

HOW NATS RESPONDED TO THE DAY OF TERROR

It was only a matter of minutes after the terrorist strikes on New York and Washington before NATS' people were feeling the first effects of what would for them be a five-day emergency, drawing in staff at all levels from units nationwide.

For when the US authorities responded to the outrage by closing the country's airspace the immediate result was nearly 200 westbound aircraft seeking alternative destinations. Oceanic controllers had to contact each one and revise its flight plan. Many aircraft turned back.

Meanwhile, other NATS people were dealing with the next phase of the emergency, the government's ban on flying over London. Heathrow arrivals procedures had to be swiftly – and safely – changed and London City Airport was closed.

The response to the crisis was fully in line with NATS' finest traditions with staff volunteering to work beyond their shifts or forego rest days. Transport Secretary Stephen Byers praised their “speed, efficiency and professionalism.” And chief executive Richard Everett chose just one word to describe it: magnificent.

At Oceanic control 'Y' Watch was on duty at the time and its members will probably never forget what happened next. For, as Keith Richardson, manager ATC Ocean at the Scottish and Oceanic Area Control Centre (ScOACC), Prestwick, puts it: “the tragic events in the USA had an almost immediate impact upon Shanwick operations.”

In fact it was at 1442 BST, just 57 minutes after the first hi-jacked aircraft had slammed into the World Trade Centre, that the New York centre told ScOACC that US airspace was closed.

For NATS it could hardly have happened at a worse time. There were 197 aircraft crossing, or cleared to cross, the north Atlantic westbound. “At that stage we were confronted with a situation that we had never been confronted with before,” says NATS operations director Keith Williams. “It was the worst scenario we could possibly think of.”

“In that first hour the north Atlantic region experienced its worst ever disruption with some 40-plus aircraft executing mid-ocean turn-backs,” reports Keith Richardson. A similar number of aircraft returned or diverted before they reached the Shanwick area. This left the bulk of westbound traffic making for Canadian airports. By the evening Halifax, Nova Scotia, was reporting 43 large aircraft parked on its runway with similar numbers at Gander and other maritime airports. Traffic also diverted to Iceland and Bermuda.

But before aircraft could land safely oceanic controllers had to arrange conflict-free clearances for them while dealing with multiple requests for return. They also had to handle four declared emergencies and a Mayday call, although this was later downgraded. Many pilots adopted standard contingency procedures by turning off-track, or climbing or descending to intermediate levels while awaiting ATC clearances. Says Keith Richardson: “Controllers were stretched to the limit passing traffic information, finding conflict-free paths, descending returning flights and handling massive amounts of co-ordination.”

The brunt of this increased workload was borne by Steve Toal and ‘Y’ Watch although senior managers took some of the pressure off them by establishing a communications cell. A number of non-operations staff offered help and so did people on leave. Three controllers living locally gave up their days off while others stayed beyond the end of their shifts. Says Keith Richardson: “Support staff were magnificent and played an important role in the operation, as did our system engineers.” The switchboard was also busier and canteen staff stayed on to supply much-needed refreshment.

Next day the centre handled just 107 transatlantic crossings – about ten per cent of its normal workload. But it was the day after that which Keith Richardson describes as “very challenging” because of confusion about the status of US airspace and the flights that were allowed to enter it. Several from Europe were turned back after another US ground-stop was imposed and it was not until late the following day that UK airlines were allowed back.

Meanwhile the effects of the emergency were also being felt in London. During the afternoon of 11 September NATS was warned about the Government’s intention to ban low-level flying over the capital. Taking advice from senior controllers, Colin Chisholm together with Keith Williams and his team worked with officials of the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions to draw up plans for maintaining operations at Heathrow despite the overflying ban.

Keith Williams explains: “We couldn’t feed in the Heathrow traffic as normal over London because we had to bring it all the way round the back and in from the south.” To test the new procedure short operational trials were run “to see if there were any things we hadn’t thought of.” But Keith Williams reports: “We were content that it was safe, so we introduced it.”

It fact it was at 1900 BST that the CAA, acting on the government’s instructions, clamped the exclusion zone over London. It was six miles long by four miles wide and extended from Canary Wharf in the east to Kensington Palace in the west. It reached up to 6,000 feet. Only police and medical emergency helicopters were allowed to fly within the zone.

Even that was not the limit of NATS' problems that day, as Keith Williams explains: "We knew there was some bad weather coming up and we were concerned that we weren't able to use our normal procedures." But in the end it worked. Actually, Heathrow's normal landing rate only fell by 10 cent and delays peaked at 45 minutes.

There was some good luck, though. Steve James, general manager, air traffic services at Heathrow says: "Recently Heathrow Airport Ltd has been re-surfacing the northern runway and replacing the instrument landing system so we've not had to alternate the landing runway in the middle of the afternoon as we normally do. That helped a lot."

It meant that the holding area for Runway 27 Left could be used for emergency aircraft parking. "At one time we had 20 large aircraft sitting there and on other remote parts of the manoeuvring area," Steve James recalls.

He's also full of praise for his staff. "Thanks to their professionalism we were prepared for the return of the North American flights and really didn't experience any bad delays. Terminal Control at West Drayton did a fine job as well."

Another affect of the central London flying ban was the closure of London City Airport from Tuesday evening until Friday morning. Paul Reid, the airport's manager air traffic services, reports that during this time NATS staff, both there and at Thames Radar, worked "extremely hard" to design and seek approval for a temporary departure route to permit the resumption of operations. This meant that aircraft were required to turn north east immediately after departure to ensure clearance from the exclusion zone. Normal operations were not resumed until Sunday.

Says Paul Reid: "The whole team deserves a lot of credit – including the CAA's Directorate of Airspace Policy. This hard work undoubtedly allowed the airport to open earlier than it would otherwise have been able to."

Transport Secretary Stephen Byers praised the professionalism of NATS staff in the aftermath of the attacks and the London airspace restrictions. In a letter to chief executive Richard Everitt he says: "I and my colleagues are aware that these measures are disruptive and require a great deal of extra effort by a large number of people. I have been impressed by the speed, efficiency and professionalism with which the industry has responded to these additional demands."

Richard Everitt believes NATS responded "magnificently." He says: "Staff dealt effectively and sympathetically with returning flights on which passengers and crews were clearly distressed. Many staff stayed on duty to help and many more `phoned in to offer assistance."

A week after the attack the crisis moved into a new phase as the industry began counting the cost in terms of lost business. Many airlines announced job cuts slashing fleets and route networks (see page 5).

In response to the downturn in the aviation industry, NATS has had to accelerate its planned reduction in the numbers of management and support staff.

IN A Box

How Airlines and Airports Coped

Less than 30 minutes after the terrorist attack **British Airways'** top management and key operations staff were meeting in the airline's 'war room' under the chairmanship of chief executive Rod Eddington to determine their response to the crisis.

BA normally flies 36 services a day to the USA and 22 were in the air at the time of the attacks. All had to be diverted although some were able to return to the UK and Ireland. Most landed in Canada where small airports were suddenly overwhelmed by the arrival of large numbers of passengers all needing food and shelter.

But the aircraft could not leave for two days as Canadian stayed closed. The shortage of beds meant that two flight crews had to spend their nights in a local jail. By the week-end, though, the aircraft and their crews had been retrieved and repositioned. Rod Eddington declared it had been "the harshest week of my entire career."

Virgin Atlantic counted itself fortunate to have only four flights diverted with the rest able to return to the UK. But spokesman Paul Moore describes as "confusing to say the least" the conflicting messages from the Federal Aviation Administration about new security requirements and the status of US airspace. The airline established a control team of key people which met three times a day during the crisis to assess the developing situation and take decisions.

Airport operator **BAA** had the additional headache of new security requirements and in the early stages of the crisis office staff at Heathrow were drafted in to help. Regular meetings involving key airport staff and NATS representatives were also held.

IN A Box

CRISIS CHRONOLOGY

(All times BST)

- 11 September 1345** American Airlines Flight 11 crashes into World Trade Centre's north tower
- 11 September 1405** United Airlines Flight 175 crashes into south tower
- 11 September 1442** FAA tells NATS US airspace is closed; 197 flights in Shanwick oceanic airspace heading west or have clearance to enter
- 11 September 1900** CAA imposes airspace restrictions on government instructions; London City Airport closed
- 12 September** NATS controllers handle 107 transatlantic crossings, nearly 90% down on normal
- 13 September** US airspace re-opens but only to US-owned aircraft, causing confusion with five UK-originating aircraft turned back by another temporary US-imposed ground stop
- 14 September** London City resumes operations
- 14 September** US airspace opens but availability of individual US airports depends on compliance with revised security measures; UK airlines not told they can re-enter US airspace until 2215