LOSS OF SEPARATION THE BLIND SPOT

Given the traffic density in some European airspace, it is not surprising that dangerous situations are very occasionally overlooked. In most cases, the problem will be detected by the controllers themselves or STCA will be triggered in time to be able to correct the situation.

In other cases though, controllers of all experience levels sometimes completely overlook an aircraft when clearing another in the direct vicinity (in one area there were some 20 separation infringements in 3 years). There are some examples below.

Common elements found in these incidents:

- Most happen in low or medium traffic situations. The risk is increased after a peak or during the period after a handover (when you think you've 'settled in' on the sector).
- Descending aircraft are often involved: inbound traffic often needs to meet certain restrictions. Coupled with aiming for the top-of-descent point, this sometimes results in an incomplete scan of the affected traffic. In occasional climbing situations, a crew's request is acted on immediately without a proper scan of its immediate vicinity.
- The conflicting traffic may be in the immediate vicinity of the cleared aircraft. Typically, the controller spots potential problems that are further away, but doesn't detect the traffic that is closest to the aircraft that he/she is clearing.
- In cases of close proximity (less than 10 to 15 Nm and 1,000 ft), STCA will only give a very short warning before separation is infringed or even when it is already too late.
- Quite a number of occurrences involve traffic under someone else's control. The different colour(s) used for these aircraft may lead to subconsciously filtering them from your scan. Quite often, the overlooked aircraft has already been passed to the next sector. As such, it was considered 'dealt with', erased from memory and overlooked. The second person on the sector does not detect the problem; their workload often prevents them following the actual traffic situation.

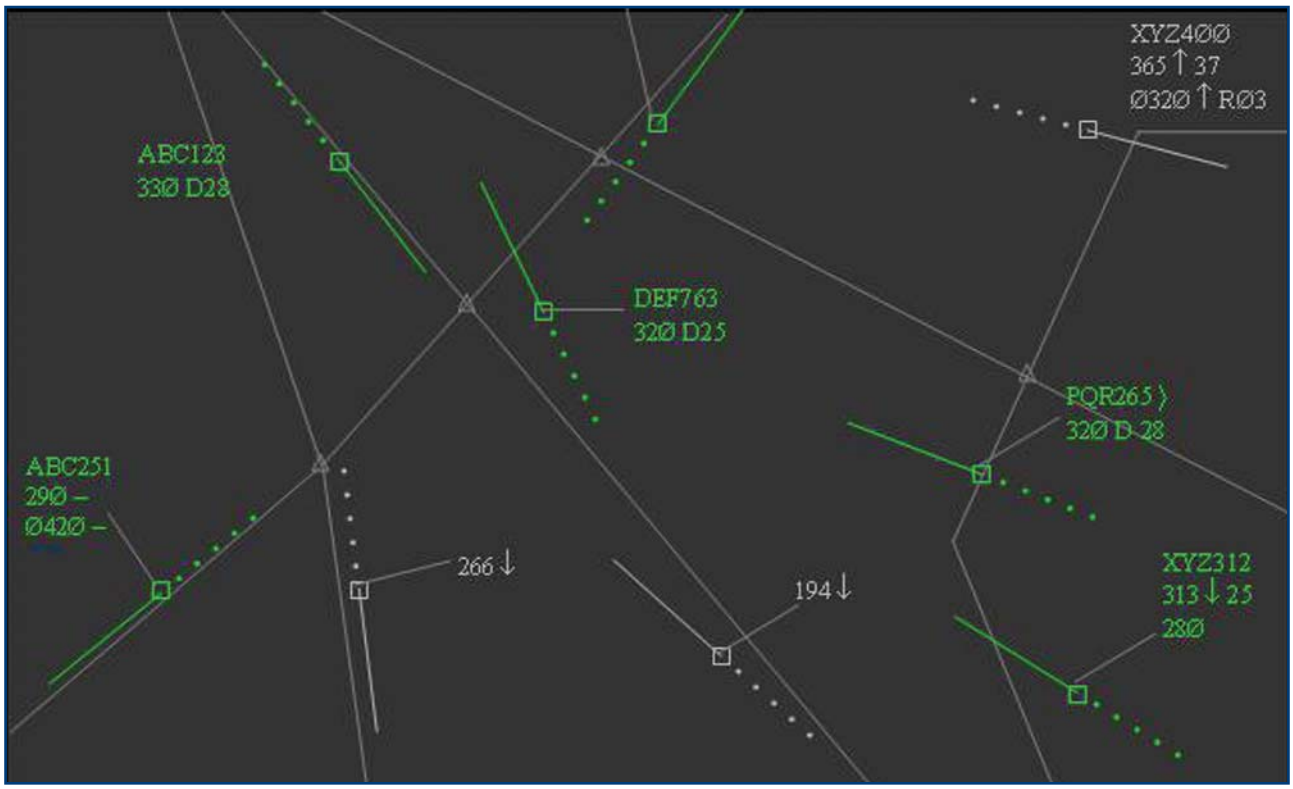

Figure 1 - For ABC123 - the controller spots both PQR265 and XYZ312 but overlooks DEF763

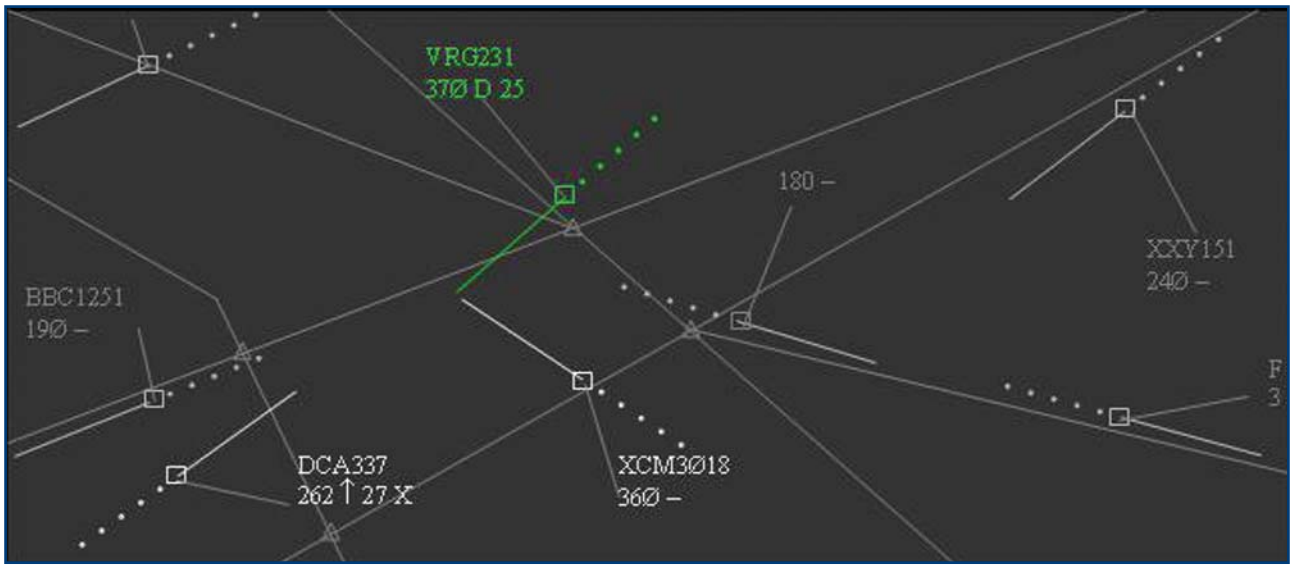

Figure 2 - VRG231 is on the sector frequency and requests descent. Taking DCA337 into account, the controller overlooks XCM3018

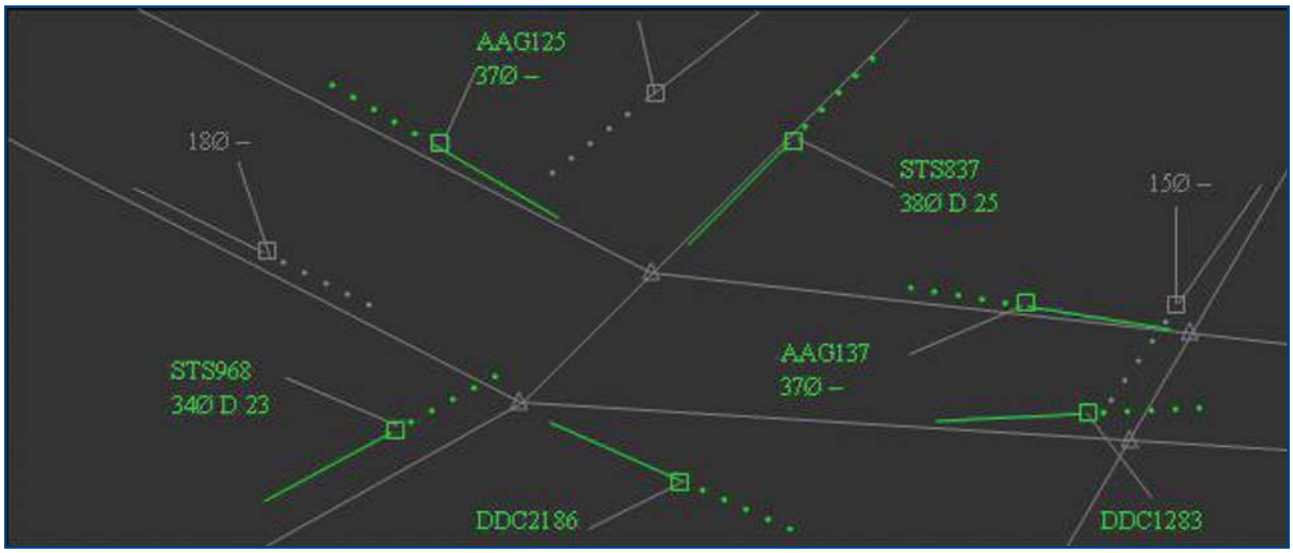

Figure 3 - Controller focuses on making a restriction for STS837 and overlooks AAG125

LESSONS LEARNED

From the many lessons learned from this and other incidents concerning all members of the aviation community, the following relate particularly to Air Traffic Controllers:

- Re-scan the situation immediately after you've given a clearance.
- Ensure correct brightness settings don't obscure aircraft not under your control.
- Avoid transferring aircraft to the next sector very early, especially in places where a lot of vertical movements are necessary.
- After peak periods, exchange positions on the sector in order to refocus and maintain a high concentration level.
- Wearing a headset can help the coordinator to follow the actual traffic situation closer. As an Executive, don't assume that your coordinator hears and cross-checks absolutely everything you do. Even when you're not very busy, your coordinator may be.
- Don't be afraid to tell a pilot to stand-by while you evaluate his/her request.
- Get a release from your adjacent sector. If possible, ensure that aircraft is free of conflictions before you pass them to adjacent centres, so no unexpected manoeuvre will affect your traffic. Try and do this for internal transfers as well.