

SkyTrack

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF PATCA

PATCA STRATEGIC
PLANNING 2026

IFATCA TOC/PLC
MEETING IN MANILA

YOUNG SKY: VOICES OF
THE NEW GENERATION
OF ATC



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Pat examines the systemic "brain drain" affecting the Philippine aviation industry as skilled pilots, engineers, and controllers migrate abroad for better compensation and career stability. It highlights the widening opportunity gradient and the urgent need for a strategic conversation to build a more resilient local aviation ecosystem.



From the Editor



On Altitude and Intent

The first quarter of a year always feels deceptively quiet. Traffic flows resume their rhythm, watches rotate, rating endorsements are signed, and somewhere between midnight shifts and sunrise handovers, the profession continues. Yet beneath that routine lies something more deliberate: intent. Strategy is not drafted in conference rooms alone; it is lived in radar rooms, in towers, in the discipline of phraseology and the restraint of good judgment. As we begin 2026, this issue is less about celebration and more about calibration.

We have come from a season of international engagement, difficult industry conversations, and renewed organizational direction. Through the lens of strategic planning, we ask what kind of association we want to be. **PATCA** is not just reactive, but anticipatory; not merely present, but influential. The aviation ecosystem around us is shifting: migration trends, modernization pressures, and global standards are tightening their grip on local realities. Controllers feel it first. We always do. We always bear the brunt of adaptation.

This edition of **SkyTrack** reflects that tension between stability and change. We learn about the resilience and adaptability of our colleagues during airspace closures, from voices examining the brain drain affecting our cockpit counterparts, and from leaders who are mapping out PATCA's next flight level. Even a hot air balloon becomes metaphor — proof that altitude, when handled with care, grants perspective rather than distance.

If there is a single thread binding these pages, it is responsibility and accountability. To each other. To the profession. To the skies we manage with quiet precision. Strategy, after all, is not about ambition alone; it is about stewardship. And stewardship demands clarity of purpose.

Here's to a year of steady climb.

Not rushed, not reckless, but intentional.

RENZ MARIONE BULSECO

Editor-in-Chief



Snoozed Twice, but Still on Time

BY JETHRO MATTHEW ANTENOR | PHOTOS BY PATCA TECH

Set against the laid-back charm of Bacolod City, the 2026 Strategic Planning served as a timely pause from operations to reflect, recalibrate, and move forward with intent. The meeting reminded us that behind every structured plan is a community bound by purpose, professionalism, and shared vision.

The year is supposed to start in January. Cue the 'new year, new me' era, suddenly we're all about fitness goals and financial freedom. More travels? Come on! The year is spotless, the vibes are immaculate, and the itinerary. Oh, it's stacked. Soft life, but with a Google Calendar. But let's be real, sometimes the year doesn't actually start until a random, completely unexpected month. Plot twist: yours begins when the chaos settles, and the group chat finally agrees on dates. For PATCA, however, it didn't clock in until March, set against the charming backdrop of Balay Bato in Bacolod City, where committee members and officers gathered for the 2026 Strategic Planning. Because who says January gets all the glory?

New year... but make it March. And we're just getting started!



“...this thorough review not only highlighted successes but also provided clarity on areas needing attention, reinforcing a culture of accountability and continuous improvement.”

Ahhh, Bacolod. What better way to dive in than with the finest chicken inasal in town? Of course, it was 'planned'. I mean, we're talking legit Bacolod Chicken Inasal here. But surprisingly, that ended up being my first meal after a 'spontaneous' 3-hour delayed flight. Planned spontaneity, because why not? Oxymorons taste better with barbecue. After the sumptuous dinner, we made a beeline for the staff house at Bacolod Control Tower, our home for the night. Cozy? Definitely. Clean? Impeccably so. And finally, I got to meet the rest of the PATCA committee. What started as a quick introduction turned into a mini late-night *chika* session. Before I knew it, the clock read 1:29 AM. Day zero, done. Over and out.

Wakey wakey, eggs and *bulad*. Word play! Wait, that didn't sound right? Well, I wouldn't have it any other way. The perfect breakfast combo to start the day. Thank you, Bacolod Tower! A three-car convoy, and we're off to Balay Bato. We arrived at the venue and immediately switched to 'let's look busy and important' mode. Bags, down, laptops out, tables and chairs magically falling into place like we'd rehearsed it (we didn't). All systems go. The meeting kicks off at 10 AM sharp.

The meeting opened on a solemn, meaningful note, with a heartfelt prayer led by Earl, my colleague at Manila Tower. It set a reflective tone, grounding everyone for the discussions ahead. This was followed by an earnest and inspiring message from our PATCA Chairperson, Rudy, who warmly welcomed all attendees. He expressed his sincere appreciation to everyone who generously set aside their valuable time to be present, especially Atty. Speedy. A special acknowledgment was also extended to the Bacolod Tower controllers for their gracious and warm hospitality. Indeed, the spirit of PATCA proves to be something far greater than volunteerism. It is a shared commitment rooted in camaraderie, service, and purpose.

The meeting started with a focused look back and an ambitious gaze forward, highlighting the Strategic Planning 2025 held in Cagayan de Oro City. It served as both a reflection and a roadmap, where each committee's achievements in 2024 were thoughtfully revisited, and their proposed initiatives for 2025 were carefully examined and refined. Beyond the numbers and milestones, the discussion broadened to encompass key organizational updates, reinforcing the association's evolving direction. Equally significant was the continued dialogue on the Magna Carta for Air Traffic Controllers, underscoring the collective commitment to advancing the welfare and professional standing of ATCs nationwide.

The second segment of the meeting shifted the spotlight to the committees, each taking the floor to present a comprehensive account of their progress. Reports detailed key accomplishments for 2025, alongside proposed schedules of activities for 2026. Committees also openly shared the challenges and issues they encountered, creating space for meaningful dialogue. Questions were raised, concerns were addressed, and insights were exchanged, fostering a collaborative environment aimed at strengthening both strategy and execution in the years ahead.



“...equally significant was the continued dialogue on the Magna Carta for Air Traffic Controllers,”

The third segment of the meeting put a spotlight on tangible results, as each committee presented its key deliverables. The organization meticulously cross-checked every proposed activity for 2025, assessing whether it had been accomplished, was ongoing, on hold, or had not proceeded. This thorough review not only highlighted successes but also provided clarity on areas needing attention, reinforcing a culture of accountability and continuous improvement.

The final segment of the meeting branched into wider organizational and industry developments, addressing issues that went beyond routine committee reports. Key topics included the CAAP Reorganization and CPCS II, both of which continue to ignite discussions on standards, procedures, and the evolving role of air traffic controllers. Adding another layer of strategic significance was the conversation on the CNS-ATM privatization, an issue that touches on the intersection of public infrastructure, technological advancement, and long-term sustainability. Far from being a mere briefing, this segment demonstrated the organization's commitment to staying ahead of industry changes, fostering proactive dialogue, and preparing its members to navigate an evolving regulatory and operational environment with confidence and clarity.

To be fair, that wasn't even the actual last part. Of course, we had drinks, alcohol, naturally. Because PATCA doesn't just plan; it celebrates, it laughs, and it raises a toast to showing up for what truly matters. As glasses clinked and conversations stretched into the night, one truth stood out: you can snooze twice, misplace your keys, or endure a three-hour delayed flight, and still make it. But skip this kind of magic, this mix of strategy, camaraderie, and pure unfiltered joy, and the universe will personally haunt you. So linger a little, laugh a lot, and never, ever miss a moment worth being on time for. In PATCA, March isn't just a month; it's January, February, and Friday night all rolled into one.



“...Indeed, the spirit of PATCA proves to be something far greater than volunteerism. It is a shared commitment rooted in camaraderie, service, and purpose.”



(top and mid) PATCA committee heads and officers, led by Rudy (National Chairperson) discussed pressing issues and plans for the year 2026 and beyond.

(bottom) Team PATCA with Atty. Speedy

Open Mic Session: When Passion Meets Profession



WORDS AND PHOTOS BY
NEIL JOAZ LAGUNDINO



SkyTrack's Managing Editor, Neil Lagundino, was invited to speak about working as an air traffic controller.

Before joining the elite generation of aviation professionals, I had been immersed in social work as a youth office coordinator and a youth ambassador. Visiting schools and communities, and working with them, has developed this passion in me as a spokesperson and a bearer of the torch to voices that need to be heard. In that timeline, I had been to countless seminars, trainings, workshops, and facilitation stints either as an organizer or a speaker, and I would say that speaking has been a skill I have developed over the years.

Fast forward to now, I never expected that I would be able to put that skill, which I presumably have left for good, into use as I was invited for the second time to speak on the career talk portion during the Philippine International Hot Air Balloon Fiesta (PIHABF) 2026 last February 13-15, 2026, in New Clark City, Tarlac. The first one was way back in 2024. I was a little hesitant at first because I am not certain if I have had the experience long enough to share my expertise, or if I have the position high enough to be listened to. However, I took this opportunity to challenge myself and to go beyond what is expected of me in my work. Being lined up with other aviation professionals with the likes of pilots, both in commercial and general aviation, cabin crews, engineers, and dispatch supervisors, could be a little intimidating because, truth be told, the public has a more obvious knowledge of the aviation workforce on the frontier. Introducing my job to the audience and potentially enticing them to gain interest and curiosity would be hard work. With the audience composed of students, professionals, and families joined together by the love for aviation, I didn't hold back but shared to the best that I can about how this job, being an air traffic controller, links together every job for a single flight to fly.

“...with discussions that underscored the indispensable role of meteorology in ensuring the safe and efficient control of air traffic.”

I was given an hour to talk about my topic, which had this title: *Cleared for Take-off: Guardians of the Skies*. It basically included the process of becoming an ATC in the Philippines and how ATCs from different control facilities work together with pilots to ensure a safe, secure, and orderly flow of air transport. Additionally, challenges associated with the job were shared along with how these can be improved to ensure that air transportation will always be the safest form of transport.

At the end of the career talk, I entertained a few questions, and there was one particular question from the audience that made me pause for a moment and think. Once I composed the words to say, I answered in full honesty. The question went this way:

“You mentioned that you have been working under CAAP for almost eight years. What keeps you going in your job?”





In this world where satisfaction at work is a luxury and time is a hack everyone must crack-open to survive, that question really struck me. What keeps me going to work, really? Is it about the pay? Or the prestige of being an aviation professional? Neither of those, I suppose. It has always been the fact that I get to be part of the workforce that safely brings the flying public to their destinations. No caps, no lies. That has always been my mantra, working in the industry for almost a decade now. And if you ask me if I love sharing what I do with a crowd, I would definitely do it all over again with a resounding "hell yeah!"



The Ganja Pass

**WORDS AND PHOTOS BY
RENZ MARIONE BULSECO**

The airspace over the Middle East has long been one of the busiest crossroads in global aviation. Major hubs such as Dubai International Airport, Abu Dhabi International Airport, and Hamad International Airport serve as critical connectors linking Asia, Oceania, Europe, and the Americas. Every day, thousands of aircraft pass through this region, carrying millions of passengers and vast amounts of cargo between continents. In normal circumstances, the network of airways across the Middle East and surrounding regions allows traffic to flow efficiently along well-established routes. However, when geopolitical tensions or security concerns force the closure of certain airspaces, the delicate balance of global air traffic is quickly disrupted.

Recent closures of airspace across parts of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf have forced airlines and air navigation service providers to adapt rapidly. Flights that once crossed directly through these regions must now reroute either north or south, dramatically reshaping established traffic patterns. What might appear on a map as a simple detour is, in reality, a complex challenge involving coordination across multiple countries, sectors, and air traffic control centers.

“...recent closures of airspace across parts of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf have forced airlines and air navigation service providers to adapt rapidly.”

One of the most significant alternative routes currently being used is the so-called Ganja Corridor, which runs between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan and crosses the Caspian Sea. This corridor has become one of the most efficient pathways for aircraft traveling between Europe and Asia. In the absence of access to southern routes across Iran, many flights have been funneled into this northern passage.

Yet the Ganja Corridor is not simply a convenient shortcut. It is one of the few viable options remaining in a region where multiple airspaces are restricted. Aircraft must avoid not only Iranian airspace to the south but also the restricted skies over Ukraine and Russia to the north. As a result, this narrow band of airspace has become an essential artery of international aviation, carrying traffic that would normally be distributed across several routes.

Historically, Azerbaijan has served as a strategic bridge between East and West. It is the only country that shares borders with both Russia and Iran, and for centuries, trade and travel have passed through this corridor between Europe and Asia. Today, that same strategic significance has re-emerged in the aviation domain, as aircraft traverse the skies above the region in large numbers.



For airlines, these reroutes often translate into longer flight times and increased operational costs. Avoiding closed airspace in the Middle East can require aircraft to fly further south toward southern Saudi Arabia before turning toward their destinations, adding up to two hours to some journeys. Flights that once followed relatively direct routes, such as those between Dubai and Moscow or Dubai and Baku, are now significantly longer.

Longer routes also bring operational implications for flight crews. Airline pilots and cabin crew operate within strict fatigue management and duty time regulations designed to ensure safety. When flight durations increase unexpectedly, airline operations teams must carefully plan crew rotations, fuel loads, and alternate airports to maintain compliance with these protocols.

But perhaps the most complex challenge lies not in the cockpit, but on the ground. These are the air traffic control centers that must manage this sudden redistribution of traffic. When multiple flights converge into fewer available corridors, the risk of congestion increases dramatically. Controllers must coordinate with neighboring air navigation service providers, adjust sector capacities, and apply tactical flow management measures to maintain safe separation between aircraft.

Air traffic controllers constantly monitor radar displays, communications frequencies, and flight data systems, making rapid decisions that affect hundreds of aircraft simultaneously. In high-density corridors such as the Ganja route, precision and situational awareness become even more critical. Controllers must anticipate potential conflicts well in advance, issuing clearances that keep aircraft safely separated while maintaining the most efficient possible flow of traffic.



“...today, that same strategic significance has re-emerged in the aviation domain, as aircraft traverse the skies above the region in large numbers.”



These responsibilities often unfold quietly and largely unseen by the traveling public. Passengers boarding an international flight may notice a longer route or extended travel time, but few are aware of the complex choreography taking place behind the scenes. Every rerouted flight represents a coordinated effort involving dispatchers, pilots, air traffic controllers, and international aviation authorities working together to maintain safety and efficiency in an ever-changing operational environment.

In moments when global airspace becomes more constrained, the essential role of air traffic controllers becomes particularly visible. Controllers ensure that even as traffic patterns shift and bottlenecks emerge, aircraft continue to move safely across borders and oceans. They manage the invisible highways of the sky, adapting to new realities while upholding the highest standards of aviation safety.

As global aviation continues to grow and geopolitical dynamics reshape airspace availability, the expertise and professionalism of air traffic controllers remain indispensable. Their work ensures that passengers reach their destinations, cargo and humanitarian supplies arrive where they are needed, and the world remains connected even when the skies themselves become more complicated to navigate.

“...in high-density corridors such as the Ganja route, precision and situational awareness become even more critical.”

Remembering Camila

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY
LOUISE VALERIE CONJUSTA



Amid the persistent drizzle and low-hanging clouds that made even the simplest photograph a challenge, Baguio City welcomed the CCS team with a quiet, unassuming calm. The mist clung gently to the pine trees, softening the edges of the landscape, as if the city itself was in no rush to reveal everything at once. It was a fitting introduction. Not just to the place, but to the people who live and work within it.

That same calm was reflected in Baguio Airport Air Traffic Controller Catherine Abad. She is always steady, grounded, and reassuring in both presence and perspective.

Speaking with Catherine, who has dedicated 17 years to the service, one immediately senses a quiet confidence in her demeanor. It is not the kind that demands attention, but rather the kind that earns trust. In a profession where precision, composure, and clarity are essential, her presence mirrors the very environment she has grown to love.



“I love Baguio,” she says with a gentle certainty. “I chose to be assigned here because it is my second hometown. I was raised here since I was five years old, although my family is originally from Cebu. Over time, the place has really grown on me. It was the climate, the discipline of the people, and the sense of community that made me decide to call this home.”

She pauses briefly, as if taking in the thought before continuing.

“Life here is simple, but meaningful. The environment is clean, the lifestyle is more relaxed, and you feel close to nature. There’s a certain peace in that which you don’t always find elsewhere.”

In many ways, Baguio is more than just a workplace for Catherine. Baguio became a space where her personal story has quietly unfolded alongside her professional journey. The city’s rhythm, shaped by cool air and steady routines, seems to complement the demands of air traffic control: measured, attentive, and deliberate.

Yet behind the calm exterior of both the city and the controller lies a deeper narrative—one shaped not only by years of experience, but by the people who have influenced her along the way.

For Catherine, one of the most profound influences came in the form of mentorship. It was an enduring connection that continues to guide her, even in her absence.

“Although she’s no longer with us, I had a supervisor who truly became my mentor,” Catherine recalls, her voice carrying both respect and quiet emotion. “Ma’am Camila Conjusta, our former Facility-in-Charge here at Baguio Tower. I worked with her every day, and she passed on so many of her principles to me.”

In a profession often defined by technical expertise and operational efficiency, it is easy to overlook the human connections that shape those who carry the responsibility. For Catherine, those connections became foundational.

“I learned so much from her. She was not just as a superior or colleague, but as a mother figure,” she continues. “She taught me values that I carry both in my personal life and in my profession. Discipline, professionalism, integrity. And she embodied all of those every single day.”

There is a quiet reverence in the way she speaks: less about loss, and more about legacy.

“She was consistently professional throughout her career,” Catherine adds. “And that’s something I’ve always tried to live up to. The way she handled situations, the way she treated people, the standards she set. It always stays with you.”

“...for Catherine, one of the most profound influences came in the form of mentorship. It was an enduring connection that continues to guide her, even in her absence.”



Moments like these remind us that the culture within a facility is not built solely on procedures or systems, but on the individuals who shape its character. Mentorship, often unspoken and gradual, becomes one of the most enduring forms of influence in the profession.

As the conversation unfolds, it becomes clear that Catherine's story is not just about choosing a station. It is about choosing a life rooted in purpose, community, and continuity. In Baguio City, where clouds drift low and time seems to move with intention, she has found both stability and meaning.

And perhaps that is what makes her presence so fitting for the role she holds. In the control tower, where decisions must be made with clarity and composure, the ability to remain grounded is invaluable. It is a quality not easily taught, but one that is often shaped by experience, environment, and the people who guide us along the way.

In the quiet rhythm of Baguio, where the mist rolls in as naturally as the day unfolds, stories like Catherine's remind us that the essence of air traffic control goes far beyond coordination and control. It is built on trust, on shared values, and on the invisible threads that connect one generation of controllers to the next.

She was Camila. And through those she guided, she continues to live on.

In every calm decision, in every standard upheld, and in every lesson quietly passed forward, her legacy remains.



The Brain Drain Problem in Philippine Aviation: A Shared Industry Concern



WORDS AND PHOTOS BY PATRICK ROA

Here we are again, talking about one of those persistent issues that surfaces in morning briefings and late-night ops meetings—the steady outflow of experienced Filipino pilots, and increasingly, aircraft maintenance engineers and other skilled aviation professionals. It’s not just a cockpit staffing headache or an isolated gripe from the flight deck.

This so-called ‘brain drain’ is a systemic challenge that ripples across the entire Philippine aviation ecosystem: from flight operations to aircraft maintenance, air traffic management, regulatory oversight, and the long-term sustainability of the industry.

This isn’t about pointing fingers or complaining.

It’s a signal that we need to treat as a strategic conversation about building a more resilient future.



Migration Trends: Following the Opportunity Gradient

Filipino aviation workers—pilots, engineers, and controllers alike—have long been valued globally for their technical competence, strong English proficiency, and adaptability. Over the past several years, however, migration has intensified. Pilots and licensed aircraft engineers continue to move toward the Middle East, Southeast Asia, the USA, Canada, and parts of Europe, drawn by significantly better compensation, clearer career progression, and more stable upgrade pathways.

At home, flight schools are still producing hundreds of Commercial Pilot License holders annually, but the local market struggles to absorb them quickly.

Many newly graduated pilots, often with only 200–250 hours, hit a wall—domestic carriers typically require 500 to 1,500 hours and ideally jet/turbine time and multi-crew experience.

Meanwhile, a noticeable surplus of self-financed pilots who invested heavily in type ratings now find those ratings expired and unused, watching as airline-sponsored cadet programs fast-track fresh graduates straight into the cockpit.

The same pressures apply to engineers chasing EASA or FAA licenses to access international MRO opportunities.

What we're seeing is a widening opportunity gradient. Talent naturally flows where it is most valued and rewarded.

Economic and Regulatory Drivers: Beyond Just Salary

Compensation remains the most visible driver, but it's far from the only one. Becoming a commercial pilot in the Philippines is expensive—families often shoulder P3–5 million or more for licenses, hours, and type ratings. Aircraft maintenance engineers face similar upfront costs of reviewers and an internship to qualify for the international licensing exams. When domestic absorption lags, the pressure to seek higher-yield markets becomes intense.

Regulatory factors also shape mobility. Streamlined licensing conversions and bilateral agreements abroad make certain destinations more attractive.

At home, strict safety standards are essential, yet procedural delays, limited fleet growth, and occasional 'who-you-know' shortcuts can frustrate self-funded talent and accelerate outward movement.

Pilots are especially drawn to environments offering diverse international routes, frequent aircraft transitions, and faster command experience. These are long-term career investments, not short-term decisions.

Impact on Domestic Airlines: Structural Constraints and New Realities

For local carriers like Philippine Airlines and Cebu Pacific, pilot and engineer migration creates structural constraints that go beyond simple attrition.

Training cycles are long and costly. Losing experienced crew forces airlines into repeated cycles of recruitment, retraining, and upgrading—driving up costs and affecting operational readiness.

Command-level shortages are particularly painful: first officers can't upgrade without enough training, and captains and expansion plans become hostage to human capital availability.

The rise of airline cadet programs adds another layer. While these initiatives (such as Cebu Pacific's partnership with Airworks and PAL's program in Australia) are positive steps that have recently graduated new pilots, they also create fresh uncertainty for the large pool of already-licensed, self-financed pilots whose type ratings have lapsed. Many now face the prospect of being bypassed in favor of sponsored cadets—an honest source of frustration for those who bet heavily on their own careers.

Growth continues—passenger numbers have surpassed pre-pandemic levels, and new aircraft orders are rolling in—but staffing limitations are slowing how quickly and safely the industry can scale.

Ripple Effects on Air Traffic Services and the Broader Ecosystem

The effects don't stop at the flight deck. Workforce instability influences air traffic services in subtle but real ways.

Higher numbers of training flights, mixed-experience crews, and shifting schedules increase complexity and workload for controllers. CAAP has acknowledged similar pressures on air traffic controllers and specialists. When one part of the system is stretched, it creates variability and additional demands across the board.

Aviation is deeply interconnected. A resilient pool of pilots and engineers directly supports smoother, safer operations on the ground and in the tower.

“Aviation is deeply interconnected. A resilient pool of pilots and engineers directly supports smoother, safer operations on the ground and in the tower.”

The Middle East Factor: Renewed Uncertainty Amid Global Crisis

The ongoing war in the Middle East has added a new layer of complexity and unpredictability.

As of March 2026, escalating tensions—including strikes and retaliatory attacks—have led to airspace closures, restrictions, and diversions across major Gulf hubs. Philippine carriers have suspended or adjusted Gulf routes, while some overseas-based Filipino pilots face disrupted operations, higher insurance costs, and even restrictions on movement.

In the short term, this instability may slow the outflow of talent and create a window for domestic airlines to attract experienced pilots and engineers back home for safer, steadier roles. However, the longer-term outlook remains uncertain.

As the region eventually stabilizes and airlines recalibrate, renewed hiring could once again intensify competition for Filipino talent. Global rerouting, extended flight times, and shifting traffic patterns are already adding complexity worldwide, affecting everyone from pilots to air traffic services.

This geopolitical crisis reminds us how quickly external events can reshape labor markets. It brings both opportunity and risk, leaving many aviation professionals weighing safer domestic paths against potentially lucrative but volatile international ones.



Toward a Sustainable Aviation Ecosystem

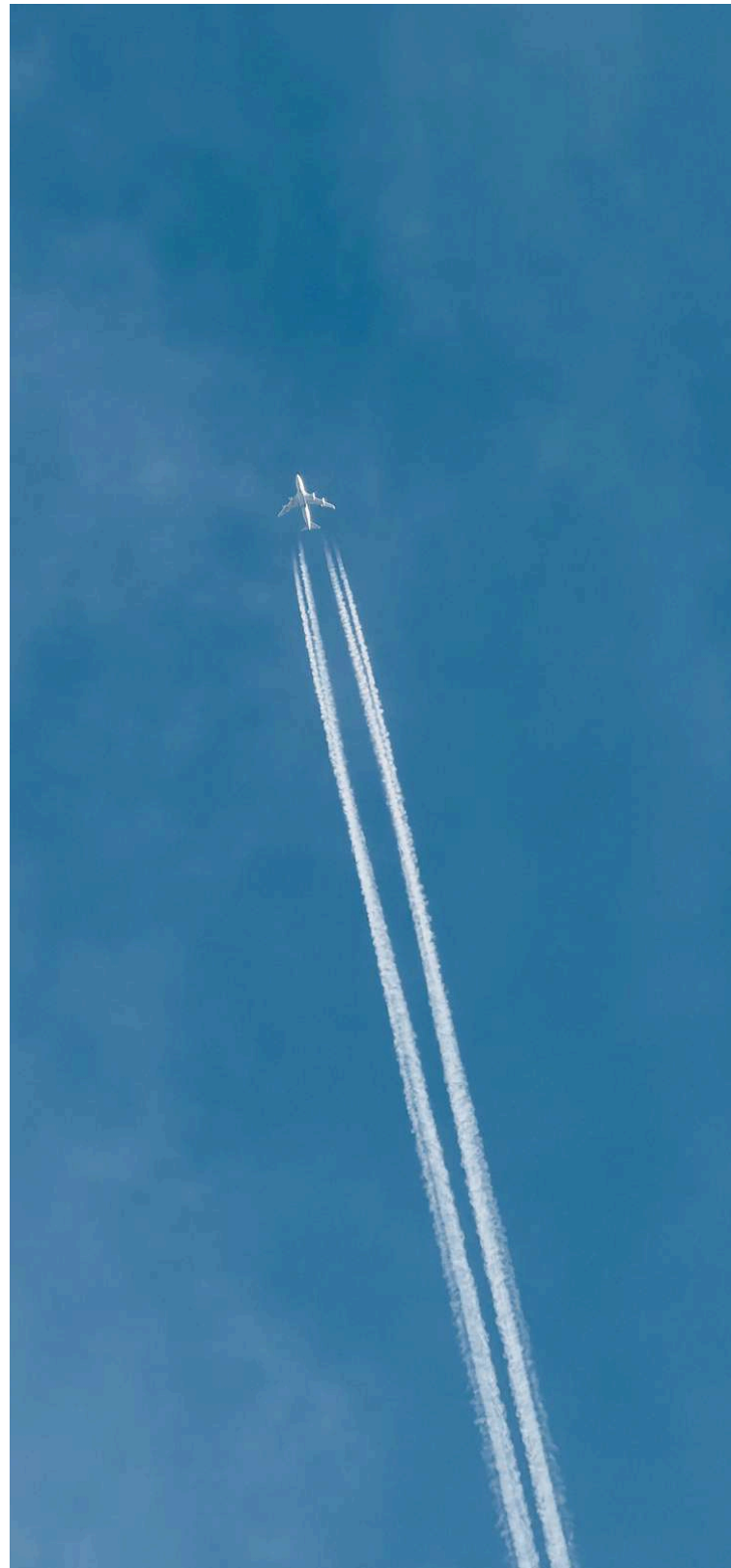
Addressing brain drain isn't about restricting mobility—that would be neither practical nor fair. The real path forward is making the Philippine aviation industry a competitive place to build a career.

This means strengthening retention through better career progression, aligning training pipelines with actual fleet needs, streamlining regulatory processes without compromising safety, and investing in workforce development across flight operations, maintenance, and air traffic services. It also calls for coordinated efforts among airlines, regulators, training organizations, and air navigation providers.

We should also explore smarter policies—like a Magna Carta for aviation professionals—to ensure fair conditions and reduce unnecessary barriers for self-funded talent.

The outlook ahead carries genuine uncertainty.

The Middle East conflict has introduced volatility that could shift migration patterns in either direction, while global economic pressures and regional growth forecasts continue to evolve. Yet the momentum is real: record passenger traffic, expanding infrastructure, and committed training programs provide a strong foundation.



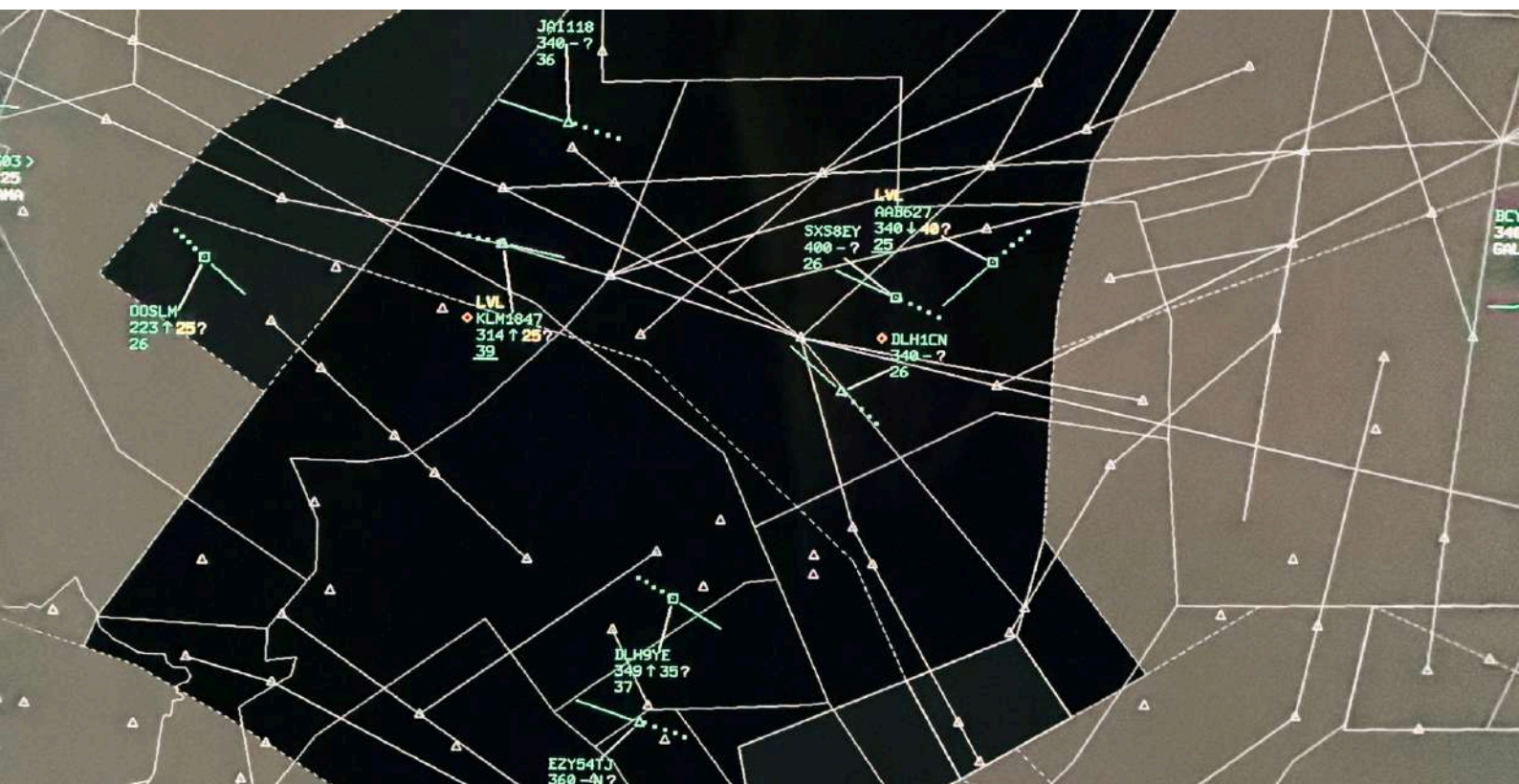
The challenge is real, and so is the empathy we should extend to the many pilots and engineers who have invested everything in their careers only to face unpredictable prospects.

By treating this as a shared strategic opportunity rather than a crisis to blame on anyone, we can build a system resilient enough to keep more of our best talent flying right here at home—while still allowing those who choose to seek opportunities abroad to do so.

Because when our pilots, engineers, and controllers thrive here, the entire Philippine aviation system flies stronger and safer.

“The Middle East conflict has introduced volatility that could shift migration patterns in either direction, while global economic pressures and regional growth forecasts continue to evolve.”

Safe skies ahead.



Global Minds, Local Skies: IFATCA TOC/PLC Meeting Held in Manila



WORDS AND PHOTOS BY RENZ MARIONE BULSECO



For the first time, Manila hosted one of the most important technical gatherings within the global air traffic control community. Representatives from around the world convened in the Philippine capital for the joint meeting of the Technical and Operational Committee (TOC) and the Professional and Legal Committee (PLC) of the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations (IFATCA). It was a milestone moment both for the Philippines and for the Philippine Air Traffic Controllers Association (PATCA).

These committee meetings serve as the intellectual engine of IFATCA. It is within these working sessions that emerging operational challenges are examined, technical concepts are debated, and the foundation for international policy recommendations is built. The conclusions drawn here will ultimately shape the working papers that are presented and deliberated upon during the upcoming annual conference in Bucharest this April.

Hosting the meeting in Manila marked an important step for the Philippine ATC community. Not only did it highlight the country's growing engagement within the international federation, it also reflected the trust placed in Filipino controllers to contribute meaningfully to the development of global aviation standards. PATCA currently serves as an elected member of IFATCA's TOC and a corresponding member of PLC, providing the Philippines with a direct voice in discussions that influence the future of air traffic management worldwide.

Throughout the sessions, delegates tackled a diverse range of subjects that reflect the rapidly evolving landscape of aviation. One of the key topics explored was the growing role of autonomous aircraft functionality. As technological advancements continue to push the boundaries of automation, the aviation industry must address how such systems will integrate with existing air traffic control structures. Controllers, who remain the human interface between technology and safety, must be prepared to manage traffic that may increasingly rely on automated decision-making systems.

“...for the first time, Manila played host to one of the most important technical gatherings within the global air traffic control community.”



Another topic that sparked considerable discussion involved ambient workspace recordings. As recording technologies become more prevalent in operational environments, questions arise regarding their role in safety investigations, operational transparency, and the protection of controllers’ professional rights. The PLC sessions examined how such recordings could be implemented responsibly, balancing safety benefits with legal and ethical considerations for controllers working in high-pressure operational settings.

Language and communication, long recognized as pillars of safe aviation, also featured prominently in the meeting. Investigations are currently underway into radio frequency interference (RFI) phraseology and how controllers and pilots can maintain clarity in communications despite technological disruptions. Ensuring that phraseology remains resilient even when communications are degraded is critical to maintaining safe separation and efficient traffic flow.

Licensing frameworks were also examined, particularly in relation to the continuation of Air Traffic Flow Management (ATFM) competencies within controller licensing structures. As airspace becomes increasingly congested, ATFM has become an integral component of modern air traffic management. Discussions focused on how controllers’ training and licensing standards should evolve to ensure that ATFM expertise remains embedded within the profession.

Another operational subject receiving renewed attention was the conduct of Instrument Flight Rules operations in uncontrolled airspace. While such operations are already practiced in several parts of the world, their legal frameworks and operational safeguards vary widely. The TOC sessions explored how harmonized approaches could enhance safety while recognizing the different realities faced by aviation systems across various regions.



Looking further upward, the committees also examined the implications of high-altitude operations and the emerging challenges associated with near-space environments. As commercial and scientific activities expand toward higher altitudes, controllers must begin considering how these operations will interact with conventional air traffic flows.

Closely related to this is the growing concern surrounding space debris and its potential operational impact. While traditionally considered an issue for satellite operators and space agencies, debris re-entry events and increasing space launches may eventually require closer coordination with air traffic services. Early discussions within IFATCA aim to ensure that controllers are included in conversations about how such risks are managed.

Beyond the technical discussions, the Manila meeting also reinforced the collaborative spirit that defines the international air traffic control community. Controllers from different regions bring with them unique operational perspectives shaped by their local environments, whether managing dense European airspace, vast oceanic sectors, or rapidly expanding Asian traffic corridors. When these perspectives come together, the resulting dialogue becomes richer and more globally representative.

For PATCA, hosting the TOC/PLC meeting was both an honor and a responsibility. It provided Filipino controllers the opportunity to showcase their professionalism while also participating directly in conversations that shape the profession's future.

More importantly, the meeting serves as a critical step in the preparation process leading to IFATCA's annual conference in Bucharest, Romania. The ideas discussed, refined, and debated in Manila will soon evolve into formal working papers, which will be presented to the federation for further deliberation and potential adoption as policy.

In aviation, progress rarely happens in a single moment. It emerges through careful discussion, thoughtful analysis, and collaboration among professionals who share the same commitment to safety. The IFATCA TOC/PLC meeting in Manila demonstrated exactly that global minds working together, guided by a common responsibility to ensure that the skies remain safe, efficient, and ready for tomorrow's challenges.



(top) Renz Bulseco, representing PATCA as an elected member of TOC presented a brief overview of the air traffic service of the Philippines.

(mid) PLC delegates during their closed-door meeting at Heritage Hotel.

(bottom) All of the delegates had a sumptuous dinner at Barbara's, accompanied by the cultural show.



Young Sky: Voices of the New Generation of Air Traffic Controllers



WORDS AND PHOTOS BY ETHAN JAN ORTIZ

For generations, the Philippines' invisible highways in the sky have been paved by the resolute voice of those who came before. Given the industry's dynamism, there has been a shift in the frequency. A new set of vanguards has arrived to claim the watch, young minds that are ready to take control of the airwaves and the intricate geometry of our modern airspace.

How does it feel to hold the sky? We've reached out to young controllers across the archipelago. Their stories capture the full-spectrum of the Philippine FIR, from the high-altitude chess of Area Control and the rapid-fire precision of Manila Approach, to the dual-role complexity of the Tower/Approach hubs and the critical watch of the Flight Service Stations. Separated by miles and roles, they are united under one goal: **to ensure the safety of every flight.**

A new set of vanguards has arrived to claim the watch, young minds that are ready to take control of the airwaves and the intricate geometry of our modern airspace.

Earl John Gregorio is a rising controller assigned to the expansive architecture of the Manila Area Control Center. For Earl, it was a leap of faith; he admits to initially knowing about the job only at the surface-level. Having seen the CATS (Comprehensive Air Traffic Service) Training graduation photo of one of his high school classmates, he became curious and joined the next training program.

Getting assigned to a facility that handles an airspace of great-expanse required a lot of adjustment from Earl. It required him getting used to manipulating the ASD, CADAS, and Frequentis; handling departures and arrivals from multiple airports throughout the country; managing overfly traffic; providing clearances; coordinating with adjacent FIRs, to name a few. “Over time, it gradually became more manageable as I gained experience.” Earl shared. Last October, he got his rating for the Flight Data and Clearance Delivery positions, and this year, he got his rating as a planner for the South, Southeast, and Central South sectors of the Manila ACC. His accomplishments were made possible with the mentoring of his senior colleagues.

For future ATC aspirants, Earl has this to say: “If someone is unsure about becoming an Air Traffic Controller, I would say it helps to realize how meaningful the role is. You are responsible for keeping people safe every day, and there is real fulfillment in managing traffic smoothly, especially during busy situations. One cool part of being an ATC is working with live traffic in real time. Every decision is crucial, and every situation is different, which keeps the job engaging and interesting. For me, a great controller stays calm under pressure, pays attention to detail, and is always willing to learn.”



Katrix Sunga is one of the recruits assigned to the frenetic Manila Approach. She hails from Bulacan, a province adjacent to the north of the capital. She set her sights to the skies, having been brought up near Plaridel Airport—one of the busiest community airports in the country, handling training flights—she inevitably became fascinated with airplanes. For Katrix, choosing to be a part of an industry traditionally defined by men is a way to prove that brilliance knows no gender.

Getting used to managing traffic in Manila Approach presented an immediate awakening. Katrix admits to initially being overwhelmed by how much traffic she would eventually handle. She also noted that it took her nearly three months of immersion to truly master the “ins and outs” of being a planner. Yet, she found her footing through the mentorship of her seniors. Even as she navigates the nerves of completing her rating, she maintains a resilient outlook: “Everything can be learned through experience, and you will always be guided by your seniors.” With that, Katrix is now half-rated, having recently earned her rating for procedural control of Manila Approach.





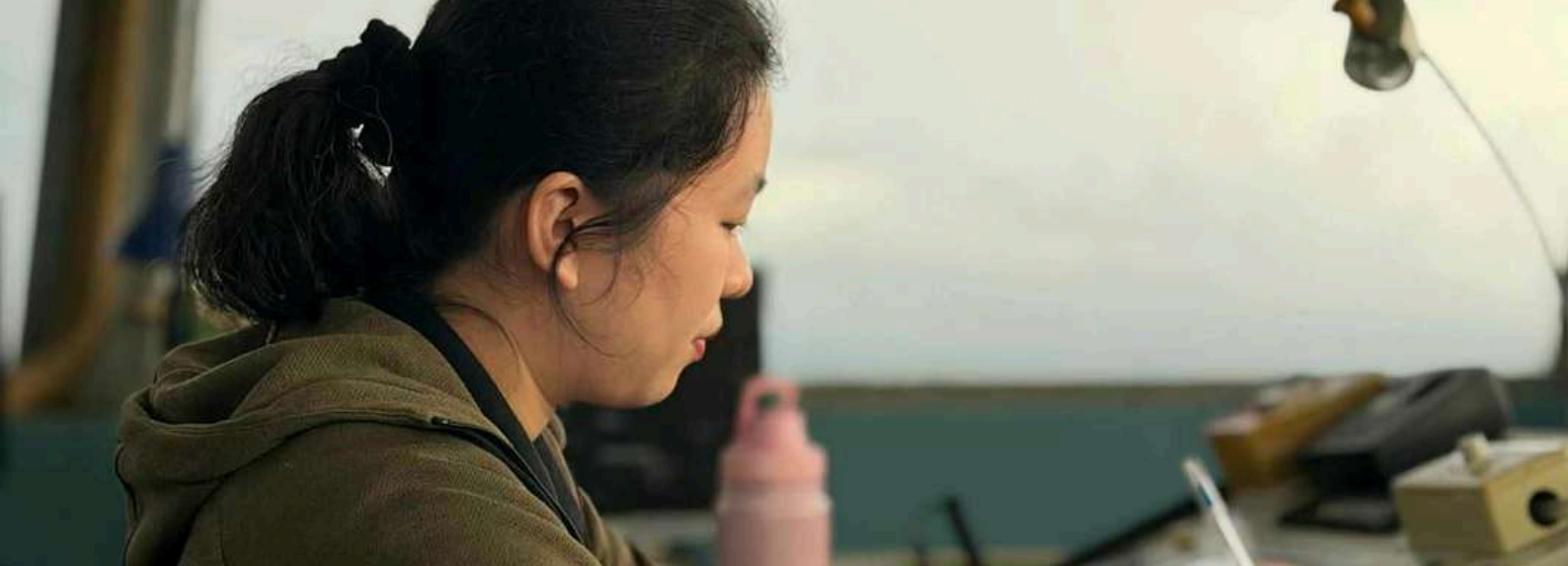
For those considering a job as an Air Traffic Controller, Katrinx has this to say: If you're still unsure about becoming an Air Traffic Controller, think again before deciding, because this is a long-term commitment. It will take a lot of time and effort to get to the place where you want to be, but once you're there, you'll be satisfied and proud of yourself. You need to have good discipline and great multitasking skills to become one. There are a lot of things you need to read and study, but everything can be learned if you really want something, and there will be no excuses. This is one of the hardest jobs a person can have in a lifetime, and it feels rewarding to live knowing you are an ATC. ATC is THAT job.”

Shifting towards the diverse archipelagic landscape of the country, **Juna Mae Alas** and **Chryss Emans Milanés** are emerging ATC professionals assigned to Tower/Approach facilities in the provinces.

Juna grew up in Tacloban City. Situated in the eastern part of the Philippines, Tacloban frequently bears the initial brunt of seasonal typhoons. Her goal to improve her skills by working in a high-pressure environment and to achieve stability led her to being an Air Traffic Controller.

Juna was initially assigned in operating the CADAS and manning the coordinator position for both tower and approach of Tacloban Airport. From the initial confusion of simultaneously ringing telephones to the high-stakes coordination of flights requiring special handling, Juna recalls the early days as a steep mountain of multitasking, where managing the timing for each aircraft was demanding, requiring both intense focus and composure. Through intensive live training and the guidance of her mentors, she mastered the art of pre-planning to ensure separation in the Tacloban TMA, eventually realizing that while the workload became manageable, it was never truly easy. Now, Juna is a fully-rated Tacloban Tower/Approach controller, having both a tower rating and a procedural approach rating.

For future ATCs, Juna has this to say: “Becoming an ATC is truly fulfilling work. Aside from seeing different aircraft landing, you get a front-row seat to nature's beauty, witnessing magnificent dawns and twilight over the Samar and Leyte islands from the Tacloban Tower. It also offers a great lifestyle; you have the freedom to manage your time. It's a career that combines high-level responsibility with an incredible view.”



Chryss is a new Air Traffic Controller assigned to Zamboanga Tower/Approach in the southwestern Philippines. His journey into air traffic control was sparked by proximity. Living near the final approach path of Runway 09 of Zamboanga, he spent his youth witnessing the intricate dance of arrivals and departures, a front-row seat that eventually led him to his current post. For Chryss, having ATC as his profession is a meaningful way to turn something he's always loved into something he can truly commit to.

In his assignment, Chryss has handled various types of traffic: commercial flights, general aviation, and military, including UAVs. He admits that everything was overwhelming at first, including getting used to how different types of traffic operate. His understanding on how the operations work in Zamboanga was strengthened by the help of his mentors through their insights and guidance. Now, Chryss holds an aerodrome rating for RPMZ. For Chryss, there is still a long road ahead, an opportunity to gain more experience to become an even more reliable ATC.

We asked Chryss about what he has to say for those who want to become an ATC: "I remember a senior controller once asked me, 'What does it feel like knowing the passengers you're guiding are on their way to be with their families? Do you feel that as a controller?' That question really stayed with me. It made me realize how meaningful and honestly how cool this job truly is because it gives a strong sense of purpose. Beyond the technical side, there's a quiet fulfillment in knowing that, in my own way, I'm helping bring people home safely to their loved ones."

Expanding our horizon now to the archipelago's furthest reaches, we connect with **Gil Christian Centina** and **Ma. Gladymae Asantor**, controllers assigned to Flight Service Stations.

Catarman is a quiet town situated in the central-eastern side of the country. There, Gil, a freshly minted ATC, mans the radio of Catarman FSS. He got into the profession having initially worked as an Administrative Support Staff of CAAP Area Center VIII, part of his job was to deliver documents to the tower cab of Tacloban tower. It was there that he got to witness controllers manage the skies.

“It made me realize how meaningful and honestly, how cool this job truly is because it gives a strong sense of purpose.”



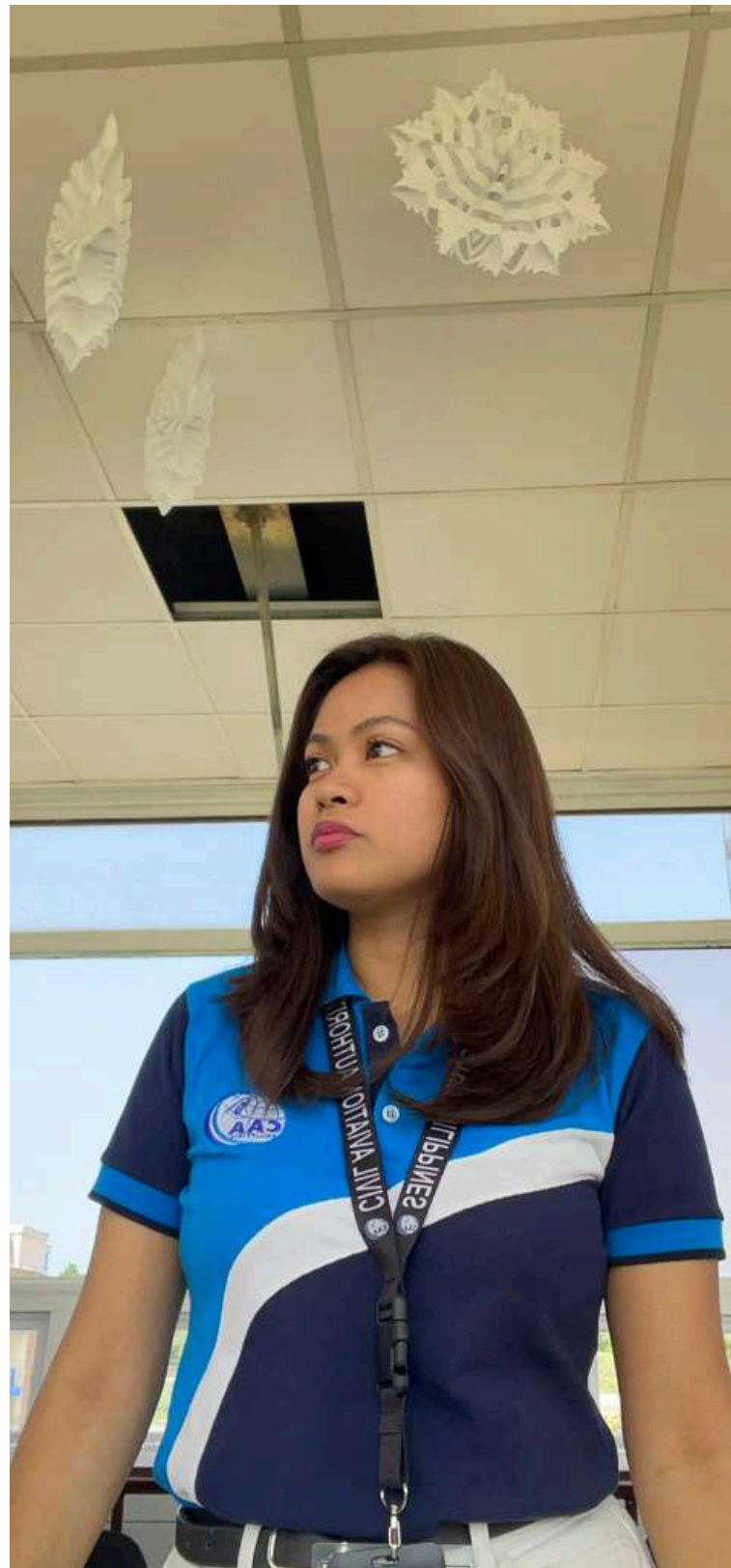
The scenery in Catarman FSS was a culture-shock for Gil. During the training program, the operations of a Flight Service Station was merely taught but never practiced in an exercise or dry-runs. One of the challenges that Gil experienced in Catarman was having to collate meteorological information hourly for their traffic. There are several steps that he has to take in order to get this information, one is an hourly weather update via a text message from PAGASA (The Philippines' official meteorological agency), another is to rely on the windcones. Soon, a VAISALA AWOS will be installed in Catarman to provide more accurate, real-time weather data. Gil got his rating to provide Flight Information Service in Catarman last September, 2025. Getting used to the operations went smoothly for Gil thanks to his mentors. Recently, he was designated as Catarman FSS's Facility Training Officer.

Gil has this to say for the future ATCs: “It’s not an easy path, but it’s incredibly rewarding. At first, you may focus on yourself, but eventually, you see the impact your work has on other people, even if they don't see it. Being an ATC gives you the chance to be part of something bigger than yourself. We also have a fatigue risk management system. It’s serious work, but it comes with systems that keep us safe and effective. Punctuality is essential; respect others’ time as much as your own. Patience, empathy, and kindness are equally important. The world can be harsh, and a little kindness goes a long way, especially in high-stakes operations.”

For **Ma. Gladymae Asantor**, the fascination began in her hometown of Basco, Batanes—the northernmost province in the country—where she spent her childhood peering up at the tower and wondering about the silent dialogue between the glass walls and the pilots above. What started as a fascination with the ‘cool’ factor of talking to aircraft quickly turned into a deep respect for the high-stakes responsibility of passenger safety. Driven by this purpose, she joined the CATS 17 program.

Now a rated Flight Service Provider as of October 2025, Gladymae manages Basco’s unique ‘one way in, one way out’ runway, a configuration that demands precision due to the surrounding mountainous terrain, Mount Iraya. Though she initially braced for the pressure of radio work, she found that the technical phraseology became second nature, allowing her to focus on the intricate timing of arrivals and departures. Recently appointed as Basco’s Facility Training Officer, she now balances the intensity of the morning rush with the quiet rhythm of the afternoons.

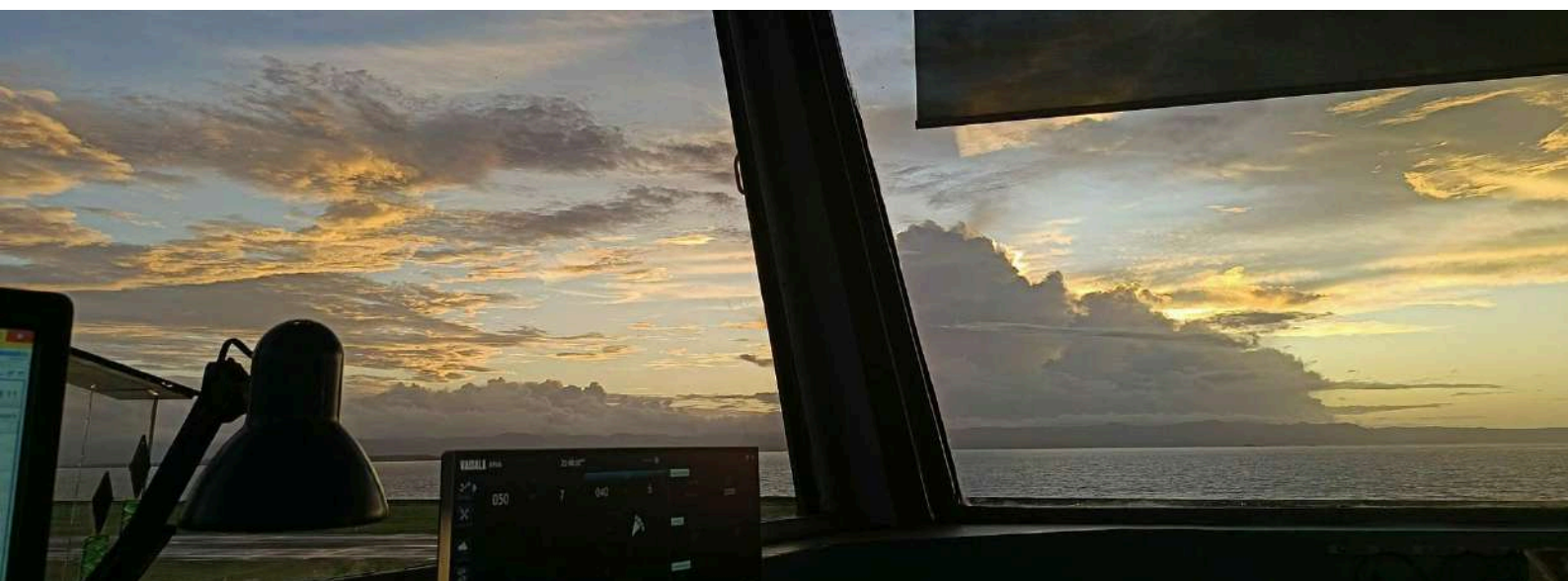
“Becoming an ATC is truly fulfilling work. It also offers a great lifestyle; you have the freedom to manage your time. It’s a career that combines high-level responsibility with an incredible view.”



For the future generation of ATCs, Gladymae has this to share: “For me, the coolest part is just being in the tower cab. You talk to pilots, move aircraft, and everything depends on you. It’s like being in the middle of a whole show. It’s quite stressful but also fulfilling. Plus, you get a view that anyone could dream of. I’ve learned during my training both in CATC as well as in the facility that a great controller needs to stay calm under pressure, think ahead, and pay attention to every detail since pilots rely on you. You also have to be disciplined and focused, but adaptable too, because every situation is different.”

From the vast reach of the Manila ACC to the mountain-guarded runways of Basco, this new generation has successfully transitioned from curious onlookers to guardians of the sky. By navigating the high-pressure broadcasting on live frequencies and mastering complex systems, they have proven that the future of Philippine aviation is in resolute hands. These emerging controllers ensure that while the faces behind the console change, the mission of safety remains constant. For those still looking up at the glass walls with wonder, the message is clear: the path is demanding, but there is no greater fulfillment than the quiet, rewarding purpose of bringing the world home.

“Being an ATC gives you the chance to be part of something bigger than yourself. We also have a fatigue risk management system.”





Wellness at FL350: ATC & Mental Health

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY
RENZ MARIONE BULSECO

In the world of aviation, safety is often measured in procedures, technology, and regulations. Yet behind every radar screen and tower window is a human being whose clarity of mind and sharpness of judgment are just as critical to the safety of flight. For air traffic controllers, mental wellness and fatigue management are not merely personal concerns: They are operational necessities.

Air traffic control is widely recognized as one of the most cognitively demanding professions in aviation. Controllers must maintain situational awareness, process multiple streams of information, anticipate aircraft trajectories, and communicate with precision, all in real time. Unlike many professions where tasks can be paused or revisited, decisions in air traffic control must often be made within seconds. The margin for hesitation is minimal, and the consequences of error can be severe.

Within the Philippines, the operational context adds unique dimensions to this challenge. The country's archipelagic geography requires controllers to manage a complex network of domestic and international flights crossing multiple sectors. Major hubs such as Ninoy Aquino International Airport handle dense traffic flows that must be carefully sequenced within constrained airspace, while controllers also coordinate with neighboring flight information regions across Southeast Asia.

“Unlike many professions where tasks can be paused or revisited, decisions in air traffic control must often be made within seconds. The margin for hesitation is minimal, and the consequences of error can be severe.”



Controllers working at the Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines facilities—including the country’s central radar operations at the Philippine Air Traffic Management Center—operate within a system that must balance high traffic demand with limited manpower resources. This reality often results in rotating shifts, overnight duties, and extended periods of intense concentration.

Shift work, while unavoidable in a 24-hour aviation environment, is one of the primary contributors to fatigue among controllers. Human circadian rhythms are naturally aligned with daytime activity and nighttime rest. Rotating schedules, particularly those involving night shifts followed by early morning duties, can disrupt sleep cycles. This makes it difficult for controllers to achieve consistent, restorative rest.

Fatigue manifests in subtle but significant ways. Reduced attention span, slower reaction times, diminished memory recall, and impaired decision-making are all documented effects of sleep deprivation. In a profession where maintaining mental acuity is essential, even moderate fatigue can affect performance.

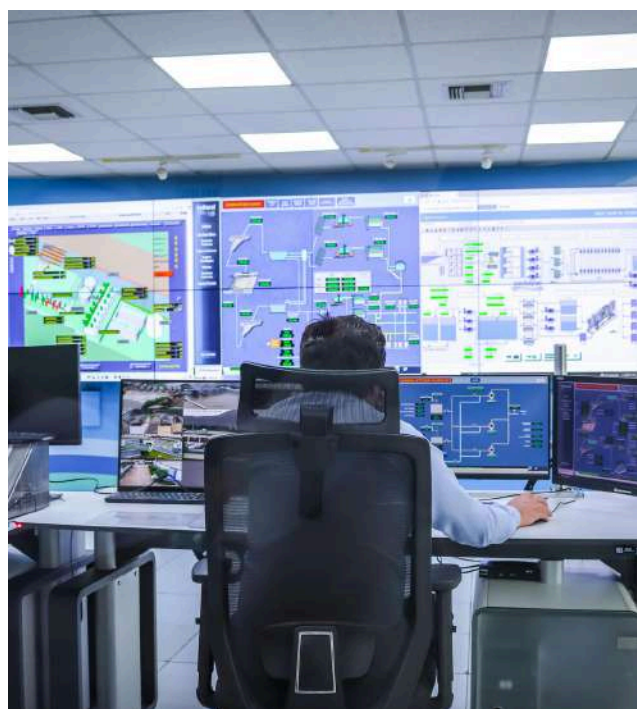
Mental wellness, however, goes beyond sleep alone. Controllers frequently operate in high-pressure environments where traffic surges, weather disruptions, and technical constraints require constant adaptability. Over time, prolonged exposure to operational stress can contribute to cognitive exhaustion or burnout if not addressed properly.

Organizations such as the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations have long emphasized the importance of fatigue risk management systems within air navigation service providers. These systems aim to recognize fatigue as an operational hazard and develop structured policies to mitigate it. Strategies include scientifically designed shift rotations, mandatory rest periods, and continuous monitoring of workload levels.

For controllers themselves, practical habits can also play a meaningful role in maintaining wellness. Prioritizing consistent sleep routines whenever possible is fundamental. Creating a sleep-friendly environment (dark, quiet, and free from digital distractions) can significantly improve sleep quality, especially for those who must rest during daytime hours after night shifts.

Physical activity is another important factor. Regular exercise helps regulate sleep cycles, reduce stress hormones, and improve overall cognitive performance. Even short periods of daily activity, whether a morning run, a gym session, or a simple walk, can contribute to better mental resilience.

Nutrition also deserves attention. Long shifts sometimes encourage reliance on quick caffeine boosts or convenience food, but balanced meals and proper hydration support sustained mental focus throughout operational periods.



Equally important is fostering a culture where controllers feel comfortable discussing fatigue and mental strain. Aviation culture traditionally values toughness and resilience, but modern safety philosophy recognizes that acknowledging human limits is a strength rather than a weakness. When controllers can speak openly about workload pressures or fatigue concerns, organizations gain valuable insight into operational realities that may otherwise remain unnoticed.

Peer support within the workplace also plays a vital role. Air traffic control is inherently a team profession. Controllers rely on one another during position reliefs, coordination tasks, and traffic management decisions. A supportive work environment—where colleagues check in with one another and maintain strong professional camaraderie—helps mitigate stress and promotes collective vigilance.

Ultimately, maintaining wellness in air traffic control is a shared responsibility. Institutions must design systems that respect human limitations, while controllers themselves must actively safeguard their physical and mental health. When both sides work together, the result is a safer and more sustainable operational environment.

In aviation, we often say that safety is built in layers. Technology, procedures, and training form essential defenses, but none are as immediate or as indispensable as the alert mind of a controller. Ensuring that controllers remain mentally sharp, well-rested, and supported is therefore not only a matter of personal well-being—it is a commitment to the safety of every aircraft entrusted to their care.





In Retrospect

BY RENZ MARIONE BULSECO

As we reach the closing pages of the fourth issue of *SkyTrack*, allow me to first extend my sincere thanks to you, our dear readers, for staying with us through every story, insight, and reflection we have shared. Your continued support gives this publication its purpose. And before we fully wrap up this issue, it feels necessary to pause and reflect on a recent event that has once again placed our profession under a stark and unforgiving light.

On March 22, 2026, what should have been a routine landing at LaGuardia Airport turned into a fatal chain of events. An Air Canada CRJ-900, arriving from Montréal, collided with an Oshkosh Striker 1500 fire truck during its landing roll on Runway 04. It was an incident that claimed the lives of both pilots and immediately raised difficult questions about coordination on the ground. Emerging details point to an understaffed tower during peak hours, where the controller on duty was managing more than one control position simultaneously, stretching human capacity in an already high-tempo environment. Initial accounts suggest the controller did what he could within the limits of time, workload, and information available, yet the sequence of events still unraveled into tragedy.

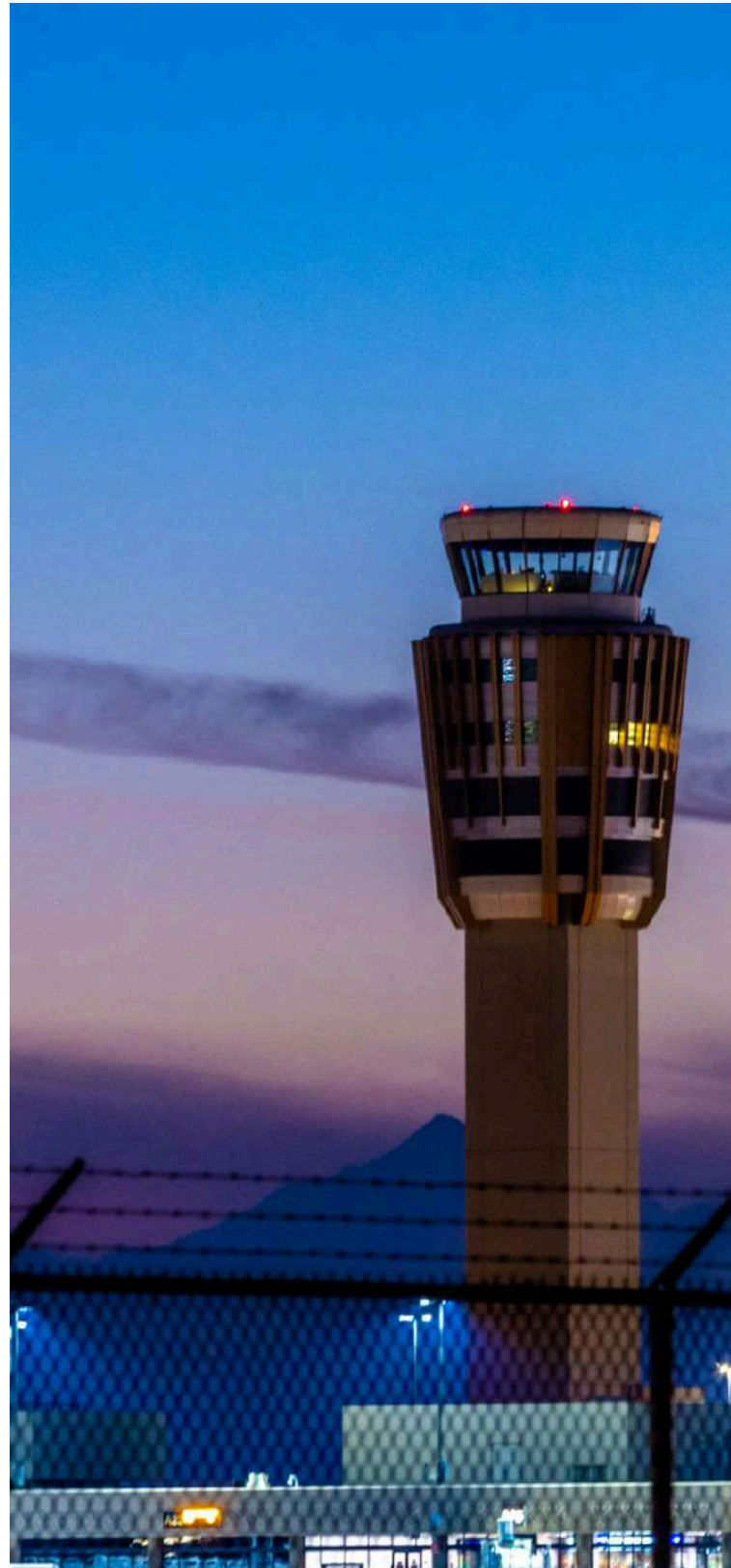
In an environment where seconds define outcomes, the incident forces a deeper, more uncomfortable inquiry: **just how critical and how unforgiving is the role of the air traffic controller?**

The recent accident at LaGuardia left a quiet but lasting sting. After more than a decade working as an air traffic controller, I couldn't help but put myself in the tower controller's shoes during that shift: imagining the decisions, the timing, the weight of every transmission. When I was younger, I used to watch Air Crash Investigation on Nat Geo with curiosity, eager to learn from each episode. Now, it feels different. Now, it feels personal.

Across the globe, our profession faces ongoing challenges: understaffing, increasing traffic demands, and the pressure to do more with less. Yet, as air traffic controllers, we are trained to think ahead. To anticipate. To plan. And to adapt in real time. Safety is never negotiable, so we become resourceful, creative, and relentlessly focused, even as margins grow thinner. *And thinner.*

It's a profession that remains largely unseen and often underrated. There is no applause or accolades for the countless problems we solve in a four-dimensional space (altitude, speed, direction, and time) because it is simply what we are expected to do. Every shift. It often feels like playing a game where there are no second chances. It's like navigating to the final level with everything on the line. And when something does go wrong, or nearly does, it doesn't just end with the shift. It lingers in passing thoughts, in quiet moments, and, worse, even in dreams.

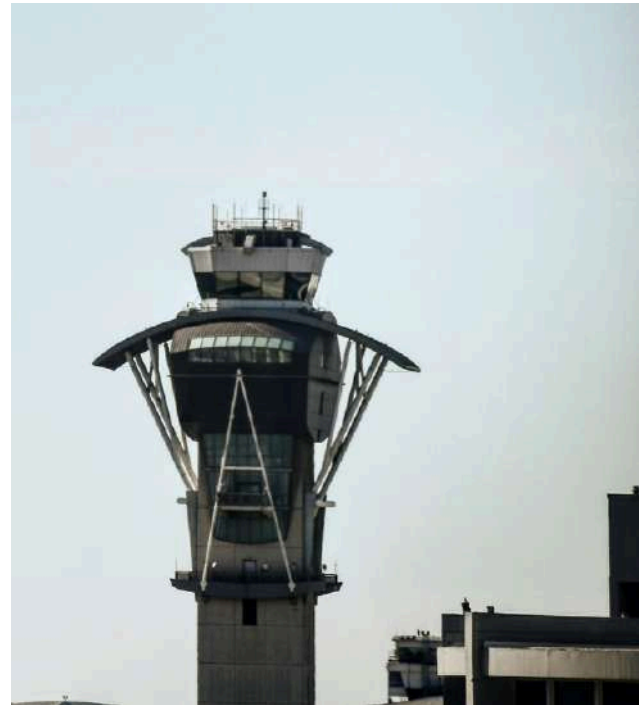
“We are always reminded to put ourselves in a position where catering to each traffic must be done with extra care because our friends, loved ones, or even our families could be on board.”



“It’s a profession that remains largely unseen and often underrated. There is no applause or accolades for the countless problems we solve in a four-dimensional space...”

This is the part that is hardest to explain to those outside the profession and the hardest pill to swallow. The truth is, while being an air traffic controller is deeply fulfilling, **it can also be quietly consuming.** Without strong mental resilience and fortitude and a reliable support system, the weight of the job can take its toll over time. That is why initiatives like Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) and growing conversations around mental health and wellbeing are so important. They remind us that even those trained to stay composed need space to process, recover, and be supported.

Because in this line of work, no two shifts are ever the same. And every shift, no matter how routine it may seem, leaves a mark that stays with you long after you’ve signed off.



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