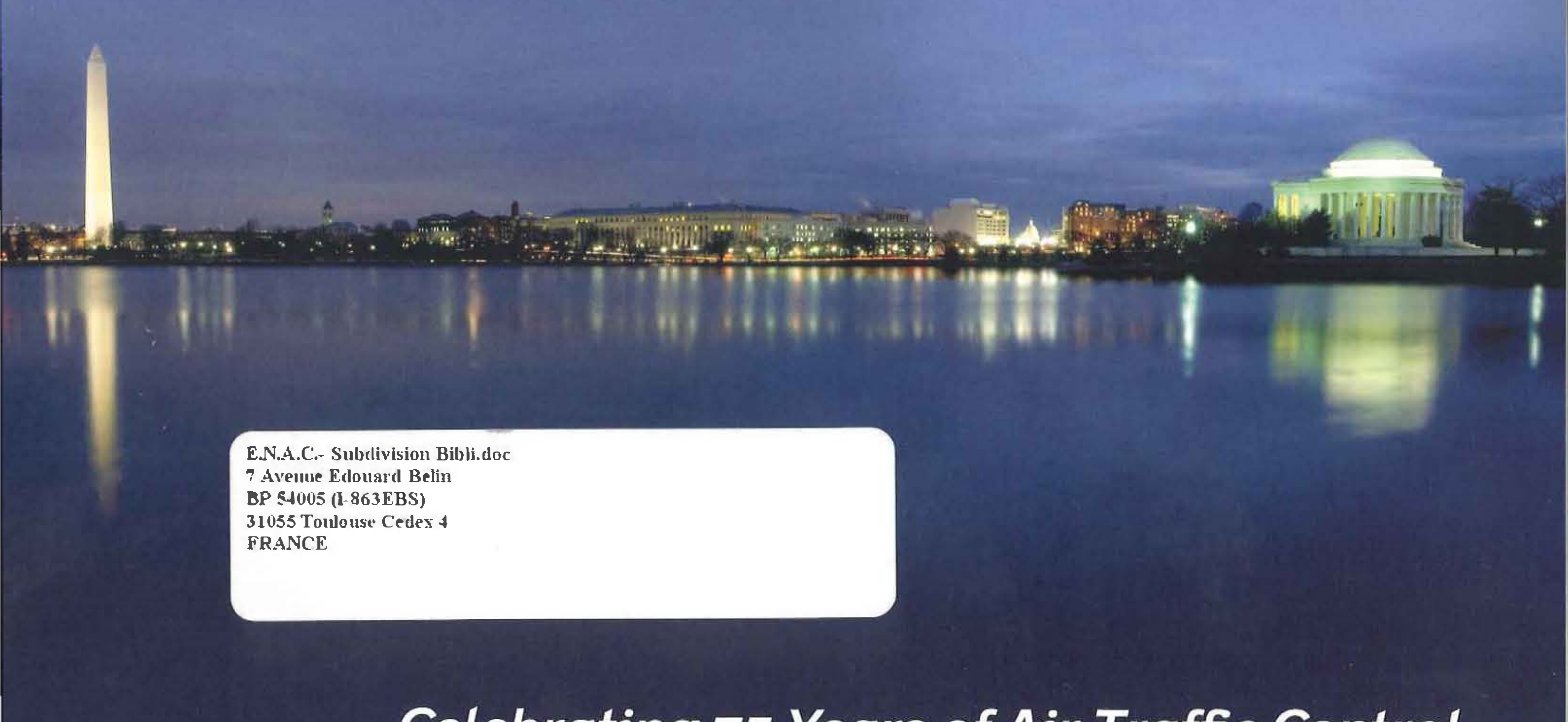
THE JOURNAL OF

FALL 2011

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL ASSOCIATION, INC.

The ATCA 56th Annual Conference & Exposition



Celebrating 75 Years of Air Traffic Control

Fall 2011
Vol. 53 No. 4

THE JOURNAL OF
AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL
OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL ASSOCIATION, INC.

The Journal of Air Traffic Control is published quarterly by the Air Traffic Control Association
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The *Journal of Air Traffic Control* (ISSN 0021-8650) is published quarterly by the Air Traffic Control Association, Inc. Periodical postage paid at Alexandria, VA and additional entries.

EDITORIAL, SUBSCRIPTION & ADVERTISING OFFICES at ATCA Headquarters: 1101 King Street, Suite 300, Alexandria, Virginia 22314. Telephone: (703) 299-2430, FAX (703) 299-2437, email info@atca.org, website *www.atca.org* POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The *Journal of Air Traffic Control*, 1101 King Street, Suite 300, Alexandria, Virginia 22314.

Membership in the Air Traffic Control Association including subscriptions to the *Journal* and ATCA *Bulletin*: Professional, $130 a year; Professional Military Senior Enlisted (E6–E9) Officer, $130 a year; Professional Military Junior Enlisted (E1–E5), $26 a year; Retired fee $60 a year applies to those who are ATCA Members at the time of retirement; Corporate Member, $500–5,000 a year, depending on category. Journal subscription rates to non-members: U.S., its territories, and possessions—$78 a year; other countries, including Canada and Mexico—$88 a year (via air mail). Back issue single copy $10, other countries, including Canada and Mexico, $15 (via air mail).

Conflict and Wind Forecast: How to Best Benefit from Wind Forecasting

Toward a more extensive automated assistance to air traffic controllers

Jacques Villiers, Member of the Academy of Air and Space

Foreword

At the present stage of air traffic automation, computers presentcontrollers' flight plans and radar data in the most appropriate form; they do not proceed to conflict resolution and their participation to conflict detection remains of a marginal interest. The present contribution aims at analysing the interlaced meteorological and human causes which prevent more extensive assistance to air traffic controllers and at studying the means to assist them.

Conflict/ Potential Conflict

Two aircraft are said to be in potential conflict as long as one cannot be certain that their separation will be safely respected at their trajectories crossing point. Because of decisions consequently to be taken, it is necessary to envisage this possibility with sufficient notice (T). Aircraft flights are carried out by air speed control while their separation is defined by reference to the ground. It follows that times of arrival forecast at crossing points are affected by several error sources: air speeds and average wind gradient on the concerned trajectories parts. The larger is the anticipation of T, the higher the margins must be taken. These latter must result from a compromise between:

- the rate of undetected conflicts
- the rate of falsely detected conflicts

Conflicts have therefore to be qualified as "certain," "probable," "not very likely," or as "definitely non-conflicting."

Whatever this compromise is, it is appropriate to carry out monitoring of the situation evolution. As the moment of conflict approaches, forecasting can be refined so that qualification of conflicts are both of random and evolutionary nature. For achieving an absolute optimisation of airspace management and a 5 nm safety separation, a forecast accuracy of 1 nm, would be required (i.e, four seconds of flight for each aircraft). It will be noted that the system is protected by an automatic urgent avoidance device (TCAS) which, in the last resort, protects safety by acting in such a short time scale that wind influence is negligible.

Fuzziness of the controllers' vision

To know the future position of an aircraft, controllers can only rely on flight plans, which describe projected aircraft trajectories, and radar which gives the a/c (accurate/current) position and a very approximate indication of their ground speed. Controllers forecast do not result from a true mental calculation but from an intuitive evaluation to which they are brought by long experience. The fuzziness of this evaluation is increased by wind uncertainties.

In traditional air traffic control practice, controllers take large margins, such that situations that they regard as conflicts are numerous, are led to solve in an anticipatory manner potential conflicts to avoid: a) being later overwhelmed by several conflicts simultaneously becoming urgent to be solved, and b) monitoring of a too numerous number of potential conflicts.

It results that, in three out of four cases, potential controllers are resolving conflicts which would not have resulted in a real conflict if they had not intervened. To resolve conflicts, controllers do not have any other solution than to carry out large trajectory alterations: change of level or radar avoidance. Preparation and control of these maneuvers require time and attention.

Conflicts and ATC computer

A computer having access to on-board available data and to the best sources of wind forecast can calculate future positions with an accuracy much higher than those being estimated by controllers. There are several data sources available concerning real time wind forecast, which very little use is made at the present stage of air traffic control automation. MET services provide wind forecast, starting from models adjusted by actual wind knowledge (in particular by collection of wind measurements transmitted in real time by commercial aircraft[1]). These forecasts are conducted with a:

- mesh "m" (3 km in the most modern US network), and
- renewal rate (one hour in the network above).

To estimate the future positions of a given aircraft, this model can be readjusted again and refined by the knowledge of:

- actual winds as known here and now on board of aircraft i.e. by direct access to data which are currently transmitted in real time by Airlines only to meteorology services,
- wind encountered by aircraft having preceded it on the same trajectories.

Very great progresses are thus possible in effective use of available real time wind forecast and consequently in forecasting future a/c positions.

How to use this invaluable further information?

Note – Future "business trajectories," basis of SESAR and NextGen programs, will not provide sufficient accuracy for being solely used for conflicts forecasting without taking into account local and real time wind forecast.

Controllers and ATC computer

Conflict detection

How to allow controllers to benefit from the more accurate estimates carried out by the ATC ground computer? This problem which appears simple is in fact of a particular complexity because of incommunicability in real time between 1) a controller under intense cognitive pressure having to face a fuzzy universe in constant evolution, and 2) a computer whose forecasts are themselves evolutionary and affected by a residual uncertainty. Any new information, and "a fortiori" any dialogue with the computer, introduces an intrusion penalising the controllers' cognitive processes of analysing, memorizing and surveying interactions between all aircraft in charge.

Many modern en route control centres are equipped with a list of conflicts, called MTCD, as perceived by the ATC computer. Experience has shown that effective use of such a list by controllers has only marginal interest because of the randomness and constant evolution of conflict probabilities.

Conflicts resolution

Based on more precise forecasts than those of controllers, a computer can elaborate proposals for conflicts resolution (choice of the mode of resolution, moment of its execution). Many effective programs have been elaborated to this end. But what can be done with them? One could imagine that a computer is programmed according to "Artificial Intelligence" in order to behave like a real controller and thus be able to issue clearances proposals entering into the framework of the controllers' evolutionary strategy. This is still currently an unrealistic Utopia. It follows that proposals carried out by computers based on data which are different from those available to controllers would have very little probability to fit the evolutionary strategy worked out by controllers; experience has shown that this would contribute more to distract them from their cognitive processes in progress rather than to bring them useful assistance.

What can be done?

The fact that all ingredients have been available for a long time without finding an effective application, shows well that this is a highly complex problem: to the very great "complication" of the moving relationship of "n" aircraft between them is added the "complexity" of the human brain which remains in the centre of the system. There are however two types of action which computers can automatically undertake to the

1 Airlines are remunerated for providing these data to Met Services

benefit of controllers without any disturbance of the course of their cognitive processes:

- "non-conflict assurance"
- "subliminal control"

"Non-conflict assurance"

An ATC computer can detect among the doubtful cases as perceived by controllers, those which it can ensure that a given pair of an aircraft will indeed be separated at their crossing point by a distance higher than the safety separation (5 N.M.). This apparently simple action poses in its turn a very difficult problem due to the fact that, even if uncertainties in wind estimation are taken into account with precaution, nothing makes it possible to neglect wind forecast "distribution tails" in particular in the case of a not particularly stable atmosphere. The "non-conflict assurance" must have a probability of failure at the most equal to the probability commonly admitted for the setting off of TCAS alarm s (10-4 or less). One will show below how it is possible to face this problem.

"Subliminal control"

Speed regulation

Since it is impossible to make computer and controllers cooperate in real time with significant benefit to the latter, the idea has come that, due the fuzziness of controllers' vision, a privative field of action can be opened to computers thus transforming weakness into strength. A minor adjustment of aircraft longitudinal speeds staying within the limits of this fuzziness and initiated sufficiently in advance can make it possible to remove many conflicts while being undetectable by controllers. Such an action is of a subliminal nature with respect to controllers and is not by any means likely to influence the course of their cognitive activity or to disturb their strategy; it can thus be carried out without previous coordination with controllers.

In addition, this mode of avoidance has the advantage on any other mode of conflict resolution insofar as each conflict can be treated separately without creating any interference with the whole of the traffic (which has the further advantage to highly simplify conflicts resolution software as compared to classical ones). This original control process has been retained by SESAR under the acronym TC-SA (Trajectory control by minor Speed Adjustments). It also constituted the heart of ERASMUS[2] project and is the object of one of the fundamental claims of a French patent in course of extension to Europe and the US.

Relation with controllers

To benefit from this process, one can first consider a version which could be named minimalist or passive, which consists in engaging subliminal control and leaving to controllers the care to appreciate, as they currently do, separations between aircraft which result of this action. Controllers will thus directly note that the traffic is miraculously fluid. This version has the considerable advantage of allowing a first operational stage for subliminal control implementation without requiring complementary devices on controllers' desks. Moreover, Control Centers equipped with MTCD and thus with calculation of a/c separations are able to carry out subliminal control from the start. In the following stages, ATC computers will take responsibility of guaranteeing to controllers the pairs of aircraft which separations are indeed safely assured and let it know to them. Then is raised, the problem of wind gradient forecast distribution tails already analysed above. This problem can be solved thanks to implementation of lateral speed control.

Lateral speed control

Just as potentialities of minor longitudinal speed variations were unrecognised for a long time, it is still more the case for lateral control. Without that being obvious at first sight, action on lateral separation is particularly interesting for several reasons:

- the data source consists of navigation means (in particular GPS) having a terrestrial reference, therefore indifferent to wind
- lateral guidance accuracy from now on can be of an extreme precision (0.02n.m.)
- potentialities in terms of increasing separations are much larger than those of longitudinal control.

On this last point, one notes with some surprise that displacement of each two aircraft on the port or starboard side of an airway (+/- 5 N.M. wide) increases their separation since their convergence point[3] is then moved so that the

2 "ERASMUS, a convivial way to break the capacity capacity barrier". J.Villiers in the Institute of Air Transportation Volume June 58, 2004

3 The new trajectories can be otherwise defined by the coordinates of the new crossing point

distance to reach it is increased for one of the aircraft and decreased for the other one. It results that separations can thus be increased by 3 N.M. for a 30 degree trajectories crossing angle, 7 N.M. for 90° and more for greater angles, being noticed that wind gradient correlation are greater for little crossing angles. It results that the volume delimited by present Flight Plans can constitute for each aircraft a privative domain in which it can freely move without creating any interference:

- with the rest of the traffic, and
- with ongoing controllers' cognitive processes.

It will be shown here under that such minor speed variations are sufficient for solving most of the conflicts. This innovative process could be put in practice in two different ways: 1) on a complementary basis to clip "distribution tails", or 2) as a basic tool for complementing longitudinal control in the form of "composite control." Initiated 15 minutes in advance lateral control requires only a trajectory variation of less than three degrees for each aircraft with a quasi-null effect on overall flown distances (each increase of one of flight trajectory is compensated by the decrease of the other one). It will be noted that lateral control is not strictly subliminal: the controllers can become aware of it when an aircraft slightly moves away from its nominal trajectory, but they could be informed that this has not to be taken in consideration.

Potentialities of composite control

It is then possible to assess the potential offered by weak variations of aircraft flight parameters:

- the number of actual en route conflicts at a given crossing point is genuinely very weak; in effect, if aircraft were regularly spaced, the capacity would be in the order of 180 aircraft per hour (speed of the aircraft 450kts, separation 5 N.M.)[4]
- longitudinal subliminal control makes it possible to increase natural a/c separations by 6 N.M. but with a degree of uncertainty concerning wind gradients forecast (this capacity is limited in particularly unstable atmosphere)
- lateral control offers an additional possibility to increase natural separations independently of any wind influence by a supplementary number of miles all the more important as the angle of crossing trajectories are greater with a minimum of some 3 N.M. up to 7 N.M. (right angle) and more for obtuse angles.

A large potential to increase natural separations is thus opened which makes it possible to guaranteeing safety even in the event of particularly unstable winds. The ATC computer has thus a large field for choosing the best solutions (taking into account the angle of trajectories, relative a/c speeds, wind forecast and the estimated degree of wind instability) for solving conflicts by minor speed adjustment or to renounce solving some of the conflicts if it cannot find a sufficiently safe solution.

It must be recalled that 1) the objective of this process is not to solve every conflict (as required in an automated system) but to reduce as much as feasible the number of residual ones, 2) "non conflict" insurance for potential conflicts as seen by controllers will by itself highly reduce their task (surveillance + non necessary potential conflict resolutions), and 3) automated means added to controllers vigilance will increase safety. It consequently becomes possible to greatly increase the service rendered to controllers, beyond the minimalist solution above considered. It is interesting to note that composite control can be implemented in the frame of a "free flight" system as well as in the conventional "pre-determined route" one.

ERASMUS implementation

The controller's side

ERASMUS project includes many devices for assisting controllers, beyond the minimalist solution discussed above, which could be implemented gradually:

- a display of guaranteed "non-conflicts" (natural or under speed control)
- an automatic monitoring of the evolution of computed separations
- an innovative display called "Dynamic Separations Display:" each pair of aircraft is represented by a point: X-coordinates representing the time before the moment of conflict and Y coordinates the computed separation. This tool of vigilance could bring assistance to controllers as important as was the introduction of radar compared to procedural control.
- transfer of responsibility to aircraft (ASAS) for speed control management.

4 Which shows that the "en route" sky is very far from being saturated and that the l capacity of the system is limited by the cognitive and mnemonic capacities of the human brain!

Note that speed control processes can be initiated on board of ASAS equipped aircraft since they have no effect on the rest of the traffic and on controller's task. This opens the way to a future decentralized system that any other conflict resolution process would render impossible at least during a transition phase.

The aircraft side

Several processes for conflict forecast and regulation of longitudinal or vertical speeds can be considered:

- separations are calculated by ATC ground computers after taking into account wind gradients forecast and then clearing a new aircraft air speed,
- clearing an hour of arrival at the trajectories crossing point (RTA), the aircraft flight management system (FMS) ensuring then the necessary control.

The first solution, which one can describe as minimalist, has the advantage of not requiring FMS modifications to make them ready to RTA control and of making thus possible to proceed rapidly to a first phase of operational service.

An easy transition

It has been showed that implementing ERASMUS is fully compatible with the present air traffic control system, this allowing an easy transition towards a more and more efficient assistance to controllers implying no change in their working method. In a first stage, the association of minimalist solutions both aboard aircraft (air speed control instead of RTA) and for controllers (no new device added on their desk) makes it possible to proceed, as of now, to a first phase of implementation of ERASMUS process.

Controllers will thus be able to familiarize themselves with this innovation without change of their working methods and to gradually participate in the development of the complementary means offered for a full implementation of ERASMUS potential; on their side, convinced that a new way is finally open. Airlines will be encouraged to equip gradually with FMS ready to include an RTA control. The transition towards a more and more automated assistance to controllers will be thus progressive and will justify, one hopes, the acronym ERASMUS (towards "En Route ATC Software Management Ultimate System").

ERASMUS feasibility and efficiency

After the very favourable reception – even enthusiastic – from controllers of the ERASMUS project when published by the Institute of Air Transportation, an international entity called "ERASMUS Consortium" sponsored by the European Commission was quickly constituted in 2006 to study the feasibility and efficiency of this project.

This consortium has:

- demonstrated that +/– 3 percent longitudinal speed variations are undetectable by controllers
- successfully developed a conflict resolution software by longitudinal speed control
- shown that more than 80 percent of the conflicts can thus be solved (a residual conflict on each sector every 10 minutes!)
- experimented in operational environment (Aix en Provence en route ATCC) solving conflict by longitudinal speed control which has been highly welcomed by controllers
- shown that no specific controllers training was necessary but only a short familiarization
- left pilots in the loop letting for entering the clearances in the FMS

ERASMUS Consortium has thus reached its primary goal of demonstrating the feasibility and the potential efficiency of ERASMUS process. During the assigned time, it has not proceeded with all possible declination of all these process potentialities as above analysed. It has essentially concentrated its effort on 1) longitudinal speed control, 2) RTA control (which requires FMS improvements) without taking wind forecast in consideration neither for conflict detection nor for conflict resolution, and 3) minimalist solution for controllers (no addition to controllers' desk). Replaced in the frame of the present study, ERASMUS Consortium findings produced the proof of the originality, the feasibility and the efficiency of ERASMUS project and of its ability to be introduced progressively without requiring new training for special controllers, the first phase beginning shortly.

SESAR and ERASMUS

ERASMUS project is the conclusion of a personal study of its author. Its approach is "bottom up," i.e. as shown above, based on a thorough analysis of the reasons for the blocking of any significant evolution of en route control and on the research of means for circumventing encountered difficulties. On its side, the European Commission was worried, in turn, by the lack of any innovative project allowing it to face forecast traffic growth. "SESAR Consortium," which was consequently inaugurated, was attached to this last task and decided to proceed on a "top down" approach (i.e. starting by laying down objectives in terms of capacity and safety, then proposing a way to achieve them). Each of the two projects considered that controllers will remain the centre of the system and will continue to assume full responsibility for safety.

Proceeding with two opposite approaches, these two projects were therefore complementary. SESAR was most naturally interested in ERASMUS project, whose feasibility and effectiveness had previously been demonstrated within the framework of "ERASMUS Consortium." So, SESAR report retained ERASMUS process in its own project and, as said above, named it TC-SA according to its functional contents (Trajectory Control by minor Speed Adjustments), and defined its substance (under reference CM0403) in the same terms as those of ERASMUS project:

> "Conflict dilution by upstream action on speeds to dissolve conflicts by minor speed adjustments of flight parameters (vertical/horizontal, rate of climb/descent), not directly perceivable by the controller and not conflicting with their own action and responsibility". "This air-ground co-operative and human centred ATC automation allows transition towards further automation while respecting the operator cognitive process"

In its final report SESAR Consortium did not explain this choice and did not describe its expected results. Moreover it did not consider the effects of wind forecast errors and did not propose the devices necessary to implement this process. In addition, SESAR (as ERASMUS) Consortium did not perceive lateral control potentialities. SESAR report left then to SESAR Joint Undertaking (SJU) to perform the studies of the problems raised by wind forecast accuracy as well as to investigate and implement the devices necessary for making the best profit of TC-SA process.

TC-SA is a part of IP1 package which SESAR considered so important that "any delay or failure to implement IP1 will impact the rest of the ATM deployment sequence." D4 part of SESAR report envisages to deploy longitudinal control by minor speed variations in the very near future (2012). It is therefore left to SJU to design a progressive development/deployment programme of ERASMUS project which could start to be implemented shortly in the form of solutions said "minimalist" (conflict detection taking into account wind forecast and computation of air speed clearances) without any additional device on controllers' desks.

Conclusions

Meteorology

- Mean wind gradient forecast in the next 15 minutes is essential for accurate a/c separation computations
- Necessary data is already available (current Met forecast + real time measurements on board of the a/c) and can be complemented in Air Traffic Centres by the knowledge of winds encountered by preceding a/c on the same trajectories
- These available data are sufficient ... if properly exploited
- Statistical wind forecast errors distribution is not strictly Gaussian, in particular under atmosphere instability: distribution tails are inevitable,
- The required degree of safety impose to take into account these distribution tails in an appropriate manner
- It would be of great interest to better know the shape of the statistical distribution of mean wind gradients errors during the 15 minutes to come and namely the s of the distribution core and the distribution tails as a result of real-time evaluation of the degree of atmospheric instability.

Note – Nothing could be more misleading than fixing to meteorological services a given wind forecast accuracy objective supposed to be valuable in all circumstances and to build the system on such a deterministic basis.

Air traffic control

For many years, little progress has been made in using a/c separations forecast for developing improved automated assistance to controllers. Two interlaced main causes of this blockage are:

- a meteorological cause: these forecast are affected by "distribution tails"
- a human cause: classical conflicts resolution proposals (change of flight level, radar avoidance) established by computers have an impact on the overall traffic (possible induced conflicts) and have a weak probability to be compatible with controllers' intents and strategy,

It is why SESAR has retained an innovative control process which it called TC-SA (Trajectory Control by minor Speed Adjustments); this process:

- confers to ground computers a privative domain of action for automatically solving conflicts without interference with the rest of the traffic and without prior coordination with controllers,
- confers to each aircraft a private volume of evolution of its flight parameters delimitated by the tolerances of current flight plans,
- is able to safely increase a/c separations even in presence of large distribution tails affecting mean wind gradients forecast,
- can be first start to be implemented in the very near future in its minimalist form,
- will progressively be able to automatically solve more than 80 percent of the conflicts (i.e. one conflict left every ten minutes on a sector).

ERASMUS is the first project having proposed this process and having described the devices for a progressive implementation of a more and more extensive assistance to controllers letting them the masters of the situation, situation all the more easy to dominate in that the number of residual conflicts will progressively become extremely weak and controllers will be provided with appropriated devices to be kept informed and to ensure a constant vigilance on the evolution of the situation. This project fits all SESAR requirements.

There is no known competing project able to reach such objectives. Mr. Peter Sorensen, Director of IATA Europe will be able to see thus carried out his wish[5] to profit from a "quick return" from SESAR, after which the progressive completion of the project will be able to undoubtedly exceed his own hopes. The circumstances of this Conference are particularly appropriate to wish... favourable winds for the SESAR Joint Undertaking!

5 Bulletin of SESAR JU of December 2009

Studies, articles, and conferences (1960/2010) on air traffic control

Jacques Villiers

1 "Perspectives sur l'automatisation de la circulation aérienne", Revue "Navigation" 1961

2 "L'approche française de l'automatisation du contrôle de la circulation aérienne" (1966)

3 "Perspectives pour le contrôle de la circulation aérienne dans les phases avancées d'automatisation: la "Méthode des Filtres" Revue "navigation",(1968)

4 "Le contrôle de la circulation aérienne sur l'Atlantique Nord: les satellites aéronautiques", Revue "Navigation" (1968)

5 "De la révolution industrielle à la révolution informatique" Institut de Recherche en Informatique et Automatismes (1970)

6 " Automatisation du contrôle de la circulation aérienne: de la décision et de l'aide à la décision" Revue "Navigation" (1974)

7 "L'intelligence artificielle dans le contrôle de la circulation aérienne" ITA Magazine (1987)

8 "Le Mur de la capacité" ITA Magazine N° 59 et N° 60 (1990)

9 "L'homme face aux systèmes techniques complexes" Revue "Futuribles" (1992)

10 "Les facteurs humains et la sécurité du contrôle de la circulation aérienne: réalité et paradoxes » Forum "Homme/Machine" Académie nationale de l'Air et de l'Espace (2.000)

11 "Automatisation du Transport Aérien" Colloque Académie Air et Espace, Octobre 2005

12 "La mémoire des opérateurs dans la conduite des systèmes complexes:le cas de l'ATC", Forum "Homme/Machine" de l'Académie nationale de l'Air et de l'Espace (2.004)

13 "Automated ATC for an innovative and efficient "Single Sky": a joint road for a joint goal" ECAC News (2004)

14 "The ERASMUS Project: a friendly way for breaking the capacity barrier" Revue "The Controller" de l'IFATCA (2006)

15 "Quel futur pour le contrôle aérien ?" Lettre de l'Académie de l'Air et de l'Espace (2007)

16 "ERASMUS, now", Revue "The Controller" de l'IFATCA (Sept. 2010)

Principal contributions to the ERASMUS Consortium

1 "ERASMUS, a friendly way for breaking the capacity barrier " Etudes et Documents ITA (2004)

2 "Cooperative Air Traffic Management" (C ATM), 7 Décembre 2005

3 "Glossaire pour servir à la description rationnelle de l'ATM" Mars 2006

4 "SESAR et ERASMUS: Performances, Compatibilité et Complémentarité", Avril 2007

5 "Un projet innovant pour un ciel unique européen", Mai 2007

6 "SESAR Con Ops et ERASMUS" Nov 2007

7 "ERASMUS, un projet novateur, une étape essentielle pour SESAR", analyse approfondie du rapport SESAR,: les questions posées, les réponses ERASMUS

8 "ERASMUS, what has been learned on its feasibility and efficiency. Consequences for SESAR JU work programme" Fev. 2010

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"Colloque Concept Opérationnel", Eurocontrol , Vaux de Cerney

Présentation de ERASMUS à Eurocontrol (Bruxelles) Janvier 2005

Présentation aux SESAR Users" Dec 2006

Palais de la Découverte (Paris) (Cycle de Conférences de l'Académie de l'Air et de l'Espace)

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