

## ISSUE 1

# CONDUCTING THE SKIES

**Air Traffic Control Officer Ngui Le Chen shares some quirky insights into his dynamic profession.**

Directing an aircraft through an airspace riddled with tropical thunderstorms, strong winds and lightning strikes to its landing destination, easily ranks alongside other top piloting nightmares. While this might sound like a scenario from an adrenaline-fuelled computer game, the reality of the situation has never been more keenly felt by Ngui Le Chen, an Air Traffic Control Officer (ATCO) with the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS).

“This was the kind of weather some pilots faced two years ago when Singapore was experiencing unusually heavy rainfall,” recalls Ngui, who’s been on the job for 15 years. Working at the Singapore Air Traffic Control Centre, known in short as SATCC, Ngui is responsible for the approach control, which directs aircraft entering Singapore airspace to their respective runways. This sector of air traffic control ensures that the many different airways coming into the country do not clog up, especially during the peak periods at Changi Airport, one of the world’s busiest airports.

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***To ensure that ATCOs give their full attention to the task at hand, it is mandatory for them to take constant breaks to relieve the perpetual stress that comes with their profession. “Studies have shown that after two hours of talking non-stop to pilots, an ATCO’s focus dips drastically,” says Ngui. “As such, we have to go on half-hour breaks every two hours to regain our concentration.”***

To facilitate this arrangement, there are two relief ATCOs on stand-by, ready to take over from those at the control positions. There is also a recreation room for ATCOs to adjourn to during their break, where they can unwind by reading magazines, watching television, grabbing a bite or even taking a short power nap. “During these much-needed breaks, we do anything that will help take our mind off work,” says Ngui.

With the fate of countless aircraft and passengers in their hands, it is small wonder that ATCOs like Ngui do not crack under pressure. Interestingly, some ATCOs have their own ways to stay calm and collected. Some would carry their lucky pen as a personal talisman against air traffic mishaps.

For Ngui, it is deep breathing that helps calm his mind and body during high stress situations. “When we’re too caught up doing our job, we sometimes forget to breathe, and our heart rate goes up,” he says. “It’s important to lower your heart rate and relax so as not to get too tense.”

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Ngui sometimes finds himself bringing home certain aspects of the ATCO profession. While pleasantries are exchanged between ATCOs and pilots during less busy periods, peak hours see ATCOs doing away with all formalities and adopting abbreviated sentences so as to shorten transmissions. Having been in the profession for over a decade, Ngui is a master of “ATCO speak” and he often finds himself speaking to his wife in short phrases and truncated sentences.

“The term ‘say again’ is often used by pilots when they have a request. When we don’t catch it, we repeat the term. I say this to my wife sometimes, but she has since gotten over it and is now quite amused,” laughs Ngui.

And while Hollywood films such as *Pushing Tin* and *Ground Control* portray ATCOs as obsessive-compulsive, unpredictable stereotypes, Ngui hastens to mention that movie portrayals of the ATCO are highly exaggerated. “While some behavioural aspects come pretty close to the truth, like how we are perfectionists when it comes to ensuring the smooth flow of air traffic, we definitely do not fight in the control room,” he assures.

In fact, the ideal ATCO is someone with more brains than brawn. According to Ngui, the person most fit for the ATCO profession is one who is analytical, open to suggestions, and able to size up situations and think fast on his or her feet. However, ATCOs are also trained not to dwell in certain thinking modes for too long. Adds Ngui, “Aircraft move all the time, and if you don’t act fast enough, there will be new situations which require new solutions to be thought up again.”