. "I'm vacating the runway at the holding point" the vehicle driver transmits.

#### Friday 7 April 2006

"We from the management have absolutely nothing to do with this serious incident". The Operational Manager is in a meeting with the Inspectors from Head Quarters who have come to find out what has happened. "When we received the full report of your visit last year, we put a copy in the tower for the controllers to read". "They are required to sign to confirm that they have read and understood it. That has been our standard procedure for years". "They should know not to handle this amount of traffic during these weather conditions as you clearly pointed out in your excellent report".

No one say anything, everybody waits for someone else to speak. They can hear the distant sound of voices from the coffee room down the corridor. "Can you confirm that the stop bars were working properly" one of the Inspectors asks in a quite friendly way. "And what about your alerting system", she continues. "Can you please explain to us how it operates"?

#### Monday 10 April 2006

When thinking about it today, I believe I saw something on the screen entering the runway at the threshold. Perhaps it was the vehicle? I hadn't alerted Fredrik, why should I have done, after all the runway was his responsibility. I never forget people who do not keep their promises..... 

# Case Study Comment 1 by Eileen Senger

Being a controller for upper airspace, I can only assume how the situation with the inspection vehicle should have been handled. But there are certain points in this story that apply to all of us working in the field of aviation safety, be it as controller, pilot or infrastructure or company manager. I have only picked out a few.

Let's start with the impression that within this ATC provider there does not seem to be an open culture for voicing one's opinion. In the interests of safety but also the working environment, it is only beneficial to create a proactive space where young minds with little seniority but a fresh view and fresh ideas are especially encouraged to speak up, share their opinion and think out loud. There should always be the chance to raise questions about current procedures, systems or working habits – if not face-to-face then even more ideally in an anonymous system. There should be a clearly understood structure so that every individual



knows who is their contact person for questions or concerns. The protagonist in this story is asking himself the right questions and identifies the offer for help from the visiting Inspectors as such, but because of his junior status, he prefers to keep a low profile.

The story also shows just how important it is to have your training of any one individual carried out more than one instructor and preferably several different ones – different in personality and different in working style. In this way, the trainee will not copy one (possibly bad) behaviour but can 'cherry pick' what they like best from each one. There are frequently



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