



Who stole my call sign?

by Bengt Collin

The Manager was new in his job – he had started only two months ago. His knowledge of process management and efficient monitoring had played an important role in his selection, ahead of other applicants. “We need to look at air traffic control from a different angle; the European SESAR project will dramatically change the role of the controller” the CEO was explaining to Union representatives in a coordination meeting following the new appoint-

ment. “This organisation is like a fat cat lying in the sun, waiting to be fed. We have to change that”, he continued. One of those at the meeting, a senior controller, looked out of the window. It had started to rain and he had no umbrella.

One pair of fighters had already departed from the local air force base bound for one of the exercise areas some ten minutes east of the base. Sylvester led a second pair as they taxied out to the runway for departure. It was a sunny day. During an earlier training flight before lunch, he had been flying under callsign A32 but for this second sortie, he had been assigned callsign A65. He had really enjoyed lunch – fried herring and mashed potato with lingon berry jam. Immediately after take-off he contacted the controller responsible for clearing air force flights crossing the terminal area of the international airport nearby; “Control, Alpha six five airborne”. Bert, the controller, replied “Alpha six, five fly heading one zero zero, climb to flight level one one zero, call you back for further climb”. “Heading one zero zero, climbing to flight level one one zero, Alpha six five”. The landscape he was passing over was so beautiful, small lakes, attractive green forest. Perhaps there would be time for a trip on his Harley later. ▶▶



A65



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Who stole my call sign? (cont'd)

Bert began to coordinate A65 with the two controllers responsible for traffic north and east of the international airport just south of the intended flight path. He had to coordinate all crossing traffic as he did not control the airspace himself. The first controller, Greg, replied immediately. You could tell he was bored to death and had virtually nothing to do by the way he replied. "Send them wherever you like, it doesn't matter to me" Greg responded in a tired but not unfriendly way.

The second coordination was not as simple. He didn't expect it to be given that there was a trainee in position. By turning around to his left, he could see that the trainee, Yvonne, had been left alone, her instructor was nowhere in sight. As always, once he had made contact he proposed a solution. It was much quicker and efficient to do it that way. "Please stop ABC123 at level one two zero, I stay below with Alpha six five". "OK", Yvonne replied. He could overhear other aircraft calling on her frequency, she was obvious busy. He thought about asking the supervisor to call Yvonne's instructor back, but decided not to. After all, it was the

supervisor's duty to support his team by following the operational environment, not his.

Frederic and Kevin, two representatives from a consulting company, had arrived to the centre at lunch time. "We will be measuring the work load of the controllers" Frederic explained to the supervisor, Tony. "It's part of the new efficiency program initiated by the new manager" he continued. "For example, what is that controller over there busy with", Frederic asked the supervisor, nodding towards Greg, now lying across his desk half asleep? "Greg, wake up! We have visitors". The supervisor felt rather embarrassed to say the least. "Well this is what happens when we are required to keep all the sectors open whatever the work load" Greg answered in his typical, obstructive way.

"Why not start your study at another sector, perhaps...", the supervisor tried to change focus away from Greg. But he stopped mid-sentence when his phone began to ring and he saw that it was his wife, i.e. absolutely top priority. "Please just go ahead, I'll get back to

you as soon as I've dealt with this important phone call". Frederic and Kevin walked slowly over towards Yvonne.

Bert instructed the first pair of fighters to contact the air force controller in charge of the exercise area located east of the civil terminal area. The second pair of fighters, A65, passed just north of the international airport maintaining flight level one one zero. The conflicting traffic for A65, ABC123, was descending through flight level 170 westbound so they should be clear of conflict in around two minutes.

Whilst he waited for a third and final pair of fighters, operating as A32, to depart, to follow the same eastbound route as the previous ones, Bert tried to coordinate a military transport aircraft heading southwest but the line was busy. The airspace south of the civil terminal area was controlled from a different and rather small approach centre. There was not really any need to keep it open, it had remained just for political reasons.

In this small centre, there were four controllers on duty but only one working – the other three were playing cards. This was their usual routine – work very hard for an hour then have three hours free. Even better, one or two of them could leave early which was very useful – you

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could do all your shopping before you officially stopped for the day. The controller in position, Marie, was very experienced; she had full control of all the aircraft, although she was responsible for traffic to and from four different airports. The only minor stress factor was the necessary coordination with the towers, but she could handle that too without any problem.

Bert again tried to coordinate his southbound transport aircraft. The interphone at the other centre was busy all the time which was very irritating. They must be extremely busy. He focused on the transport aircraft; it would leave his area in a minute or so and he really needed to coordinate.

Frederic introduced Kevin and himself to Yvonne. "Hi, we are going to measure your working conditions in line with a request from your new manager". "What do you estimate your current work load to be?" Frederic asked without waiting for a reply to his introduction. "We have a scale from one to six, one is a very light workload and six is very high". Yvonne turned round, "sorry what did you say?". "One is light, six is very high workload", Kevin suddenly came to life, repeating Frederic's words but louder. Yvonne looked at them, appearing rather puzzled and opened her mouth to say something but didn't.

"What is your opinion? I will fill in this and your other replies to our questions on my printed form, you just need to answer". "For obvious reasons we can't do this survey outside the operational environment, I'm sure you understand". Kevin had a serious tone in his voice.

Bert, still unable to coordinate his southbound aircraft, noticed the A32 pair had got airborne. "Control Alpha three two airborne". Just as he was going to reply, the controller at the centre south replied on her interphone, "yes, what do you want?" He recognised Marie's voice, he knew her well. "Hi, I have Echo one six zero for you, just wait a sec", Bert answered the A32 before it reached four thousand feet, the standard climb limit after departure. "Alpha tree two fly heading one two zero, climb without height restrictions", "Where was I" he said as he returned to the coordination, "ah yes, Echo one six zero, south west of...". "Radar contact, send him to me", Marie interrupted. "Thanks, climbing without restrictions, Alpha three two" the pilot replied. "OK, I'll send him to you". Marie had already hung up.

After taking down the shopping list for today's evening meal from his wife, the supervisor Tony walked over to Kevin and Fredric. He tried unsuccessfully to talk to them but they were argu-

ing with Yvonne. Her body language was unmistakable, she was obviously annoyed with them. She had turned away from her radar screen and was pointing a finger at Kevin. "Don't you dare tell me what I should do", she shouted. It could have been worse, I could have been married to her, Tony thought, returning to his working position. She will make an excellent controller!

"Control, Alfa three two, I did not reply to your clearance". What did he say; he did just that, he did read back the clearance to climb? Bert was confused. "Someone else read back the clearance", the pilot from A32 clarified. "But we are climbing now, Alfa three two", he continued. Bert suddenly went cold as ice. He scanned his HMI. Which pilot had picked up the clearance and was climbing? How could this happen? In a few seconds he saw A65 climbing, passing through the same level as ABC123 just half a mile behind it.

Yvonne turned back to her radar screen; ABC123 had just met the fighters. "ABC123 descend to flight level six zero".

"That looked really scary Bert", Greg laughed while calling up Bert to verify that the last pair of fighters had left his area. "Did they have visual contact"? ❏



High workload

