

CASE STUDY COMMENT 1

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A few opportunities to alter the unfortunate chain of events that led to this incident were missed, both in the air and on the ground. Sometimes we get so engaged by the situation and so focussed on the desired positive outcome that we cannot see anything else beyond that. It is against human nature to “zoom out” a bit while executing complex, but also routine tasks that usually end up being uneventful...

That is why we need training that will enable recognition of situations that require switching to the slow thinking mode where the bigger picture is more apparent and where, as with hindsight, it becomes so obvious something else needs to be done.

At first this looks to be contradictory to what we are trying to achieve with training. Well at least in the traditional sense where the main objective is to develop knowledge and skills that enable controllers and pilots to perform repetitive and complex tasks as routines. This is necessary in order to handle the complexity of the job without suffering from mental overload. Controllers and pilots must be able to perform while their brains “operate on autopilot”. This case study shows that although this is necessary it is also not enough.

Let’s look at the actions of the approach controller. Other participants in this incident can also be looked at in a similar way. The questions would be very similar, if not the same:


- All of us have been in situations when it is so tempting to feel you are on top of things and go for a cup of coffee. Doing more or less the same briefing several days in a row certainly feels like an unnecessary waste of time. So what makes you avoid

the “I understand everything” situation and force yourself into another briefing and more importantly into a short “what does it mean for me” reflection?

- Controllers can ask for assistance when necessary and they all know how to do it. However, what makes you ask for assistance in time, before it becomes too busy?
- Changing the runway in use is a routine task, controllers know perfectly well how to perform it and have a very good appreciation of what it means to those crews that are first to be affected by the change. So what makes you consider and actively offer alternatives for the first few aircraft in the sequence? This is especially true for the situations where a second change is necessary relatively soon after the first. Why do you dedicate more attention to these aircraft and why do you make sure the crews are well informed about the situation?
- Deteriorating weather certainly needs to be taken into account at a certain stage. What makes you start building-in larger safety buffers into your control actions due to complex weather?

I am sure you can come up with a lot of similar questions yourself

that eventually lead to the same answer: You can do all this because besides the required knowledge and skills you also have the appropriate attitude that enables you to perform (use your knowledge and skills) in a competent manner i.e. to engage the slow thinking mode when the situation requires it. A blue suitcase or a blue pram – it certainly depends on how you look at things, doesn’t it?

A RECOMMENDATION
Addressing the right attitudes in training, in an integrated manner while developing knowledge and skills, is essential. This is even more relevant for refresher training as we often take it for granted that attitudes are built in. 



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