

SkyTrack

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF PATCA

IFATCA 2026
ANNUAL CONFERENCE

WHEN THE RADAR
GOES DARK

WHEN THE
FREQUENCIES FELL
SILENT



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When technology fails, air traffic controllers fall back on something far older than radar screens and digital systems: skill, discipline, and procedure. This feature explores how controllers maintain safety during degraded operations, from communication failures to non-radar separation, proving that resilience is not found in the equipment itself, but in the professionals trained to work without it.



From the Editor



There is a quiet misconception about resilience: that it announces itself in grand gestures, in moments that require applause. In truth, it rarely does. In our profession, resilience is rarely loud. It does not arrive with spectacle, nor does it linger for recognition. It is found instead in the steady cadence of routine: in the headset adjusted at the start of a shift, in the familiar sweep of a radar scope or tower cab, in the unspoken understanding that whatever the day brings, the work continues.

Air traffic control has always been a discipline of precision, but beneath that precision lies something more enduring. Systems failures. The weather refuses to cooperate. Frequencies grow crowded, sectors stretch, and the margin for error narrows in ways both seen and unseen. Yet the rhythm holds. Instructions are issued, readbacks returned, and separation maintained. Not because conditions are ideal, but because they rarely are. Resilience, in this sense, is not the absence of disruption. It is the quiet refusal to let disruption define the outcome.

Beyond the console, resilience takes on a more personal shape. It is carried in the weight of long nights and early mornings, in the mental recalibration after time away, in the balancing act between professional demands and lives that exist fully outside the facility. It is built over years, sometimes tested in moments, and often sustained in ways that go unnoticed even by those who embody it. There is strength in that subtlety, in the understanding that not all endurance needs to be declared to be real.

There are, of course, moments when resilience is no longer quiet, when it is forced into the open by events that leave a lasting imprint. We remember them not only for their scale, but for what followed: the return of voice where there was once silence, the rebuilding of systems, and the persistence of people who chose to continue. These moments remind us that resilience is not a fixed trait, but a practice. One that evolves, adapts, and endures.

This issue of **SkyTrack** reflects that continuum. From the systems that hold under pressure, to the people who navigate its demands, to the stories that define our collective memory, resilience reveals itself not as a single act, but as a pattern. It is always repeated, refined, and quietly upheld. And somewhere between the first call-up and the final handover, it becomes clear: resilience is not what we reach for in extraordinary times. It is what we rely on every day to keep the skies moving.

RENZ MARIONE BULSECO

Editor-in-Chief



The 65th IFATCA Annual Conference

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY RENZ MARIONE BULSECO

I almost did not make it to Bucharest.

What was supposed to be a straightforward journey turned into a test of patience. Flights were cancelled, rebooked, and delayed again. Airport screens flickered between hope and uncertainty.

At one point, I found myself staring at a departure board that felt more like a roulette wheel than a plan. There is a particular kind of exhaustion that comes from travel disruptions, the kind that seeps in quietly, where you are no longer sure if you are chasing a destination or simply moving because you already started.

But somehow, through a chain of reroutes and persistence, I arrived. And as I stepped into the venue of the 65th Annual Conference of the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations, held from April 20 to 24, 2026, in Bucharest, Romania, I realized that the journey itself had already set the tone for what this conference represented. Aviation is never perfect. It is adaptive. It is resilient. And so are we.



These are no longer peripheral discussions. They are central to how we sustain our workforce. In a profession that demands precision and composure, acknowledging the human side of the job is not a luxury. It is a necessity.

This year's theme, ***"Air Traffic Controllers - Attract Them, Value Them, Keep Them,"*** resonated deeply from the very first session. Across different regions, the challenges were familiar. Staffing shortages, increasing traffic demand, evolving technologies, and the quiet pressure of maintaining safety in an environment that rarely slows down. Yet beneath those challenges was a shared understanding that the future of our profession depends not only on systems and procedures, but on people.

I was joined by fellow Philippine delegates, Venna Christine Nacorda from Bacolod Approach and Eugene Gaspan from Manila Approach. There is always something grounding about seeing familiar faces in a room filled with global counterparts. It reminds you that while we represent a nation, we also carry individual stories shaped by our own control rooms, frequencies, and everyday realities.

This year was particularly meaningful for me on a personal level. I formally took on the role of Chair of the IFATCA Training Task Force. It is both an honor and a responsibility that I do not take lightly. Training has always been the backbone of our profession, yet it continues to evolve as rapidly as the industry itself.

My goal is simple but ambitious. I want to collaborate closely with the Professional and Legal Committee and explore ways to diversify training opportunities for our Member Associations. The needs of controllers today are no longer one-dimensional. We are no longer just technical operators. We are decision makers, communicators, and, in many ways, the final safety net.

One of the highlights for me was moderating a panel discussion for the first time. Sitting alongside leading experts from various ANSPs and training departments, I was not just facilitating conversation but absorbing perspectives that challenged and expanded my own. There is a different kind of learning that happens when you are in the middle of dialogue rather than simply listening from the sidelines. It forces you to engage, to question, and to connect ideas across different operational contexts.

Beyond personal milestones, this conference marked another proud moment for the Philippines. For the third consecutive year, PATCA secured an elected seat in the Technical and Operations Committee. Representing this committee once again, I could not help but reflect on how far we have come. Each year, our voice grows stronger, not because we speak louder, but because we contribute meaningfully. The Asia Pacific region continues to assert its presence within the federation, and being part of that momentum is something I deeply value.

All working papers from Committees A, B, and C were accepted, which speaks volumes about the collective effort of the Member Associations. What stood out even more was the increasing number of delegates expressing interest in participating in committee work. It is a subtle but important shift. It shows that more controllers are not only attending conferences but actively engaging in shaping the direction of our profession.

There was also a strong emphasis on initiatives that reflect the changing landscape of aviation. The Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity Task Force and the Mental Health and Wellbeing Task Force were prominently showcased.

For the Philippines, participation in these conferences is not just about representation. It is about contribution. We bring with us our own challenges, our own innovations, and our own perspectives.



These are no longer peripheral discussions. They are central to how we sustain our workforce. In a profession that demands precision and composure, acknowledging the human side of the job is not a luxury. It is a necessity.

As the conference progressed, there was a growing sense of cohesion among delegates. Conversations extended beyond formal sessions into coffee breaks, hallway exchanges, and late evening discussions.

These moments, often informal, are where real connections are built. You begin to see that despite differences in geography and systems, the essence of our work is remarkably similar. The closing of the conference was marked by both reflection and anticipation. It ended on a high note, reinforcing the global voice of air traffic controllers. There was a shared understanding that, while challenges persist, the federation's collective strength continues to grow.

Looking ahead, the next conference will be held in Uganda, and in 2028, Australia will host the event in Sydney. Each location represents more than just a venue. It represents a continuation of dialogue, collaboration, and shared purpose.

As I made my way back, with a much smoother journey this time, I thought about why these conferences matter. It is easy to see them as annual gatherings or professional obligations. But in reality, they are more than that. They are spaces where ideas converge, where experiences are exchanged, and where the future of our profession is quietly shaped.

For the Philippines, participation in these conferences is not just about representation. It is about contribution. We bring with us our own challenges, our own innovations, and our own perspectives. At the same time, we return home with lessons learned from others, insights that we can adapt, and a renewed sense of purpose.

There is still so much for us to learn. But there is also so much that we can offer.

And perhaps that is the real value of being there. Not just to witness the global stage, but to take part in it.



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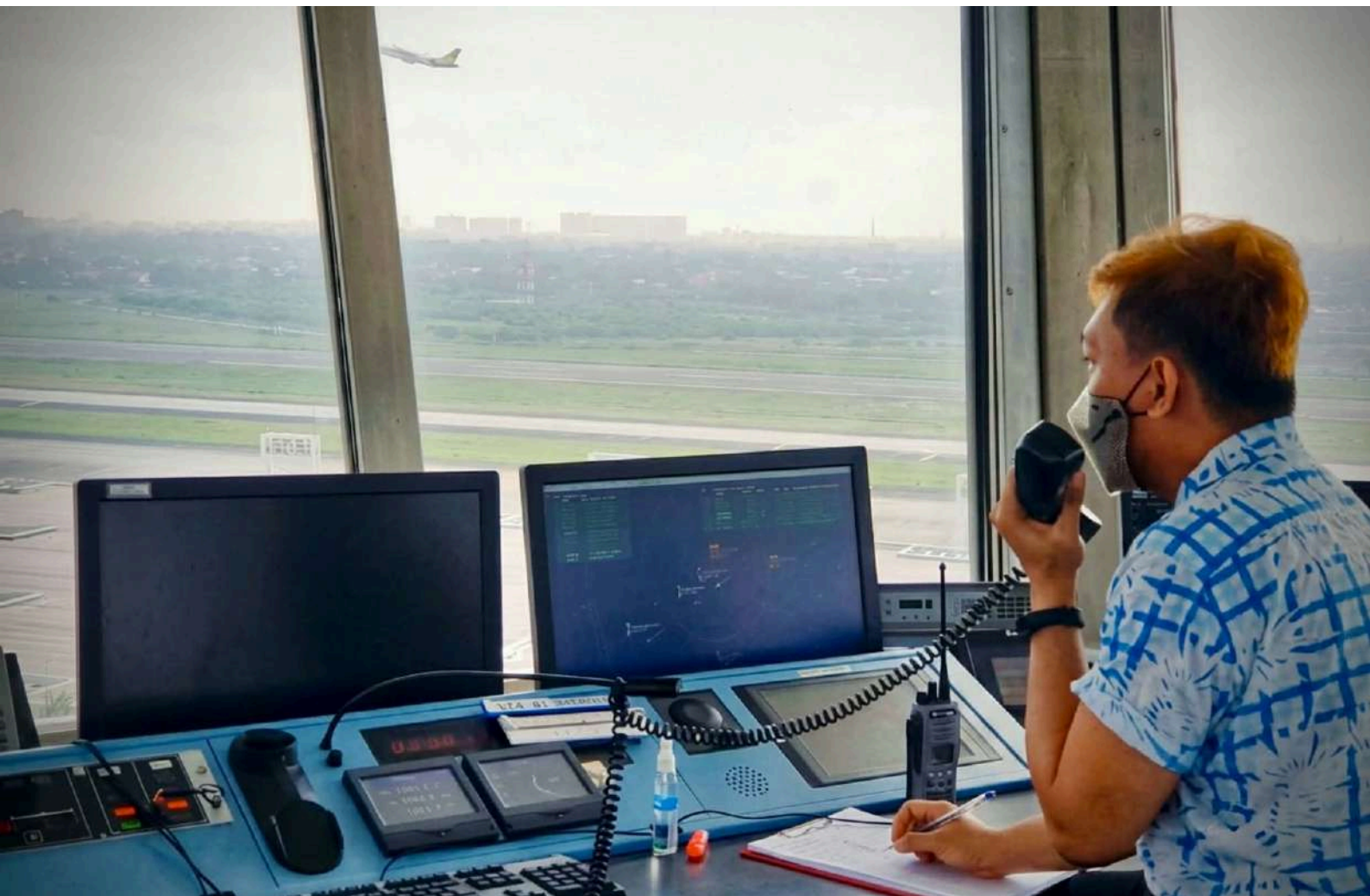


(top) the Executive Team of IFATCA Asia Pacific Region.

(mid) the delegates from Asia Pacific Region in Bucharest, Romania.

(bottom) Team PATCA with Olga Toki, a colleague from Greece.

Before the Alarm Sounds: Recognizing Crisis in the Aviation Industry



WORDS AND PHOTOS BY
NEIL JOAZ LAGUNDINO



One clear, starry evening, as I put the finishing touches on my manuscript for my pre-oral defense, I was momentarily distracted by the beauty right in front of me as I sat next to my MacBook on the porch. The moon hung brightly in the night sky, its radiance mirrored by the tranquil waters of the sea below. It was a scene of serenity - one that invited reflection.

My thoughts drifted back to a discussion from one of my Aviation Management classes during my master's studies. Among the many topics we explored, one stood out for its enduring relevance: crisis. At a time when industries across the globe continue to face uncertainty and disruption, the concept feels more significant than ever.

The contrast between the calmness of that evening and the realities of crisis sparked a realization. In aviation, as in life, periods of stability can quickly give way to unforeseen challenges. What ultimately determines the outcome is not the absence of crisis, but how individuals and organizations prepare for, respond to, and learn from it.

Today, the crisis in aviation, particularly within the airspace system, extends far beyond isolated operational disruptions. It encompasses a complex web of challenges, from rapid technological advancements and infrastructure limitations to staffing shortages, geopolitical tensions, cybersecurity threats, and the relentless growth in air traffic demand. These issues collectively test both the administrative and operational foundations of the aviation industry. Aviation is an industry where precision is paramount and where even the smallest oversight can carry significant consequences. Success is measured daily through the safe, efficient, and seamless movement of people and goods across the globe. Yet perhaps the greatest threat is not the crisis itself, but the failure to recognize that a crisis exists.

“The contrast between the calmness of that evening and the realities of crisis sparked a realization. In aviation, as in life, periods of stability can quickly give way to unforeseen challenges.”

When warning signs are ignored, vulnerabilities deepen and resilience weakens. In aviation, crises do not emerge overnight; they often develop gradually across different sectors and stages of operation. Understanding them requires looking beyond individual incidents and examining the broader system as a whole. To appreciate the true scope of the challenge, it is necessary to synthesize these interconnected dimensions and explore how they shape the industry's present and future.

New Moon (the blur) - In this phase, the illuminated side faces away from the Earth, making the Moon nearly invisible. A problem doesn't usually persist until the cracks or loopholes in the system start to show. Aging technology, staffing shortages, and weather disruptions brought on by climate change, all these issues were particularly foreseen. This picture is quite familiar in the Philippine setting and surprisingly across countries around the globe.

First Quarter (the warning) - A phase in which half of the Moon appears illuminated. In ancient symbolism, this is usually associated with decision-making, action, and overcoming challenges. In the current rising passenger demand, technological factors are at the brink of disrupting air traffic flow. As innovation and upgrades of air traffic management centers and systems are necessary to meet the consistently rising demand for air transportation, other territories fall short in this aspect. Additionally, territorial conflicts and geopolitical fragmentation pose an encompassing issue for fuel price surges and airspace disputes. All these challenges are seemingly unending and too overwhelming to overcome.





Full Moon (the manifestation) – Like a full moon illuminating every detail of the night sky, the current state of aviation has brought long-standing challenges into clear view. Recent aircraft accidents, staffing shortages, and technological disruptions in flight-planning systems reveal vulnerabilities that can no longer be overlooked. What once appeared to be isolated issues now reflect a broader crisis affecting the aviation industry as a whole. As air traffic demand continues to rise, so does the pressure on operational and administrative systems. The challenges are evident; the question now is whether the industry can respond with sustainable, long-term solutions before the consequences become even greater.

Effort and intentionality – Aviation crises, whether caused by technical failures, human error, or external disruptions, serve as powerful reminders that safety is never accidental. Behind every successful flight lies a culture built on effort and intentionality – two principles that remain indispensable when the industry faces its greatest fiascos.

In times of crisis, the aviation sector is tested not only by its technology but also by the dedication of the people who operate it. Pilots, engineers, air traffic controllers, and airline leaders must act with purpose, discipline, and unwavering commitment to established procedures. Their efforts, often unseen by the public, form the backbone of aviation safety and recovery.

Every lesson learned from a crisis reinforces the importance of preparation and deliberate decision-making. The industry's resilience is not the result of luck but of intentional actions taken long before an emergency occurs. As aviation continues to evolve, its ability to overcome crises will depend on maintaining a culture where effort and intentionality guide every decision.

Crisis, much like the phases of the Moon, unfolds in shifting forms - subtle at first, then increasingly unmistakable. Yet its full visibility is often mistaken for clarity, as if illumination itself were a guarantee of understanding. In reality, its brightness does not reveal majesty but exposes what the surrounding darkness could no longer conceal.

The question, then, is not how we wait for a crisis to fully manifest, but how we respond when it does. How do we move from being momentarily stunned by the challenges directly before us to transforming that same illumination into direction? More importantly, how do we learn to use the very light that reveals problems as the force that guides us toward solutions?

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When The Radar Goes Dark

WORDS BY JEVERLY CHASE ERIN QUIZON

The radar freezes.

In the blink of an eye, the targets disappear.

The frequency is still alive – aircraft calling, requests keep on coming, but this time, the screen no longer answers back. Suddenly, you can no longer work with the technology you’ve been relying on—no more vectoring, no more headings.

You are now working with your memory, timing, judgment, trust, and your fundamentals. It is like going into a maze you’ve completed a hundred times. But this time, you’re going in blind.

The shift becomes intensely human.

“Contrary to what many might imagine, resilience is not the absence of fear, doubt, or pressure. It is the ability to continue making sound decisions despite them.”

Degraded operations do not begin with chaos. They begin with uncertainty. It creates a small crack in your situational awareness. They often begin quietly. It may be a frozen screen, delayed radar returns, or static on the frequency. Nothing about the airspace changes instantly, but your ability to see it does.

Radar, our best friend, is one of the foundational technologies of modern air traffic control. It acts as a primary tool for maintaining airspace safety while ensuring the orderly and expeditious movement of traffic. It provides an instant confirmation. It feels like going into that maze with a high-tech gadget in hand, confidently saying, “I got this, I know where I am, and I know where the others are, and I know my way out.”

Stripping away radar, the controller begins reconstructing reality through pilot reports and estimates – like painting a moving picture in your mind while maintaining composure and slowly transitioning to manual procedures by drastically slowing down air traffic and increasing the physical distance between the aircraft. Goodbye, 5NM.

If radar failure feels like entering a familiar maze blindfolded, teamwork becomes the voice that guides you through it. Controllers, supervisors, adjacent sectors, technical personnel, and contingencies work together to rebuild the operational picture and ensure the continued safety of every flight under their responsibility.

In some approach control sectors, such as ours in Davao, support extends beyond the radar unit itself. During major contingencies, tower controllers may temporarily assume approach control functions as part of a backup arrangement. Known as **Approach Delta**, this backup unit provides approach control services during situations such as total VHF outages at the ATMC, as well as emergencies including major earthquakes, structural fires, force majeure events, and other disruptions that affect normal operations.



While the loss of radar technology may limit what individual controllers can see, effective teamwork, coordination, and well-established contingency procedures help restore the shared situational awareness needed to maintain a safe and orderly flow of air traffic.

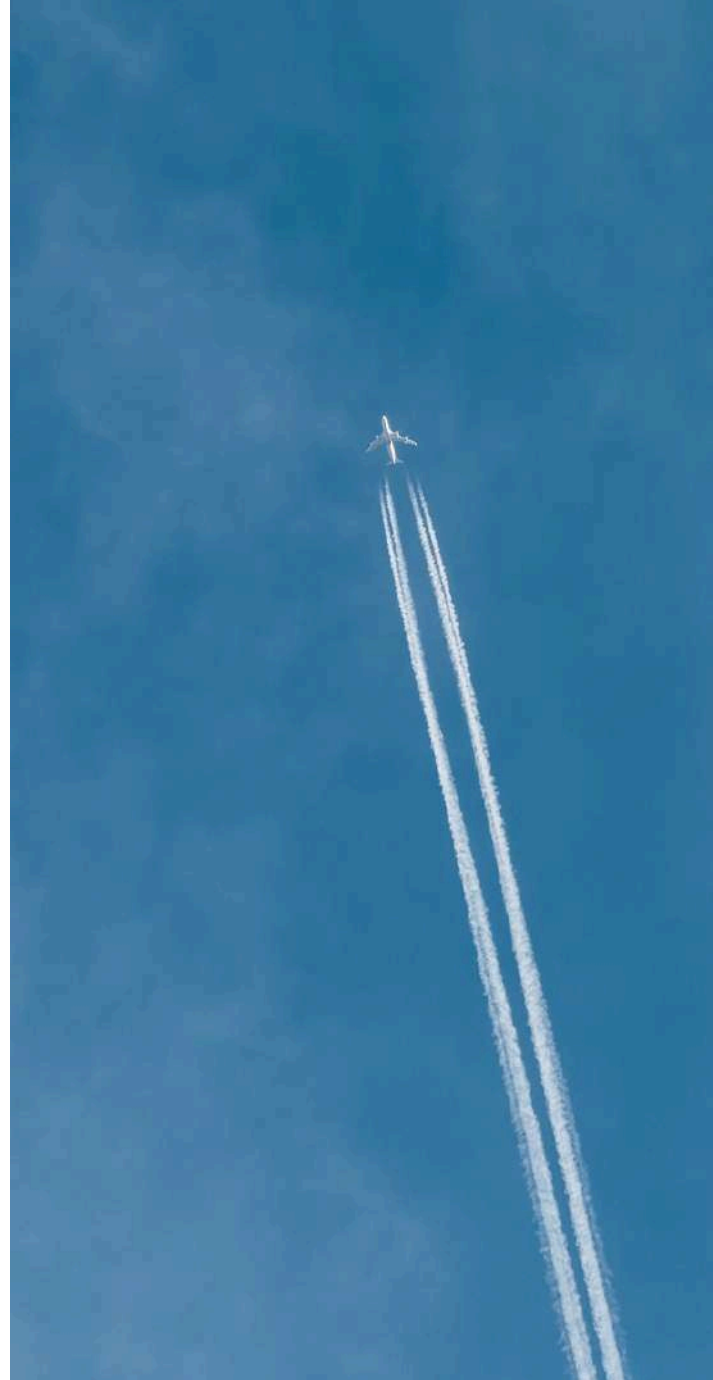
Beyond procedures, coordination, and separation standards lies the human side of technical resilience. Contrary to what many might imagine, resilience is not the absence of fear, doubt, or pressure. It is the ability to continue making sound decisions despite them. When systems fail, controllers do not suddenly become fearless. Heart rates rise, workloads increase, and the margin for error feels smaller. Yet training takes over.

During my training for the surveillance approach, there was a scenario where my evaluator suddenly turned off the radar monitor. I had no choice but to recall every aircraft I could remember and immediately identify any conflicting traffic. I looked at her as if pleading for her to turn the monitor back on. Instead, she replied, “*Unsa man? Imagina imong mama sakay sa arrival, imong papa sa departure, imong...*” (“What? Imagine your mother is on the arriving aircraft, your father is on the departing aircraft, your...”), continuing until she had practically gone through my entire family tree.

I managed to recall some of my traffic, but I would be lying if I said I passed.

I failed.

Yet that failure opened my eyes to the realities of the profession. The tough love my evaluator showed that day taught me to treat every aircraft under my responsibility with care. Behind every call sign are not just passengers, but people with families, loved ones, and lives waiting for them at their destination.



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“Yet that failure opened my eyes to the realities of the profession. The tough love my evaluator showed that day taught me to treat every aircraft under my responsibility with care.”

In an era of advanced surveillance systems, digital communications, and increasing automation, it is easy to assume that degraded operations belong to a bygone age. The reality, however, is that no system is immune to failure. Power interruptions occur. Communications can degrade. Weather can affect equipment performance. Technical failures can still happen without warning. These events are uncommon, but they remain a possibility that every controller must be prepared to face.

This is precisely why these scenarios continue to matter today. The objective of training for degraded operations is not to anticipate failure, but to ensure readiness should it occur. Modern technology has transformed the way we manage air traffic, making operations safer and more efficient than ever before. Yet the foundation of safety has never rested on technology alone. It rests on professionals who understand the principles behind the tools they use.

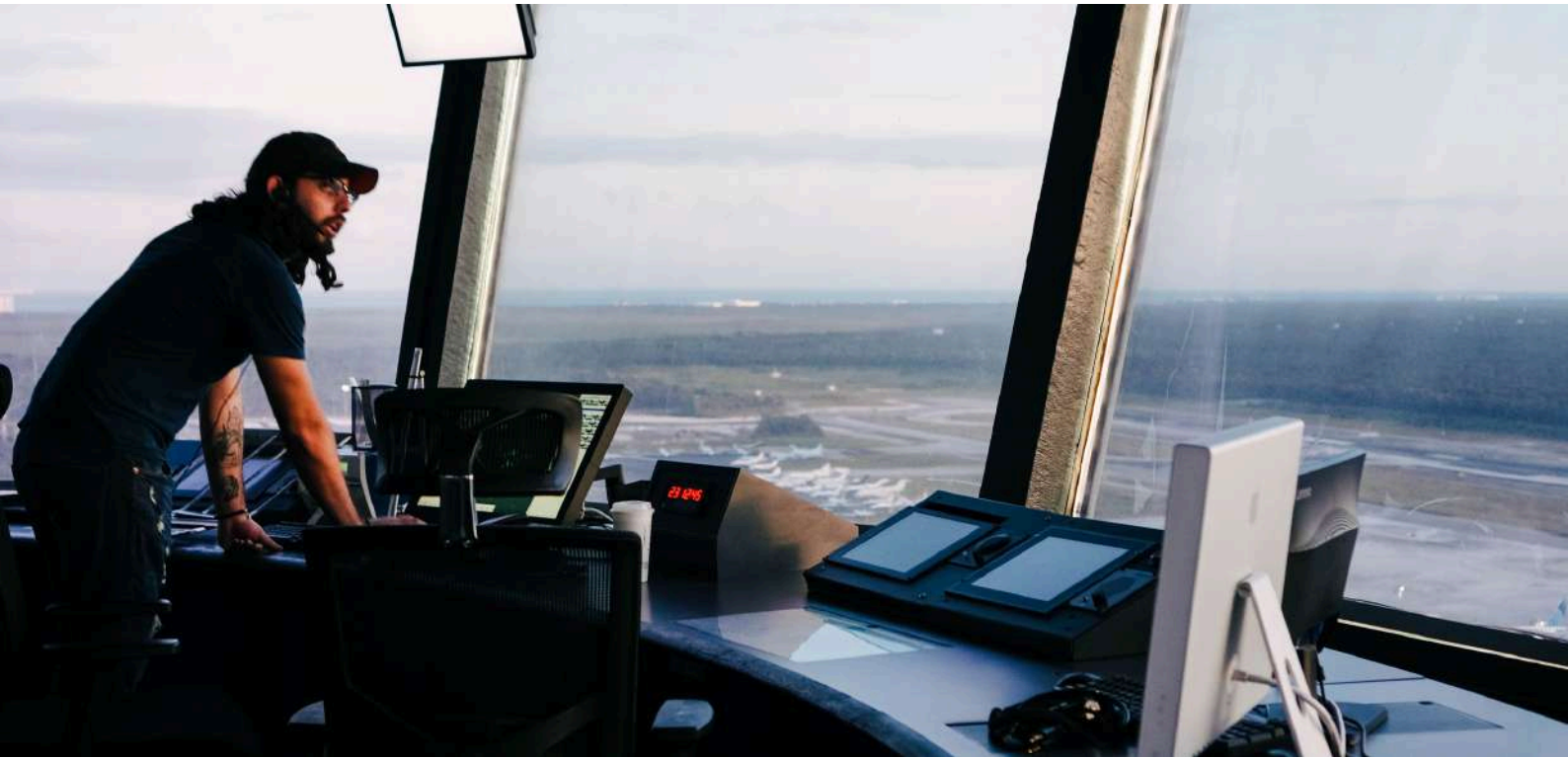
Our profession remains resilient because controllers are trained beyond the technology they operate. Radar enhances situational awareness, but it does not replace judgment. Automation reduces workload, but it does not replace responsibility. When systems perform as intended, they make our jobs more efficient. When they do not, we fall back on the same fundamentals that have guided the profession for generations: communication, coordination, discipline, and sound decision-making.

Perhaps that is the enduring lesson of degraded operations. Technical resilience is not measured by whether a system fails, but by how effectively people adapt when it does.

When the radar goes dark, the profession reveals its rawest form—not through the technology that supports it, but through the people who keep it safe when that technology can no longer help them.

Training Under Pressure

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY
RENZ MARIONE BULSECO



There is a particular kind of silence inside a simulator room before the exercise begins. Screens are filled with targets. Strip holders are arranged carefully on the table. Frequencies are checked one final time. Then the instructor leans back, watches the trainee settle into position, and quietly says the words every air traffic controller remembers hearing for the first time:

“Okay. Your control.”

What follows is rarely graceful.

The trainee scans too slowly. Misses a readback. Hesitates on coordination. Aircraft converge faster than expected. A straightforward traffic sequence suddenly becomes tangled like spaghetti beneath workload, uncertainty, and the growing realization that air traffic control is not something fully learned in classrooms. It is absorbed gradually through exposure, repetition, correction, and pressure.



And perhaps that is the uncomfortable truth about the profession: resilience in air traffic control is not discovered during emergencies alone. It is built much earlier, often in ordinary training days, where confidence collapses repeatedly before it finally stabilizes.

Across the Philippines, the challenge of training new air traffic controllers has become increasingly complicated. Traffic levels continue to rise while many facilities remain critically understaffed. Operational demands stretch available personnel thin, leaving little room for the lengthy and demanding process of developing trainees. A certified controller handling a busy sector today is no longer simply controlling traffic. More often than not, they are simultaneously mentoring, evaluating, correcting, and carrying the emotional burden of shaping the next generation beneath real operational pressure.

Training has always existed alongside operations. But today, the strain feels heavier.

Senior air traffic controllers often describe a vastly different environment from two or three decades ago. Back then, traffic volume was lower in many facilities, coordination was less digitized, and training followed a harder, almost unforgiving culture of immersion. You learned quickly because you had to. Mistakes were corrected bluntly. Some instructors raised their voices. Others simply stayed silent and allowed trainees to unravel beneath pressure until lessons embedded themselves permanently into memory.

That system was resilient, certainly. But there was also attrition.

Many trainees simply did not survive the process.

Today's training environment is slowly evolving into something more structured and deliberate. The industry has begun recognizing the importance of Competency-Based Training and Assessment, more commonly known as CBTA, a framework that shifts focus away from memorization alone and toward observable competencies such as communication, situational awareness, workload management, decision-making, and teamwork.

In a profession where uncertainty is constant, this shift matters.

Air traffic control was once taught heavily through procedural repetition. Learn the rules. Memorize phraseologies. Apply separation. But modern operations demand something broader. Controllers today must adapt to rapidly changing traffic patterns, increasingly complex airspace structures, evolving technologies, and operational disruptions that rarely unfold exactly as manuals describe them.

“And perhaps that is the uncomfortable truth about the profession: resilience in air traffic control is not discovered during emergencies alone. It is built much earlier, often in ordinary training days, where confidence collapses repeatedly before it finally stabilizes.”



CBTA attempts to train for that reality. The goal is no longer simply producing controllers who know procedures. The goal is to develop professionals capable of thinking clearly when conditions are no longer ideal. Still, frameworks alone cannot train a controller. The profession remains deeply human. Somewhere between simulator sessions, endorsement boards, and operational evaluations exists the relationship that quietly defines almost every controller's career: the bond between trainer and trainee. Every controller remembers one instructor vividly. Sometimes with gratitude. Sometimes with fear. Often with both.

The best trainers understand that instruction is not merely about correcting mistakes. It is about recognizing when pressure produces growth and when it begins damaging confidence altogether. There is an art to knowing when to intervene immediately and when to allow a trainee to struggle long enough to learn.

That balance has become increasingly difficult in today's environment. The generational gap inside facilities is more noticeable now than ever before. Senior controllers trained under older systems often carry expectations shaped by stricter operational cultures. Younger trainees, meanwhile, enter the profession differently. They are technologically adaptive, highly connected, and often more open about mental fatigue and emotional stress than previous generations ever allowed themselves to be. This difference occasionally creates friction.





“The best trainers understand that instruction is not merely about correcting mistakes. It is about recognizing when pressure produces growth and when it begins damaging confidence altogether.”

Some senior controllers interpret hesitation as weakness. Some younger trainees interpret blunt instruction as hostility. Yet beneath these misunderstandings lies an important realization: both generations are responding to the operational realities that shaped them.

The older generation survived through endurance because the system demanded endurance. The newer generation seeks sustainability because today's system increasingly demands adaptability. Neither perspective is entirely wrong. And perhaps resilience in modern air traffic control now requires bridging both philosophies together.

Because despite advances in training methodologies, one reality remains unchanged: air traffic control is still learned through exposure to pressure. Simulators can recreate traffic conflicts. Training exercises can replicate emergencies. But no simulation fully captures the psychological weight of hearing a frequency overload for the first time while knowing every decision now belongs to you. That moment changes people.

It is also why mentorship matters far beyond technical competence. The strongest training environments are rarely the loudest or the harshest. They are the ones where trainees are allowed to fail constructively, where criticism remains purposeful rather than personal, and where instructors understand that confidence is not built through comfort, but neither is it built through humiliation.

Across Philippine air traffic facilities, countless On-the-Job Training Instructors and Facility Training Officers quietly carry this responsibility every day. They teach phraseology and procedures, yes, but they also teach composure. Tempo. Judgment. Discipline. Sometimes, even survival within the emotional demands of the profession itself.

Much of this work goes unnoticed.

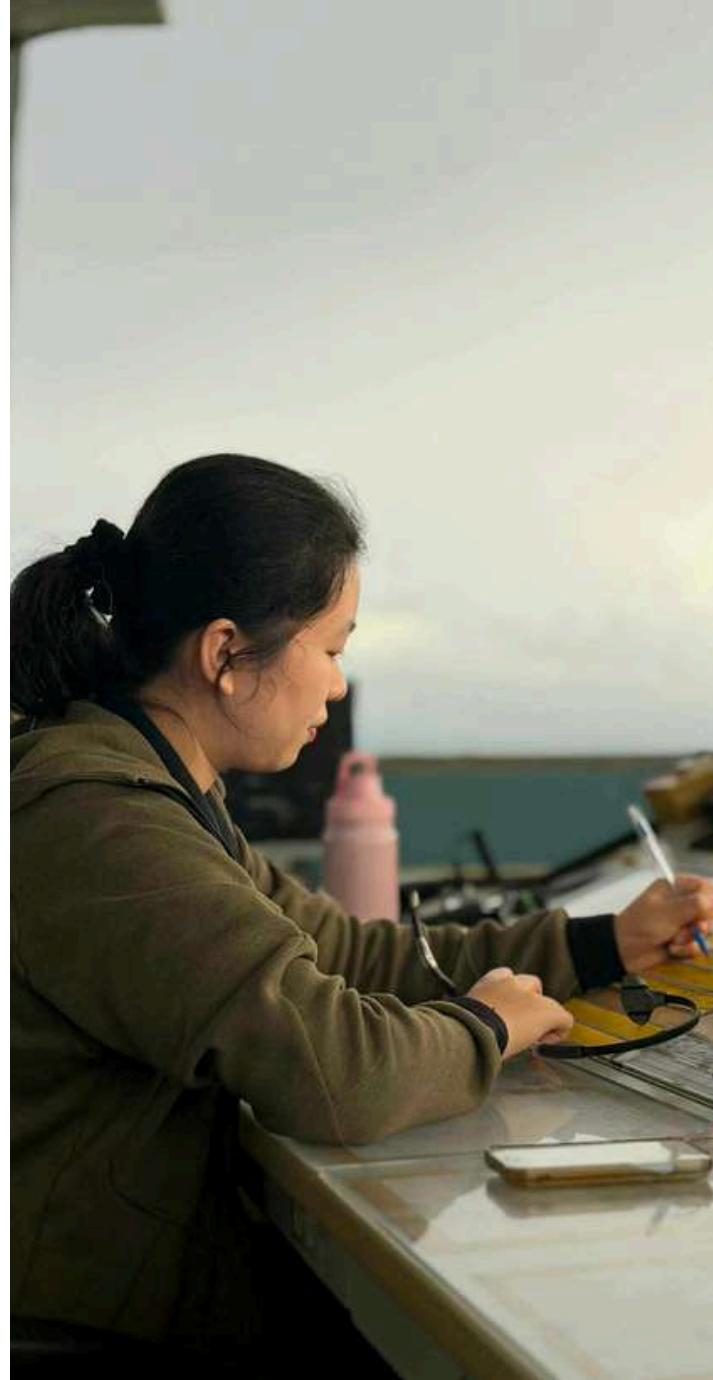
Passengers rarely think about the training pipeline behind every calm transmission they hear from a cockpit speaker. They never see the exhausted trainee replaying mistakes mentally after a difficult simulation session. They never see instructors staying beyond shift hours to debrief traffic scenarios or explain coordination techniques one more time. Yet the safety of the system depends heavily on these unseen exchanges of knowledge between generations.

Resilience, after all, does not appear spontaneously in the operations room during moments of crisis. It is shaped slowly, long before certification. Built through repetition. Through correction. Through uncomfortable learning curves and difficult endorsements, mentors are patient enough to continue teaching despite operational strain.

Somewhere inside a simulator room tonight, another trainee will hear these familiar words:

“Okay. Your control.”

And somewhere beside them sits an instructor carrying years of experience, pressure, and quiet responsibility, preparing another air traffic controller not simply to manage traffic, but to endure the profession itself.



“It is also why mentorship matters far beyond technical competence. The strongest training environments are rarely the loudest or the harshest.”

Uniform Delta: Going Around



WORDS AND PHOTOS BY JETHRO MATTHEW ANTENOR

Recovery, in aviation, is often described in neat and orderly terms: systems restored, operations normalized, everything back on frequency. As always, checklist after checklist. But for air traffic controllers, recovery is rarely just procedural. Behind every calm transmission delivered is a far more human story, one involving diversion, turbulence, and unexpected holding patterns. ***The Comeback Sector*** explores that deeply personal airspace between absence and resilience. Some controllers left because life issued its own urgent NOTAM. And in a profession where confidence is expected to sound laminar, returning after time away can feel oddly like being the new kid in your own tower.

This is a story of an Air Traffic Controller who graduated in 2012, was assigned to Cagayan/Laguindingan in 2013, resigned in 2016, reapplied and was reassigned in San Vicente, Palawan, in 2018, transferred to Puerto Princesa Airport in 2021, and finally transferred to his hometown in 2025. Let me introduce you to Nec Pepito, CATS 5, from Butuan Tower/Approach.



What was your first facility after graduation? How was your experience during that time?

I was initially assigned to Cagayan Tower/Approach Control facility at Lumbia Airport in Cagayan de Oro and was later transferred to Laguindingan Airport following its opening. Located approximately 45 minutes from downtown Cagayan de Oro, Laguindingan Airport served as my alternate duty station while I continued to perform scheduled duties at Cagayan Approach. During my time at Cagayan Approach, I underwent supervised training in approach control operations. While on rotational assignments at Laguindingan, I served at the Flight Service Station (FSS). Following the upgrade of the Laguindingan FSS to an Aerodrome Control Tower facility, I obtained my first Aerodrome Control service rating and began providing aerodrome control services at the newly established Laguindingan Control Tower.

As a newly assigned Air Traffic Controller, I felt both excitement and uncertainty. I was assigned together with one of my batchmates from training. However, due to the management transition taking place at that time, she was eventually requested to transfer to Butuan. I was left alone for a time, and I gradually conditioned myself to accept the situation and adapt to the circumstances.

During that period, Lumbia Airport was in the process of transitioning operations to Laguindingan Airport. The atmosphere at Lumbia was already beginning to feel abandoned. I rented a former coworker's house within the airport vicinity. With most of the former residents already gone, the water supply seemed to have been disconnected. I remember collecting rainwater in a drum and using it for bathing and other personal needs.

Life there was simple and peaceful, yet it could be profoundly solitary. At night, the only sounds were the chirping of crickets and the rustling of tree leaves brushing against one another during windy or rainy evenings. A shopping mall, just a jeepney ride away, became my occasional escape whenever I wanted to be around people. I would jokingly refer to it as 'civilization'. Eventually, I rented a room in the city and gradually found my footing as a young working professional living independently.

Laguindingan Airport, on the other hand, was located far from the city. It was a newly opened airport, and during my work week, I would stay at the tower for several nights at a time. There was little to nothing near the airport where one could spend an evening for leisure. The area was quiet and isolated, and after work, there were few recreation opportunities. As a result, much of my time outside duty hours was spent resting, reading, listening to music, or simply enjoying the solitude.

My experience at those facilities proved to be both valuable and highly rewarding. It provided me with practical exposure to air traffic control operations and enhanced my understanding of the knowledge, skills, and competencies required of an air traffic controller. More importantly, it reinforced my appreciation of the fundamental principles, procedures, and best practices necessary for the safe, orderly, and efficient provision of air traffic services. Through this experience, I gained greater confidence in applying my training to real-world situations and developed a deeper commitment to maintaining the highest standards of professionalism and safety in the performance of my duties.

Why did you resign? What was the reason?

I often find myself struggling to put my thoughts into words whenever I am asked about my resignation. To be honest, it is difficult to explain it fully in just a sentence or two. I was younger then; a typical young adult trying to reconcile my expectations of what I believed was a caring world with the reality of one that often felt harsh, hostile, and unforgiving. I had been away from home for a long time and thought I was accustomed to it. However, living on my own often felt like facing the world without a safety net, and there were moments when even the spiritual foundations that had long sustained me began to waver.

My decision to resign was not driven by a single factor but by a combination of personal and work-related circumstances. The personal challenges I faced as a young adult, including peer pressure, together with the demands of the role, workplace dynamics, and my own difficulty at the time in adjusting to the different personalities and working styles of my colleagues, ultimately influenced my decision to step away. It was a decision that allowed me to realign my life with what mattered most and to focus on my overall well-being, both physically and mentally. There were periods when I felt emotionally exhausted and overwhelmed, and many nights were spent struggling with feelings of loneliness, uncertainty, and discouragement.

I still remember the exact moment I stepped out of the ATC complex for the last time.

“As a newly assigned Air Traffic Controller, I felt both excitement and uncertainty. I was assigned together with one of my batchmates from training.”



I took what felt like the deepest breath of my life and, with it, experienced an overwhelming sense of freedom and relief, emotions I had not realized had been quietly growing within me for years. At the same time, those feelings were accompanied by a deep sense of loss, knowing that I was leaving behind a place that had become a second home to me, along with the remarkable people who had been part of that chapter of my life.

Looking back, I believe it was a necessary decision that allowed me to regain balance, even though it meant leaving a highly respected and professionally fulfilling role. While that choice was not easy, deep down I knew it was the right decision for me at that point in my life.

What did you do after your resignation?

The following year, I took a teaching job. While I found the work meaningful and fulfilling in its own way, the salary was only about a third of what I had earned as an air traffic controller. This is not to make comparisons, but simply to acknowledge the reality of my situation at the time. Financially, it was a challenging period, one that required significant adjustments and sacrifices. Yet that experience taught me valuable lessons about gratitude, contentment, and the importance of making the most of whatever resources one has.

As time passed, I found myself asking difficult questions; those that, at least for me, were rooted in both fear and hope. What if I returned to air traffic control? What difference would it make now? Had I truly changed? Had I become stronger, more resilient, and better equipped to face the challenges that once overwhelmed me? More importantly, had I learned the lessons that life had been trying to teach me all along? Through that period of reflection, I realized that the profession had given me a strong sense of purpose, one that I had not fully appreciated before. My time away not only allowed me to recover but also gave me a renewed appreciation for the career I had once left behind.

When did you come back? Where is your new assignment?

I eventually returned in 2018. My decision to come back was accompanied by a deeper realization. During my time away, I spent an entire year at home. It was a period of recovery that I genuinely needed; a time to rest, reflect, and regain my footing. Thereafter, I was assigned to resume air traffic service duties at San Vicente FSS in San Vicente, Palawan. The assignment marked a significant turning point in my journey and provided an opportunity to return to a profession that had always been meaningful to me.

San Vicente, Palawan, is truly a beautiful place, and being assigned there felt like both a professional opportunity and a personal blessing. As I settled into my duties, I embraced the responsibilities of the role and welcomed this new chapter in my career with gratitude and optimism. In time, I came to understand that the real question was not whether I could return to my former profession, but whether I was ready to return as a better version of myself.

In 2021, I was transferred to Puerto Princesa Tower/Approach facility. After completing the required training program, I earned my second Aerodrome Control Service Rating and later obtained my Non-surveillance Approach Control Service rating. It was during my assignment at RPVP that I finally became a fully rated air traffic controller. More importantly, I met wonderful colleagues and mentors whose friendship and support greatly enriched my experience. They will always hold a special place in my life and in my journey as an ATC.



How are you so far, now that you are in your hometown?

I feel excited every time I go to work and perform my duties as an Air Traffic Controller in my hometown. I will always be thankful to the many people who made this possible for me. After years of being away, losing my way at times, I have finally made it home. My coworkers have welcomed me wholeheartedly, and I am especially grateful for their eagerness, support, and encouragement in helping me return to Butuan. Their kindness and generosity have made this homecoming even more meaningful.

Indeed, there is no place like home. Yet wherever life may take us, what matters most is our readiness to answer the call of duty with dedication and purpose. It is not merely about where we are assigned, but how we choose to serve with all our heart, soul, and being. In the end, our greatest fulfillment comes not from the place itself, but from knowing that we have given our very best in service wherever we are called to be. Through our commitment, passion, and sense of purpose, we leave a lasting impact on the people and communities we serve.

Home may be where our journey begins and ultimately returns, but our true measure lies in how faithfully we carry out our responsibilities and honor our calling along the way.

“As time passed, I found myself asking difficult questions; those that, at least for me, were rooted in both fear and hope. What if I returned to air traffic control? What difference would it make now? Had I truly changed?”



What did you learn in your journey?

I learned that the choices we make in life, together with the setbacks we encounter along the way, can lead us to better places, but only when we find the courage to rise again and continue moving forward.

Often, our greatest growth comes not from our successes, but from the challenges that teach us resilience, humility, and purpose. Looking back, every detour, hardship, and lesson learned becomes part of the journey that shapes who we are and leads us to where we are meant to be.

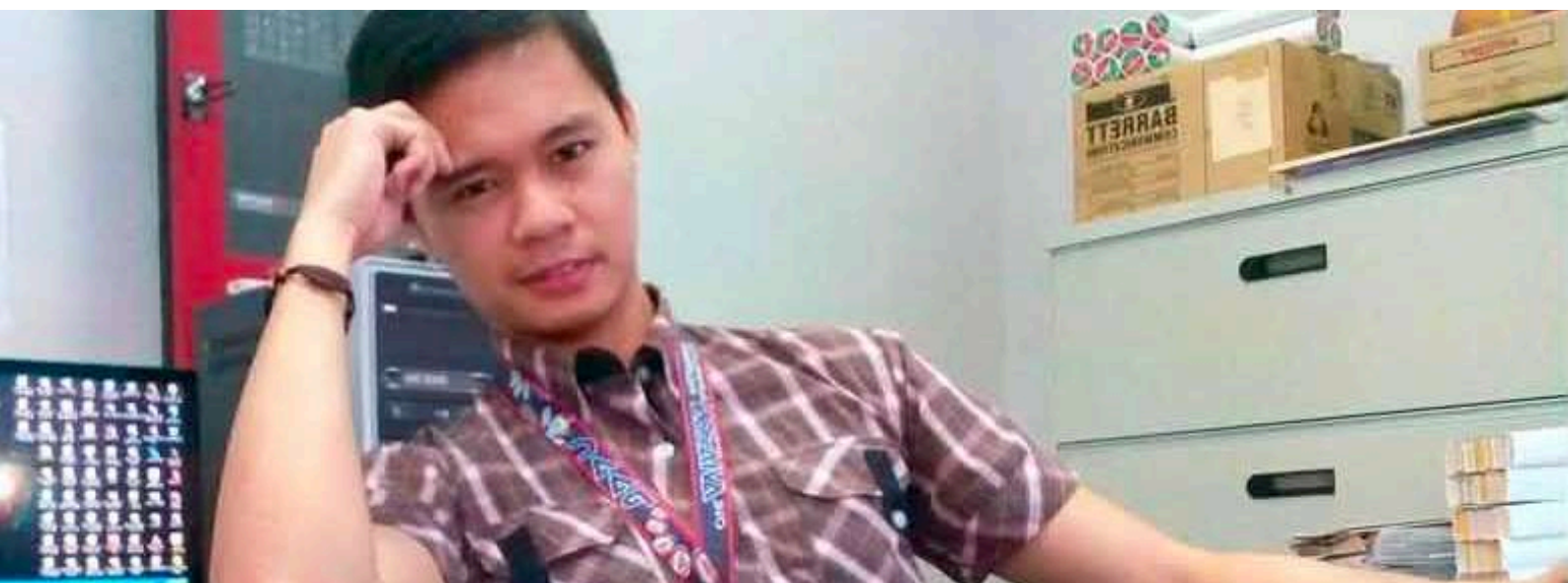
In the end, it is not our failures that define us, but our courage to stand up once more, learn from the experience, and continue the journey with greater wisdom, faith, and understanding.

What will you advise ATCs experiencing or have experienced a similar situation?

I can only say this: the final decision will always be yours to make. As you go through this process, learn to acknowledge and embrace the feelings you are experiencing, but do so with caution and wisdom, never allowing them to consume you. Try to open up and find healthy ways to cope, understanding that sometimes what we need most is the support of those around us, especially our loved ones.

Remember that it is okay not to have everything figured out right away. Give yourself the grace to process your emotions and the space to think clearly before making any major decisions. Healing, growth, and understanding often take time, and there is no need to rush. Not everything in life is within our control, but we can always choose to do our part, give our best, and continue to trust the process.

Because sometimes, life is not about having all the answers; it is about having the courage to take the next step, trusting that each experience, whether joyful or painful, is shaping us into better and stronger versions of ourselves.



In a profession built upon precision, confidence, and constant vigilance, time away can feel like drifting beyond the edge of one's own identity. The phraseology is still there, somewhere in the muscle memory, but the heartbeat behind it takes time to steady again. Yet perhaps that is what makes recovery such a powerful airspace of its own, not because controllers return unchanged, but because they return despite the change. It is rediscovering confidence one transmission at a time. It is realizing that strength is sometimes as simple as hearing your own voice steady on frequency once more.

In aviation, we often celebrate flawless operations and seamless recoveries, but rarely do we speak about the emotional crosswinds endured by the people guiding aircraft safely home every day. The true beauty of recovery lies not in denying the storm, but in knowing that even after tailwinds and wind shear, the runway lights are still there through the fog. Because in aviation, as in life, a go-around is not a failure. It is proof that you are still flying.

And sometimes, that is only the beginning.



“I can only say this: the final decision will always be yours to make. As you go through this process, learn to acknowledge and embrace the feelings you are experiencing, but do so with caution and wisdom, never allowing them to consume you.”

Human Performance: Fatigue, Focus, and Fortitude



WORDS AND PHOTOS BY ETHAN JAN ORTIZ



Facing the radar screen, blips zip across the vast expanses of the Philippine FIR. Zoom out, and these glowing green dots bleed together, becoming nearly indistinguishable. But this is no simulation. Every single blip represents a real aircraft, carrying hundreds of passengers, millions of pesos in cargo, or more often than not, both. A controller routinely juggles an overwhelming volume of traffic simultaneously, a staggering mental load that can spike even higher in an instant. This is the reality of an air traffic controller's typical workday. Technical skill is a prerequisite for the job, but when the pressure mounts, human performance ultimately plays the defining role in operational safety. Hence, in the endeavor to maintain unwavering focus and professional fortitude, controllers must understand and respect the science of their own bodies.

Managing fatigue requires looking beyond the feeling of “tired” and looking deeper into what is happening inside an exhausted brain. Scientific research has found through brain scans that the region responsible for high-level decision-making and alertness, when fatigued, loses vital activity. Behind the scope, this biological shutdown can manifest in these critical operational threats:

Microsleep

When the body accumulates sleep debt, it no longer asks for permission to rest; it takes it. Microsleep is an involuntary episode of sleep that usually lasts anywhere between a fraction of a second and 30 seconds. A person who experiences microsleep can have their eyes wide-open when this occurs; however, the brain would have already disconnected from the outside world.

Mental Tunnel Vision

A fatigued brain loses its ability to multitask. From being able to scan the entire screen and pre-plan on multiple possible conflicts, the brain would only be able to commit to solving one (possibly minor) problem. This is a result of triggering the mind's survival mode. While the mind remains intensely focused on resolving that single issue, peripheral situational awareness drops to zero.

“A controller routinely juggles an overwhelming volume of traffic simultaneously, a staggering mental load that can spike even higher in an instant.”



Cognitive Fracture

Processing a multitude of essential information becomes a hefty task for a tired brain. The ability to accurately analyze data and come up with a solution effectively declines. But it is not only the problem-solving side of the brain that is affected, but also its communication side. It could manifest in incorrect phraseology or in saying something other than what you have intended.

STAYING SHARP

To maintain an effective watch behind the console, one must shift to an active physical management strategy. Readyng one's mind through a deliberate pre-shift routine helps preserve essential cognitive function for handling traffic. It is also essential for controllers to utilize their rest period for recuperation. Taking a 20 to 30-minute (maximum) nap helps optimize the brain for the upcoming shift.

Sustaining focus does not only depend on how a controller readies oneself, but it also depends on their relationship with co-controllers. Communicating during shifts helps prevent isolated decision-making and improves managing traffic. Sharing the mental load also helps in keeping overall stress levels low.

“Hence, in the endeavor to maintain unwavering focus and professional fortitude, controllers must understand and respect the science of their own bodies.”



BUILDING CULTURAL RESILIENCE

Inevitably, the work culture an ATC operates is a factor in human performance. Praising controllers for pushing through extreme exhaustion used to be the norm (and may still be), but in recent years, the aviation industry has begun to listen to the facts; it has realized that the biological limitations of the human mind are absolute and that trying to override them with willpower is an operational liability. True fortitude in the modern aviation environment means recognizing when physiological decline risks safety margins and deciding to step back when the limit has been reached, the standard for professional maturity.

Additionally, fatigue only impairs an individual's ability to judge their own exhaustion; thus, controllers must rely on peer monitoring to maintain safety. Having someone watch for signs of fatigue in a co-worker allows for appropriate intervention at the earliest opportunity.

The safety culture is only as strong as the psychological safety within the room. If staff fear stigma and professional judgment, they are more likely to hide their exhaustion and continue working despite reduced cognitive function. True operational safety creates a safe space that normalizes staff admitting fatigue, a proactive choice that protects the entire airspace.

Ensuring safety within the Philippines' skies is a continuous exercise in human performance management where fatigue, focus, and fortitude intersect. Air traffic control cannot eliminate the biological realities of exhaustion, but a resilient operational culture can mitigate the risks. By respecting physiological limits, practicing active peer monitoring, and fostering an environment of psychological safety, the modern ATC workspace transforms vulnerability into a system of protection. True professional fortitude lies in the shared commitment to protect the mind that protects the skies.

12 Last Words



WORDS AND PHOTOS BY JOANNA BIANCA DELA PEÑA

Scrolling through social media has led us to believe that the perfectly curated life just falls on your lap. An opportunity knocks, and you answer. A door opens, and you enter. But actually, the curated life that you see is called “curated” because people carefully select it. They don’t wait for opportunities; they look for them. They choose this life.

This very thought is what led me to stop waiting and start choosing, to write my own story. Because life is more than just work shifts, and overtime, and training, more than just the four walls of the control room. And around two years ago, I set out to discover what *more* was.

“Because life is more than just work shifts, and overtime, and training, more than just the four walls of the control room. And around two years ago, I set out to discover what more was.”



It all started one fateful shift – I was about halfway into my surveillance rating when an itch to search for “what to do on September 6, 2024” hit me. Maybe it was the monotony of my daily routine (wake up, eat, work, repeat), or maybe it was just that I missed my 2023 self. The adventure, the spontaneity—I don’t know. But whatever it was, I was determined to step out and do something that Friday. I didn’t know what I was walking into, but I was going to that show – and I didn’t care what it meant.

The show in question was an EP (Extended Play) release by a Filipino artist. Now, there are a few things I should mention: 1) I love music but not enough to buy tickets to concerts, 2) I wasn’t a really big fan of the artist, and 3) it was all the way in Cubao, 16km from where I live. And yet, despite all of the above, a voice kept lingering in my mind, whispering, encouraging me. “You just have to go. You have to.”

...and go I did. The MRT ride during rush hour and the dark, unfamiliar cafe would not deter my spirit, because what came next filled my cup to the brim. I sang my heart out with strangers (and my best friend, whom I dragged along with me), I listened to the stories behind the songs, and I basked in the feeling of just being there. Because in that cafe, I wasn’t a voice that handled planes that carried lives; I was just me. The night gave me time just to breathe, to just breathe and just be.

That night was the flame that ignited the fire. Week after week, I looked for new things and adventures that would excite me and keep me feeling alive. It ranged from new restaurants and undiscovered cafes to early morning hiking trips and late-night parties that we saw on TikTok. And with every new place and experience I collected, that song by OneRepublic kept echoing in my heart: “I swear I lived.”

This was me curating my life the way I want it, because in 10 or 15 years from now, I want to look back and know that I did something... or even just try something. And isn't that what we've all been encouraged to do ever since we were kids? To just try. In this process of trying, failing, learning, and doing, we grow in ways we never expected to, and that's exactly what I set out to do. I'm glad I did so.

Now, almost two years later, the fire hasn't gone out - it's just burning at a steadier pace. Do I still do it every week? That's an easy no. I do have responsibilities (and bills!) after all. But every once in a while, I randomly search "what to do on..." and just like that, off I go.

Life truly has a funny way of putting things into perspective. I had always categorized myself as Type A - the plan-ahead, organize-everything-to-the-minute type. When I was in school, I had one goal, and I kept my mind and heart focused on that. So naturally, when I entered the industry, I dived right in. What I didn't realize was that diving in meant risking drowning - but I went ahead.



“The MRT ride during rush hour and the dark, unfamiliar cafe would not deter my spirit, because what came next filled my cup to the brim.”



Training to be an air traffic controller (and actually being one) pushed and stretched me in ways I hadn't been before. I was barely keeping my head above water, but I loved the job and the purpose it gave me. Drowning simply wasn't an option. So when life reminded me of that quiet little promise from 2023, I grabbed onto something and...

I pulled myself up. I choose every day to wake up and search for ways that I would enjoy my life. It could be that unique coffee flavor from that one shop I was dying to try. Or an undiscovered part of the metro that I have never commuted to but always see on my Instagram feed. And it could even be something as mundane as finally cooking that recipe saved on your notes app. It could be something new or something you want to retry. It could literally be anything! As long as it is something that makes you genuinely, wholeheartedly choose to live.

So as I cram this story into a thousand words at 1:28 AM, a day before the end of the month, let me leave you with this: **go back, read the last word of every paragraph, and sit with it.**

When the Frequencies Fell Silent

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY
RENZ MARIONE BULSECO

For those who perished in Yolanda.

For those who survived and carried on.

And for the air traffic controllers of Tacloban Tower/Approach Control, whose voices returned to the frequencies long before their hearts had fully healed.

In the first days of November 2013, somewhere over the Pacific, the sea began to gather heat like anger. The winds above it stayed still, allowing clouds to tighten and spin and grow. Satellite images showed a system forming east of the Philippines, at first ordinary, then suddenly not. Meteorologists watched the storm organize itself with frightening precision. Within hours, the winds climbed past 300 kilometers per hour. Yolanda was no longer just another typhoon. It had become something else entirely.

Across our country, weather bulletins rolled through radios and television screens. Forecast maps pointed toward Eastern Visayas. Toward Samar and Leyte. Toward cities and coastlines that had seen storms before and believed they understood them. Government agencies warned of destructive winds, heavy rain, and dangerous flooding. People listened while doing ordinary things. Buying rice. Charging phones. Pulling fishing boats farther inland. In the Philippines, typhoons arrive every year. They are folded into the calendar. Into memory. Into the language of survival. Storms come. Storms leave. People rebuild.

But some disasters exceed experience. There are warnings that language cannot fully convey.



On the dawn of November 8, Yolanda made landfall.

The wind came first. It screamed through Tacloban hard enough to peel roofs from houses and fling debris through the air like shrapnel. Windows and doors exploded inward. Concrete cracked. Entire neighborhoods disappeared beneath sheets of rain and flying metal. Then the sea arrived.

Survivors would later describe it as a gargantuan wall. Dark water rushes inland all at once, swallowing roads, terminals, churches, and homes. The storm surge moved with terrifying speed toward Daniel Z. Romualdez Airport, the city's fragile connection to the rest of the country, sitting exposed between Cancabato Bay and the San Juanico Strait. Water climbed the building floor by floor until it reached almost the third level of the control tower itself.

Inside, the air traffic controllers could do little except watch.

The phone lines were severed. Frequencies dissolved into static. Outside, the storm erased familiar landmarks one after another until there was almost nothing left to recognize.

And somewhere inside that tower, suspended between duty and terror, many of them believed it was their last day.

Thirteen years later, Yolanda still lives in Tacloban. It lives in seawalls and evacuation routes. In rebuilt houses and empty spaces where homes once stood. It lives in the voices of survivors who still pause before telling the story. For the air traffic controllers who stayed inside that tower while the storm tore the city apart, the memory remains sharp, immediate, unfinished.

This is their story.

“The phone lines were severed. Frequencies dissolved into static. Outside, the storm erased familiar landmarks one after another until there was almost nothing left to recognize.”



For **Roger Bandilla**, the shift began like countless others before it. Another typhoon is entering Philippine airspace. Another long night inside a familiar tower overlooking a familiar runway.

“It was just a normal shift,” he would later say.

That ordinariness now feels impossible to imagine.

At Tacloban Tower/Approach Control, operations continued under procedures that belonged to a different era. There were no advance NOTAMs suspending air traffic services. No preemptive closure of airport operations. Controllers still reported for duty because that was simply how things had always been done.

Miguel Presnilla Jr., then the Assistant Facility-In-Charge of Tacloban Tower/Approach Control, remembers closing the facility at 9 p.m. on November 7, already knowing that by sunrise, normal operations would no longer exist. Yolanda was forecast to strike directly during the facility’s opening hours.

That moment, he says, was when Tacloban’s frequency truly fell silent.

Still, the procedure demanded continuity. Another controller was instructed to report the next morning, not to handle traffic normally, but to formally suspend operations and relay the situation to the Manila Area Control Center. Even then, aviation still tried to follow structure while a super typhoon approached the coastline.

Later, **Miguel** would reflect on those old practices with painful clarity. Some CAAP employees never made it home.

Elsewhere in Tacloban City, **Ronsard Navales** spent the night before the storm like many others in the city: waiting. Rain. Wind. Familiar signs of another typhoon. He had been on duty the previous evening and was supposed to report the next morning again, but by dawn, conditions had deteriorated so badly that travel became impossible.

Instead, he stayed with his partner, fellow Air Traffic Controller **Alexis Honculada**, who was then on maternity leave caring for their newborn child. While they sheltered inside the hospital, Alexis' father remained at the staff house near the end of Runway 36. Her mother had already gone home before the storm intensified. For hours, they listened to Yolanda dismantle the city outside.

Then the storm arrived in full force.

The frequencies disappeared into silence. Backup systems failed. Communications collapsed alongside the rest of the city's infrastructure. Telephone networks went dark almost immediately. Only satellite phones continued to function.

“That moment, he says, was when Tacloban’s frequency truly fell silent.”

And for many inside Tacloban, survival narrowed into a terrifying waiting game. Families became separated by floodwaters, distance, and silence. There was no reliable way to know who remained alive on the other side of the storm.

Inside the hospital, **Ronsard** and **Alexis** waited with their newborn while the winds battered the city around them. Outside, Tacloban was disappearing piece by piece beneath water, debris, and darkness.

For hours, Tacloban ceased to function not only as an airport but almost as a city.

And yet aviation does not stop needing to exist simply because a disaster has occurred. In the aftermath of destruction, aircraft become lifelines. Relief supplies. Evacuation flights. Military transport. Medicine. Food. Water. Rescue teams. By Saturday, the priority inside the ruined airport had shifted from survival to restoration.

The control tower was crippled. Radio equipment was destroyed. Navigation aids were down. Weather instruments were gone. Runway lighting systems had failed. A temporary Flight Service Station radio was installed inside the powerhouse building in an attempt to reestablish communications.

Outside, Tacloban looked like the end of the world.





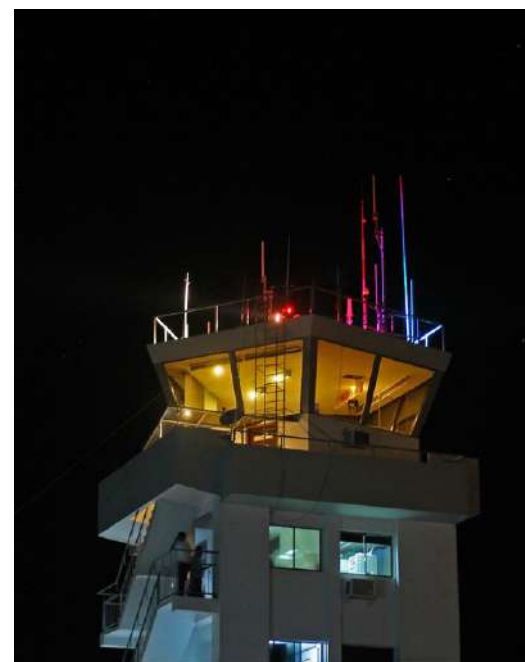
Miguel remembers returning to work after first ensuring his family had food and shelter. On the road toward the airport, decomposing human remains lay across the streets. Trees blocked entire sections of the roadway in San Jose. Some still carried the dead tangled among their branches.

But even then, his focus remained fixed on one objective: **restoring operations**.

Inside the powerhouse building, he began controlling traffic blindly, without the systems controllers normally depend on. It quickly became obvious that the arrangement would not work. The radios needed to be transferred back into the tower cab itself. So he climbed back upstairs into the wreckage.

Glass debris covered the floor. Ruined equipment lay scattered across the facility. Wind and seawater had torn through the tower with almost surgical violence. **Miguel** cleaned the cab himself, clearing enough space to make operations barely possible again. By noon, Tacloban Flight Service Station was operational.

The timing mattered. That same afternoon, relief aircraft began arriving in Tacloban carrying humanitarian aid into one of the worst disaster zones in Philippine history. The skies above Eastern Visayas, silent only a day earlier, filled again with aircraft attempting to reach a city that no longer resembled itself. And inside the damaged tower, controllers guided them in with whatever remained. Trauma, however, does not disappear simply because operations resume.





**“But even then,
his focus
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on one objective:
restoring
operations.”**

For **Ronsard**, the memory that endured most was not a specific image, but a feeling. It was the realization that perhaps the storm was not simply passing through Tacloban, but ending it. Ending everything. The helplessness of understanding that there was nowhere to run while the city outside dissolved beneath the violence of wind and sea.

For **Alexis**, the memory carried a different weight. Days after Yolanda, she eventually made her way to the airport searching for possible

transportation out of Tacloban while carrying the responsibilities of both motherhood and survival. By then, the control tower had become more than an air traffic facility. It had become a shelter, a coordination center, and a fragile symbol that the city was still connected to the outside world.

She stayed with colleagues inside the third-floor staff lounge of the damaged control tower and watched air traffic controllers from different facilities work side by side under impossible conditions. Food and water were scarce. The airport was deafening with aircraft noise, military activity, generators, and crowds desperate to leave the city.

And yet, amid the chaos, everyone kept working. Controllers. Soldiers. Medical personnel. Volunteers. People are carrying their own grief while helping others survive theirs.

Roger admits that leaving the profession crossed his mind after Yolanda. The temptation was real. But eventually, he stayed. Most of them did.

Alexis never considered leaving the profession either. At the time, both she and Ronsard were still job-order controllers, uncertain even of financial stability after the disaster. Management later arranged for her temporary reassignment to Butuan Tower so she could continue earning while caring for their newborn child, far from the devastation Tacloban had become.

Months later, when she returned to Tacloban Tower and Approach Control, the city already appeared outwardly calmer. Traffic had returned. Businesses had reopened. People had resumed routines that resembled ordinary life. But beneath that normalcy remained memory. For the controllers who survived Yolanda, storms would never sound ordinary again.

Miguel believes that no Tacloban controller truly considered abandoning air traffic control permanently after the disaster. There is something about the profession, he says, that feels almost like a calling. Still, grief surfaced in unexpected moments. On short final for Runway 36 stood a village called Costa Brava. Yolanda erased it almost completely. He had friends there. In the days after the storm, each arriving aircraft forced him to look again toward the empty coastline where homes once stood.

Sometimes, while controlling traffic, tears came unexpectedly. A controller crying inside a control tower is not normal.

He knew that. They all did. Eventually, he gathered the Tacloban controllers together and told them they needed to leave the city temporarily before the trauma consumed them entirely. With approval from ATS leadership, they boarded a flight bound for Manila the following day.

But even as Tacloban's own controllers struggled to survive and recover, help was already moving toward the city from elsewhere in the country.

THE AUGMENTATION

The call for augmentation spread quietly through aviation circles. Tacloban Tower/Approach Control needed manpower. Relief flights were increasing by the hour. The local controllers on the ground were exhausted, traumatized, and trying to manage one of the largest humanitarian air operations in Philippine history with damaged equipment and almost no infrastructure. Some volunteered immediately.

For **David Fetalvero**, the request arrived while he was still a trainee air traffic controller undergoing On-the-Job Training under the CATS Batch 6 program. He was not yet rated. He had little actual controlling experience. A supervisor from Manila Control Tower asked whether he wanted to join a flight to Tacloban to help augment the team already operating there.

He said yes almost instantly.

Benjamin Rotairo, Rudy Boctot Jr., and Jondée Li heard about the situation from fellow Manila Approach controllers. Reports had begun circulating that some Tacloban controllers had lost their homes entirely. Together with colleagues, they volunteered to help.

“Because life is more than just work shifts, and overtime, and training,”

For **Augusto Abesamis**, the deployment came through PATCA. The mission was voluntary, but to him, the choice barely felt like one at all.

“One ATC to another ATC,” he would later say.

When the augmentation teams finally arrived in Tacloban, the scale of destruction exceeded even their expectations.

Families carrying whatever remained of their belongings crowded the terminal grounds, hoping for outbound flights away from Tacloban. Military aircraft lined the apron. Foreign humanitarian teams established forward operating bases near the airport. Medical personnel rushed casualties into temporary field hospitals while transport aircraft continued arriving with food, water, medicine, and rescue equipment.

The air smelled of seawater, mud, fuel, and death.

David remembers the odor most vividly. The wind carried it constantly across the airport. Even wearing two face masks felt useless against it. Inside the tower, conditions were barely better. The storm surge and violent winds had shattered half the glass panels in the cab. Rainwater entered freely whenever the weather passed overhead. Tarpaulins and plywood were improvised into makeshift protection for radios and equipment.

And still, aircraft continued arriving.

Controllers adapted to whatever remained functional. Damaged radios became lifelines. HF radios handled coordination with neighboring facilities. Handheld weather meters borrowed from the United States military were used to provide wind information to pilots before landing. Runway lights remained inoperative, forcing most operations into daylight hours only.

Improvisation became a procedure.

For **David**, the experience was overwhelming. He had never controlled actual traffic before. Now he was sitting inside one of the busiest humanitarian air bridges in the country, learning in real time from senior controllers. At the same time, static-filled HF frequencies crackled endlessly in his headset.

“Say again” became part of almost every transmission.

Still, the operation held together. Not because systems functioned perfectly, but because people did. Air Traffic Controllers from different facilities and generations worked beside one another without concern for rank or assignment. Manila ATCs relieved Tacloban ATCs. Senior personnel mentored trainees. Information was passed constantly between shifts because everyone understood that continuity itself had become critical.



“Sometimes, while controlling traffic, tears came unexpectedly. A controller crying inside a control tower is not normal.”



Resilience inside Tacloban Tower no longer resembled the polished professionalism seen in training manuals. It looked like exhausted air traffic controllers sleeping inside the cab because the quarters were overcrowded. It looked like unwashed uniforms, cold meals shared between shifts, and long hours without proper rest. Sometimes resilience looked as small as sharing a cold piece of Jollibee after hours of controlling aircraft inside a shattered tower overlooking a destroyed city.

And sometimes it looked like simply continuing to report for duty.

Years later, many of them still describe the deployment to Tacloban as one of the most meaningful experiences of their lives, not because of recognition or certificates, but because of what the experience revealed about service, sacrifice, and the profession itself.

Disasters often reveal the invisible architecture holding a profession together. Not merely procedures or equipment, but people. The willingness to board an aircraft into devastation because colleagues need help. The instinct to rebuild frequencies before rebuilding comfort. The quiet refusal to abandon responsibility even when surrounded by ruin.



Tacloban, 13 years after

My first facility assignment was Tacloban Tower/Approach Control. I arrived there on March 2, 2014, almost four months after Yolanda tore through the city. On the final approach, the scars were still visible from the air. Hills once green had turned brown. Coconut trees stood stripped bare, their trunks exposed like skeletal remains against the landscape. Debris still littered the ground below, scattered carelessly as though an enormous hand had swept through the city and left everything broken where it fell.

Life was returning. Flights were operating again. People were rebuilding. But recovery is not the same as forgetting.

Air traffic controllers are trained to remain calm in complexity. To speak steadily while aircraft converge, weather deteriorates, and systems fail. But Yolanda existed beyond procedures. Beyond simulations. Beyond training manuals and contingency checklists. It was the moment nature overwhelmed infrastructure entirely.

And yet, beneath the discipline, phraseology, and professionalism, the people inside that tower were still human beings. They were frightened. Grieving. Exhausted. Some had lost homes. Some had lost family and friends. All of them carried the weight of witnessing a city they called home disappear before their eyes.

Still, they returned to the frequencies.

Because resilience in air traffic control is not the absence of fear or trauma. It is a quiet decision to keep answering every call, even after surviving the unimaginable.

And perhaps that is what should be remembered most about Tacloban after Yolanda. Not only the devastation, nor the shattered tower standing beside a wounded coastline, but the people who stayed.

The air traffic controllers who climbed back into broken facilities while the dead still lay in the streets. The voices returned to the frequency so that relief aircraft could find their way into the city. The exhausted men and women who carried grief in silence because others were already inbound and needed somewhere safe to land.

Many never received recognition beyond a handshake, a quiet thank you, or the memory carried by those who worked beside them. Some of the people they loved never came home. Tens of thousands across Eastern Visayas never did.

But somewhere in Tacloban, when the winds begin to howl against the tower windows and the rain falls hard enough to bring old memories back, the story of Yolanda still lives on in the people who survived it.

Not as heroes untouched by fear.

But as ordinary human beings who chose, despite everything, to remain at their posts when the world around them was falling apart.

And because they did, countless others found their way home.

In Retrospect

The work does not end with a story.

After the final page is turned, after the last account of storms weathered and systems restored, the profession returns to its natural state. Quiet, methodical, and continuous. There is no closing ceremony for resilience. No definitive moment when it is declared complete. Instead, it folds back into routine, into the familiar choreography of voices and vectors, headings, clearances and instructions, and handovers. The sky does not pause to acknowledge what it has demanded. It simply continues. And so do we.

In many ways, that is where resilience is most honest, not in the extraordinary, but in what follows it. In the uneventful shift that comes after disruption. In the steady rebuild of confidence, of rhythm, of trust in both system and self. There is something deeply human in that return to normalcy, in the decision made quietly, almost instinctively. That is to carry on without needing to mark the act.

Across these pages, we have traced resilience through different forms: in the structure of systems, in the discipline of training, in the strain of fatigue, and in the lives that exist beyond the console. We have seen it tested in moments of crisis and sustained in the spaces in between. Yet perhaps its most defining quality is this: it does not demand attention. It simply persists.

Tomorrow, the frequencies will fill again. Aircraft will check in, sectors will hand over, weather will build and dissipate in patterns both predictable and unpredictable. And somewhere in that familiar exchange, resilience will be there not as a concept, but as a presence. Quiet, steady, and assured.

Not because the skies are always kind, but because they are not.

And still, we meet them.

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