

CASE STUDY COMMENT 2

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Briefings before you take over the shift can be a boring routine for aviation personnel...

From my own experience (shame on me) I can tell that longer you are in the aviation industry, the less attention you usually pay to it. I mean, come on, we are aviation professionals (Pilots, ATCOs, Technicians etc.), we are trained to perform under any conditions, we can figure out ourselves what is going on. Just let me sit in that chair and I will deliver a performance you will not forget soon. New restrictions, regulations, software malfunctions, weather forecast – piece of cake, I will figure it out in a few seconds! Easy!

Well sometimes that few seconds are the difference between operations that are “relaxed and uneventful” and incidents.

Let’s take a look at our case, specifically at the Approach Centre controller. He “made it just in time” for the evening shift. “Just in time” to take over the duty without a proper briefing. I am not surprised that briefings annoy controllers (let’s be honest they never are entertaining), but over the time you

learn how to select important data out of the excessive information provided during a briefing. Of course you have to receive a proper briefing to be able to do so. And who is responsible for a proper briefing? Certainly it is our duty to be professionals enough not to take over the shift without having proper situational awareness. Then there are Shift supervisors. Normally it is written in supervisor’s job description that they should provide a briefing to their controllers. In our case the supervisor was going to ask the controller if he knew about the software updates, but she was interrupted by the controller’s “I understand everything”. After the answer to an unfinished question the supervisor just continues reading the document in front of her. That is not how you ensure that a controller in your shift gets a proper briefing.

Now back to controller. I believe that he honestly thought he understood everything. After all it was “his fifth day in a row at work”. He simply assumed that this shift would not be any different to the last four. And assumption is often a mother of all screw-ups. The Approach Centre controller’s HMI might have been functioning in a same manner during the previous four shifts, but that does not mean that it would continue like that forever. And it did not. The controller should have been pre-warned about the change, because one of the notifications included in the computer based controller briefing was about the

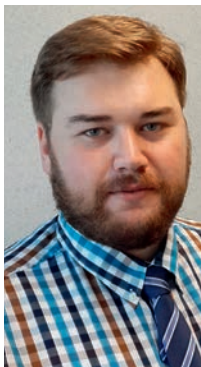
planned software update which would involve the sound of the Safe Altitude Warning not being available because of it.

In the aviation industry things change all the time and all the changes are important. Personnel impacted by a change should be notified about it as soon as possible. Having information about even seemingly unimportant alterations is a way to save time in day-to-day operations. And sometimes saved time means saved life.

Our case is a good example of how important a few seconds can be both for pilots and for a controller. It took the controller a few second to understand why the Minimum Safe Altitude Warning signal had activated but without sound. By the time he acted, the aircraft was already below the glide path. If controller had received a proper briefing, he would not have been puzzled by a silent alert and would have been able to give timely advice to the aircraft about its low altitude.

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A RECOMMENDATION

The ANSP should ensure that all of controllers receive a proper briefing prior taking over the shift. The Time needed for a briefing should be included in shifts, so that controllers would only be able to check-in at their positions after receiving a full briefing. 