

Alliance Illusions: an European Perspective

by *Bruce Taylor*

On a recent late Sunday afternoon I had to fly from Amsterdam to Frankfurt. It was the middle of the vacation period, it was not any kind of special weekend nor, to my knowledge, were there any special events of any significance in Holland or in Germany surrounding that weekend. Hence, I made the foolish mistake of expecting to be reasonably on time in Frankfurt and thus arranged with friends to go out to dinner that evening. The flight boarded on time, everyone was apparently seated and anxious to be off and departure time came and went. Then, after a while, the captain came on the intercom and I knew instantaneously that it was happening yet again: we were going to be delayed.

Indeed, the captain said we were ready for departure, but the now notorious, universal scapegoat was to blame: Air Traffic Control. The skyways were too busy and he was not allowed to start the engines for another 25 minutes. Knowing the mess that European ATC is (I worked in it for 6 years, but refuse to accept any blame), the excuse sounded plausible even given the timing. Ten minutes later the doors of the aircraft were opened to admit an additional dozen or so harassed looking passengers who were obviously in transit. Once they were seated the doors closed, the engines started and we were off.

Being a naturally cynical person, this started me thinking.

Back in the “good old days” there was business travel. My failing memory indicates that those “good old days” were a long, long time ago, but probably they were still with us till 4 or 5 years ago. In those ancient times one could fly from Amsterdam to Dublin or London or Frankfurt or Munich or Zurich or any other place within a 1000 kilometre radius, have nearly a whole day of business meetings and then fly back home the same evening, feeling that one had had a tiring but successful and fruitful day. Nowadays that is no longer true: business travel has become an obstacle course and delays force one to build a lot of slack into travel schedules to avoid not turning up at meetings with customers. What used to take one day now takes two. This consequently incurs the cost of a hotel, meals, drinks in the bar, etc. which one can compensate for by buying tourist class tickets instead of business class. Since the whole aircraft flies a tourist class schedule, why pay a business class fare?

Are these delays uniquely the fault of ATC? I believe not. In fact, I think that many factors are at play, of which ATC, although major, is only one. Is the situation going to get any better? No, it is going to get progressively worse.

Opinionated as I am, I believe that four complementary factors are at play and every single one of them is intractable. These factors, in order of decreasing disruptive effect, are:

1. Air Traffic Control - European ATC is a patchwork quilt of incompatibilities. The division of airspace is dictated by chauvinist and political motives, the supporting computer systems are incompatible with one another and the social issues at play in the diverse sectors ensure that at any given time at least someone is on strike or working to rule. Efficiency is impossible, let alone optimisation. As traffic increases the negative effects increase at an even greater rate.

2. Airline Economics - The airline marketplace has become so intensely competitive and yields so low that ever more production must be squeezed from every element in the process. In particular, aircraft are so tightly scheduled that any small disruption, whether an ATC delay, a technical problem, a staff shortage or any of a myriad of things which can go wrong, has a cascading effect causing delays through the airline’s network. Problems compound and can take days to be resolved.

3. Airline Alliances - Alliances tie individual airline networks together with joint scheduling, code sharing and use of shared facilities. Hence, the effects of 2 above are no longer confined to the individual airline: they are propagated through the global network of an alliance. A problem with check-in staff at SFO International yesterday evening means that your afternoon flight from AMS to FRA today has a 2 hour delay. The alliances promise “seamless service”; what they actually deliver seems less service.

4. Airport Congestion - Environmental objections lead to interminable delays in improving airport facilities in order to streamline the flow. Building a new airport is a drama lasting one to two decades. So an ever increasing number of passengers have to be forced through the current facilities.

I do not see anything happening, nor can think of anything economically, politically or socially acceptable, which is going to alleviate any of these factors. In fact, I believe the exact opposite is true: each and every one is going to exacerbate and drive us into an ever more dismal airline business travel future...

However, there is an alternative mode of transport which is becoming increasingly more attractive and certainly already for trips up to four or five hundred kilometres: the train. Although trains do not travel as fast, they travel on time, check in need only be 5 seconds before departure, there is no need to wait for luggage and they go to city centres, not outlying districts. Hence, door-to-door travel time for such trips by train is the same as for a flight which departs on time, but flights depart on time ever less frequently.

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COMING IN JANUARY

Little Lessons From History

We are very pleased to announce that beginning in January 2001, we will be featuring a new series of articles written by Bruce Taylor, that present a personal and international perspective of TPF's origins and past history.

You are cordially invited to join us in January as we introduce the first installment in a fascinating and unique look at "Little Lessons From History".

Announcing Tachyon 390 Cross Assembler 2.0

Denver, CO, September 29, 2000 — Tachyon Software today announced the availability of version 2.0 of the Tachyon 390 Cross Assembler. Also available is an interface for IBM's Visual Age TPF for Windows NT, allowing TPF programmers to assemble programs on their personal computers, independently of OS/390.

The Tachyon 390 Cross Assembler is a high-speed mainframe-compatible cross assembler, available for Windows, Linux/x86, AIX and Solaris. The input source and macro files can be read in ASCII, EBCDIC or UNICODE from the mainframe via NFS or from local directories or ZIP files. The assembler can produce the listing file in EBCDIC or ASCII. Object files are completely compatible and are ready to be linked and run on OS/390, TPF, VSE or CMS. The assembler can even produce the SYSADATA file.

Version 2.0 of the Tachyon 390 Cross Assembler adds support for the latest assembler features, including the new 64-bit instructions, GOFF object output, UNICODE, the CODEPAGE and THREAD options, enhancements to the AMODE, RMODE and DC statements and the new XATTR statement. Version 2.0 can be invoked from most editors and GUI development environments, including Visual Age TPF for Windows NT.

The Tachyon 390 Cross Assembler is available separately or as part of the Tachyon Assembler Workbench. The Tachyon Assembler Workbench provides a comprehensive set of tools, allowing OS/390 programs to be developed and tested on personal computers.

For more information, please contact Tachyon Software LLC, 665 South Harrison Street, Denver, CO 80209, 303-722-1341 (voice), 303-722-0979 (fax), info@tachyonsoft.com, <http://www.tachyonsoft.com>