



Air Traffic Controllers

Jon: OK, so we're with a group of air traffic controllers, and the first thing that I want to know is: actually how long does it take to train as an air traffic controller?

Woman 1: It takes three years, in school, in Toulouse. It's actually quite the same as an engineer training, so we've got two years after the baccalauréat and then three years in a school in Toulouse, called the ENAC.

Jon: So, you're all at the same place in Toulouse ...

Woman 2: Yes.

Jon: ... doing the same course?

Woman 2: Yes.

Jon: OK.

Woman 2: And then, maybe one year and a half after the entrance of the school, you know where you're going to work. Then centre or the airport where you're going to work train you, trains you and you can take, it depends on the size of the airport or centre, it take, it can take more than three years to be qualified. A big centre, maybe you, it takes 5 years after the entrance of the school to be qualified and to work by yourself.

Jon: OK. So, how important a part is English in your training?

Man: It is really important, because we have to learn first aeronautical English, with a specific vocabulary we didn't learn at school ..

Jon: Could you give us an example of one or two words?

Man: Like, uh, what were the first words we learned? At the airport ... "go back to airport"

Woman: "clear to land" or "clear to take-off", "the wind is" ...

Man: ... the basic vocabulary

Woman: "runways"

Man: ... then we have to improve general English in case of emergency, because we have to speak to not only English-speaking pilots, native-speakers, in fact. In case of emergency, sometimes we don't use on the air aeronautical English, we can just talk to explain a medical ...

Jon: If you have a French pilot who is suffering a medical distress, you're allowed to speak French to them, aren't you?

Group: Yes.

Jon: OK.

Woman: And what I found very difficult, it's that you don't have any eye-contact, because when you're learning a language in a classroom, with a teacher and everything, it's uh, you can, you can guess what he's meaning or she's meaning, just watching ...

Jon: ... body language and facial expressions ... it's like speaking on the phone, it's very difficult ... Have you actually ever experienced a real-life emergency situation, or are you still in your training, which is in Toulouse and it's purely theoretical?

Woman: Yes. I did once and it was very difficult, because with the oxygen mask, it's very hard to understand, even more hard to understand what they are saying. We were actually, when it happened, the other controller in the room, they just come next to you to see if you're OK, if you can understand everything, so we're like five or six controller and then when you manage to just calm down, you can work again, work again by your own ...

Jon: So, how important is it to be a good air traffic controller, how important is temperament, in other words, if you are someone who stays calm all the time, rather than someone who gets easily panicked, is that a vital part of your job, do you think?

Woman: Yes, if you are easily panicked, it's a problem, because you don't have enough energy, energy to analyse the situation and to take good decisions. It is important to try, and to calm down and to, for example, the more planes you have to control, the slower you will speak to the pilots. You calm down the rhythm, but you are very clear and direct ... you give orders with a very confident voice and it's ...

Jon: Is that taken into account when they actually appoint you, when they give you a place on the training scheme -- or do they just look at your grades from school?

Man: They, no, I don't think they, they don't take that into account ...

Woman: No ...

Man: ... but if we don't manage to do it, we won't be qualified.

Jon: Right.

Man: But, the intonation and the voice is the only things we can transmit to pilots, so we have to work ...

Jon: ... right ...

Man: ... and uh, as you said as well, when it gets difficult, it is a job, when it's stressful and difficult, where you can't stop. You have to continue, even if you are under pressure, you, you just have to do it, so, that's why you don't have to, to panic.

Elaine: So what do you feel that you have probably gained most from doing this intensive course?

Woman: So many things. Maybe, just not, being more confident.

Elaine: It has increased your self-confidence?

Woman: Yeah ...

Elaine: ... in speaking English. And would you agree with that?

Others: Yes, yes, totally and we feel more confident and ...

Jon: So, tell me, obviously a lot of younger people, they want to be air.... they want to be pilots. Did any of you, when you were much younger, want to be air traffic controllers?

Woman: No.

Man: Yes, I wanted to. Yes.

Jon: Because you know somebody who is an air traffic controller?

Man: Yes, in fact, I lived at my parents' house, which is, I would say five kilometres from the control centre where we work, so I knew some controllers, and I wanted to do the same job.

Jon: OK. Thank you very much all of you.

Elaine: Thank you and very best of luck in your career as an air traffic controller.

