

Front Line Reports

Emergency and unusual

By Carlos Artero

This article discusses not emergencies, but unusual situations. Fortunately, such situations do not happen very often, but we must be careful because they can appear at any time without notice.

It happened one morning in 2006. The sky was overcast around the airport where I worked. Traffic was so light that during the day one controller worked all positions, whilst at night two controllers were used.

During the day, there was hardly any IFR traffic, while at night there were many cargo flights. However, there was some VFR activity during the day, more in summer than in winter. VFR traffic flying through our CTA was supposed to call, but sometimes didn't. Departing traffic often failed to say goodbye before losing radio coverage. The airport had no radar, and the ACC radar could not detect traffic below 5000'.

starts, but departure ATC had told him to use the visual corridors and stay below the overcast.

I had a strip indicating the expected arrival and when the plane did not call me, I tried to reach it on the radio but there was no response. I called the ATC of the departing airport, who told me that traffic had been told to contact me ten minutes ago. I tried to contact the plane again with no success.

I looked at the flight plan. It was due to land at my airport, make a short stop and then fly to Germany IFR. I asked the airport office why it was coming to us and they told me that it had to refuel before continuing because its departure airport had no fuel available. This was a common story.

I kept calling the plane from time to time, using tower, ground and emergency frequencies. There was no answer, so I spent some time on the tele-

phone to other airports in the area but nobody had any news about it.

Knowing that the plane was going to Germany, I thought that perhaps the pilot had flown directly to Germany, after deciding that he had enough fuel to reach his destination or intended to stop elsewhere to refuel en route. I also felt that the apparent unwillingness to fly as filed, VFR, to reach my airport might mean that the pilot is going to do whatever he wants, so that required ATC contact may not be made before reaching a French airport to refuel and file a new flight plan.



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That morning a southerly wind was blowing at 20 knots. The clouds hovered over the mountains south of the field. The cloud ceiling was low, but not low enough to prevent VFR operations.

The morning had passed peacefully when I received a call from the control tower of an airport 75 km to the south-east, which was surrounded by mountains and accessible via published visual corridors. My colleague there was coordinating a VFR flight coming to my airport. This traffic had asked to fly directly to the VOR where my airport approach

situations in the air

However, it was strange. He was due to fly to my airport because he needed to refuel but he had not come. He had said goodbye to the departing airport, he had not contacted me or replied to my calls, he had a strong tailwind and there was a thick cloud layer. Nobody had any news of him. It was about time I activated the Uncertainty Phase, INCERFA.

I called the ACC, told them what was happening and declared INCERFA. I did not know exactly what that implied, but found out later that INCERFA means that all airports and ACCs which may have encountered the 'lost' plane are contacted to see if anyone knows anything about it. Suddenly, a lot of people began to call me: ACCs, airports... . Honestly, I thought I might be screwing up, giving too much importance to plane that was no doubt flying peacefully over France to Germany, but I saw that the situation was abnormal, the weather was bad and meanwhile I was complying with the safety protocol. If and when the aircraft were to be found, I would have done the right thing.

The ACC told me that there was no news after the established time for INCERFA, so I declared ALERFA. The ALERFA phase activates the Search & Rescue and State Security Forces and all ATC units along the whole route are contacted. I kept getting lots of calls from different places, including the Search & Rescue people.

Actually, we were all convinced that the plane was on the way to Germany, but ALERFA had been declared and the search by air and on the ground was initiated. A police helicopter arrived and, later on, a military Search & Rescue helicopter came from its base nearly 200 km away. The land teams were also mobilised. At this point I started to get scared. I hadn't been an air traffic controller for long, the destination of the plane was my airport and I had taken full responsibility for initiating the alert phases. In addition, I was alone. I should have called the Tower ATC Chief, but I didn't think about it. Everybody called me: the helicopters on the frequency, people at the airport, the military and the ACC over the phone.

More time passed. The missing plane was not located either in Spain or beyond. The helicopters could not see much because the sky was completely covered and the clouds were low. According to the flight plan, the complete flight to Germany should have been completed by now. If he had stopped to refuel in France, we would have known this from French ATC. So I called the ACC and declared DETRESFA. I learned that DETRESFA involves all State Security Forces from Spain to Germany. The man at the ACC asked me if I was sure. It was as if I were a boss or a director, whereas I was just a controller with not much experience, who was working alone and had taken a decision without properly appreciating the consequences. I just replied that I was neither sure or unsure. The regulations clearly stated when I had to declare DETRESFA, regardless of what I personally thought was going on. ▶▶



Emergency and unusual situations in the air (cont'd)

The DETRESFA phase was now active. This situation was obviously now an incident, so I searched for the official incident reporting form, which I had never filled in before, and I called the Tower Chief to ask how to fill it in. When the Chief learned that a DETRESFA was active, the first thing he asked was why he had not been advised of the situation earlier. Of course he was right. I had been alone when he could have been with me. He had twenty-five years' experience, had worked in several departments and knew a lot.

The Tower Chief came immediately to the airport. I told him what had happened and he spoke to the ACC, the military and different people at the airport. Then he left and went to gather information from the airport. Soon he called me from the flying club, to tell me to call up the helicopters and tell them to look at a particular location. When this message was passed on, the helicopters confirmed that they had been trying to check it but it was covered in cloud. The location was a peak that rose above the other mountains in the area where the terrain was flat except at

that peak. When the cloud cleared a bit, they were able to see the peak. And right there, the remains of the plane could be seen.

To sum up, I came to the following conclusions:

- We must comply with all security protocols, whether we think a plane is safe or not.
- We must be careful and aware in everything we do, as we may be slow to act if we assume that the abnormal situation is just an everyday problem, such as VFR traffic leaving without saying goodbye before leaving radio coverage.
- During any emergency situation, we must have another person to help us. If we are working on our own, we must secure the presence of at least one other person as soon as possible. S

Editorial note

In course of HindSight production Paul Neering, representing IFATCA, submitted a note to the article of Carlos. We thought it will be of benefit to our readers to include the note in the content of this HindSight edition:

A brave story by Carlos Artero. To my opinion there are however a few conclusions to be drawn before the ones mentioned in the article. It would also be interesting to know what changes in procedures and responsibilities were introduced after this accident. Are we talking history or do these circumstances still exist? (I'm afraid they do in many places).

- Training on incident and emergency procedures should be part of initial and refresher training. Even an ATCO with little experience should be convinced of and familiar with the actions to be taken, certainly in a situation of undesirable Single Person Operations (SPO). As described that wasn't the case.
- What had happened to the quality of the handling of the emergency and the handling of other traffic if traffic had increased during the process? The many generated calls because of the emergency are already an extra workload by themselves. Calling in a second person during undesirable SPO should be part of the procedures at a well determined early point in time in the process as well as the activation of traffic flow regulation measurements to mitigate the risk of SPO in combination with the handling of an emergency.
- Responsibilities of activation of SPO should be well described.

A lot less will then be left to personal interpretation.