ATC VS PILOTS: The Battle for the Skies

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The great battle of the skies! Pilots trying to fly wherever and however they like, free like birds, while mean old air traffic controllers tell them off and put a stop to the fun having…

OK, not quite. Our ATC colleagues are a vital part of the safety infrastructure and it is only with their support and services that operations remain safe and efficient. Which is why we should be asking how their pandemic situation is going as well. So, this is a look into the concerns, challenges and events that ATC are dealing with because of Covid, and some feedback on how pilots and ATC can work together to fix ‘em.

So, if you are all sitting comfortably…



Let’s take a look inside…

What’s been going on inside the towers?

- **Challenge #1 Low workload, low arousal levels**

ATC have seen reductions in traffic to as low as 20% pre-covid levels, but workload is not linear to traffic reduction, it is exponentially lower. So this is a challenge for **ATC who thrive on dynamic, high workload environments**. In one area of the UK, 7 sectors previously controlled by 7 individual controllers is now handled by just one to ensure the workload (and arousal levels) are at a level which can maintain skills and concentration.

- **Challenge #2 Technical & Procedural changes**

The risk of Covid has meant bit changes in how procedures are carried out, in an attempt to **avoid ATC Zero events** due rampantly spreading sickness. But this means ‘situational awareness’ handovers traditionally carried out face-to-face are now not leading to potential communication risk and lack of effectiveness. Safety management procedures have had to adapt, fast.

- **Challenge #3 Different events requiring different mitigations**

New events, previously not even thought of events are happening, and like our pilot CRM, ATC use TRM

(team resource management) to debrief and learn from them. But unlike pre-Covid days they don't have oodles of time to disseminate information across the operational audience – the learning and sharing has to happen fast to avoid repeats. So they are dealing with new situations, quickly.



We like this guy in Wellington, he looks fun

What events have been happening?

- **Event Type #1 Altitude busts**

Level deviations aren't a new thing but apparently numbers have increased in some regions. **The UK and parts of Europe have variable transition altitudes** and these can be low, which means your level-off on departure could be a fairly low flight level. Add to this some low atmospheric pressures and it can get messy. For example, if you take off with 983hPa set and forget to change to standard, you'll find yourself 900 feet higher than you should be.

- **Event Type #2 CPDLC**

Frequencies across Europe were at saturation level pre-Covid which is why **CPDLC was getting popular**. It is a great thing, we like it, and controllers are still encouraging the use of it now ready for when those traffic levels pick up and the frequencies get busy again. But they are also reporting a few issues with it.

First up, pilots are **reverting to voice** when CPDLC doesn't give them the direct or the level they want. If you get a "negative" on CPDLC then it is going to be the same controller giving you the same "negative' over the radio, only a little more irritatedly since they've already told you once.

Secondly, **directs are causing issues** (for once, not a pilot's fault). When you receive a clearance by voice it usually goes something like "Route alpha then bravo". When you receive it by CPDLC it might be formatted "Route Bravo via Alpha"... and when you receive this on certain systems the message might be truncated leaving the pilots thinking "we are cleared direct Bravo". So check your CPDLC message carefully if in doubt, then double check.

- **Event Type #3 Airspace Incursions**

Empty airspace means more directs are possible, but it also means some GA pilots cutting corners into airspace where big planes are playing. ATC do their best to kick them out again before they get in your way, but keep a good watch out on your TCAS for errant traffic.



Maintain your own SA and keep a good look out

Unstable Approaches

This one gets a section of its own.

Let's step back a few miles from the **300 knots, 6000 feet at 12 miles** though, and ask how we got ourselves into that position in the first place? Was it the moment ATC offered us a shortcut? Was it at 15nm when, honestly, it was looking a little tight but they would have said something?

Feedback from ATC is that they are there to help, and they want to offer the most efficient approaches they can, **cutting down our track miles wherever possible**... and lower traffic levels mean this is much more possible at the moment. Problem is, back in pre-Covid days when traffic levels were higher and most approaches were kept "standard", ATC knew what to look for. If an aircraft looked a bit high, a bit fast, compared to "normal", they could give us a cheeky "do you need a few more miles?" prompt.

Fast forward to post-Covid times though and **ATC have much less idea of what is "normal".** It might

be ok for you, and your aircraft type, to do 300 knots at 12nm, but ATC do not necessarily know. **So we cannot depend on ATC to say something when it doesn't look right – the pilots need to do this.** If you are too high, too fast, too close, speak up, you will get those track miles, but don't rely on ATC to recognize it is all going a bit wrong.

The big point?

The big point is this – **we are in it together.** ATC and pilots, directly tackling the operational challenges that this pandemic has brought.

So next time you are out flying, have some of these points in mind when working with ATC. **Talk to them, work with them, and above all support them** because they are what are keeping us safe in the skies.