

CASE STUDY COMMENT 3

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“Haste makes waste”, and with those three words we might end the comment already as the rushed approach was certainly not contributing to safety in air transportation. But is there maybe a little bit more one can learn from this case study?

The guy in the arrival hall told the lady, with her missing pram, that it depends on how you look on things. We probably don't have the whole picture. So let's try to look at the incident that has taken place at Somewhere airport from a different angle. Let's not just blame the flight crew for a rushed approach but rather ask how these incidents can happen

over and over again despite all the high quality training operational staff gets.

Setting the scene

Chapter 1, the crew complement

A first officer with quite a bit of flying experience but being totally new on this particular aircraft type. Sitting next to her is a very senior and well-respected instructor and examiner. His young first officer admires him, likely she will accept everything he does as correct and that it is done for a certain reason, even if she don't fully understand (but does not query neither). Such a complement was a contributing factor to the fatal crash at Tenerife some 30 years ago.

In this story the Captain is likely to be eager for cost savings as he is responsible person for flight operations. The first Officer is not in a hurry but it is her birthday and her partner is expected to prepare a descent dinner. She has by far no objections getting home early.

Chapter 2, the air traffic control staff

The controller came in late for his shift, rushing through his briefing. In fact, the controller did not do any briefing, he just confirmed check-in. The supervisor knew the Controller well and maybe therefore did not insist confirming the controller was aware of the minimum safe altitude alert sound inhibit. As he was on his fifth consecutive shift he missed to reassure everything is unchanged. A little bit complacent but normally not a major problem.

Chapter 3, the rules

Nowadays rules occasionally do not follow the principle of “safety first” but are rather attributed to environmental issues, economic pressure or political decisions. When looking at the different rules and restrictions as isolated rules, none of them seem to be an issue.

The chain of events

For some local reason an arriving aircraft was changed from Runway 18 left to Runway 36 left. That change reduces available track miles into the airport significantly. Normally a flight crew would ask for additional track miles or delay vectors but given the high amount of traffic this time the flight crew decides to rush their descent.



A decision that was taken by the captain but not being queried by his first officer.

Almost immediately after changing the runways ATC needed to change the runways again due to the prevailing weather conditions in combination with the environmental rules. Without the environmental rules in place there would likely have been no runway change.

Also procedures at the Approach Centre was getting a little rushed. If well prepared the controller would have expected this and there would probably have been an assisting director ready at hand.

The change from runway 36 left to 36 right probably added the amount of workload that was required to overload the two pilots. Busting their intercept coming ways too low and fast into a dangerous situation. The situation was even more dangerous as the controller skipped his briefing and therefore was not aware of a degradation of his safety nets, delaying his actions to warn the crew.

The conclusion

If you look at all the things that happened, nothing seems out of the ordinary when assessed as isolated events. It is just the combination that makes the sum of all the little things that becomes a very dangerous and potentially fatal situation.

Of course, in hindsight one is wondering why people do not state "unable" more early. But sitting at the operational staff working position in that situation is somewhat different. Of course the airline demands the pilots to fly safe all the time. Same time pilots are asked whether they can possibly hurry just a little bit as the connection time for their passengers at the destination is rather short and the airline does not want to produce hundreds of minutes of delay.

ATC of course has safety as their highest goal but same time trying to offer short and economic routes. An air traffic controller does not normally instruct a short approach or less track miles but usually offers a shorter approach. Something an airline pilots in a hurry is likely to accept.

In aviation the same is true. One major non-standard is not better nor worse than doing a couple of small non-standards. Eventually one will be out of the normal procedures and patterns and risk of incident or accident is increased.

At the first moment you are not able to cope with a given workload by using normal procedures and best ways of practise is the moment when you definitely need to state "UNABLE".

Sometimes it does not depend on how you look at things, sometimes you need to be rigid. There is for sure a difference between a blue pram and a blue trolley, the latter one would not help the young mother with her little child, regardless how you look at things!

A RECOMMENDATION

Changes can occur unexpectedly even within a run of consecutive duties. Always check for any unexpected changes and brief yourself thoroughly before every shift! ☺

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In the end we all occasionally accept a small deviation from standard operating procedures and well-accepted best way of practices. Be it the controller skipping his briefing on the fifth consecutive shift as he is a little late anyway or the pilot rushing approach and briefings favor of saving some minutes of flight time.

We all do not hesitate to do so, as this one little non-standard is just a little, little one. As it is such a little one it will not degrade safety of the flight.

What we all need to remember is the following; if you drink one large beer or three small ones does not make any difference, you will in either case not be allowed to drive your car afterwards.

