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AUTHOR: SMSgt Thomas J. Aljinovich, SNCOA Student, undtd, circa 1996

Reviewed by:

AFEHRI Representative G. R. Akin date 30 DEC 97

EPC Representative Joe R. Akin date 13 Feb 98

Scanner Operator Samy Rodas date 9 Mar 98

APPROVED BY: Gary R. Akin

**GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF
Director
Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute**

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Air Force Enlisted Air Traffic Controllers

During the

Air Traffic Controller Strike,

1981-1983

SMSGt Thomas J. Aljinovich

Perhaps the most overused and least understood phrase in the military is "Military Professional;" a term normally reserved for officers. In an article entitled *"Some Problems in the Sociology of the Professions,"* Bernard Barber presents four essential attributes that can be used to evaluate professional behavior:

1. Primary orientation to the community interest rather than self interest....
2. A high degree of generalized and systematic knowledge....
3. A high degree of self control of behavior through codes of ethics....
4. A system of rewards that is primarily a set of symbols of work achievement. (3:24)

Enlisted air traffic controllers displayed each of these attributes during the illegal job action in which more than 11,000 civilian controllers walked off the job, August 3, 1981. In the span of a few hours, enlisted Air Force controllers deployed to major airports such as John F. Kennedy and La Guardia in New York as well as airports in Chicago and Atlanta to assist in keeping the air traffic control system in operation. In all, Air Force controllers deployed to more than sixty-five Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) operated facilities until mid-1983. These enlisted controllers endured many hardships for an extended period of time, but their military professionalism was clearly demonstrated in their response, and enthusiasm in providing the needed assistance during a national crisis.

There has been very little written about the support provided to the FAA from the Air Force, and my focus will be primarily on the Air Force contingent.

Mainly, we'll concentrate on how quickly the controllers left home station, with their high degree of enthusiasm and competence. The magnitude and impact of the strike on the world, nation, and military air traffic systems. We shall also look at the quality of life issues, the totals who deployed, and finally the award of the Air Force Humanitarian Service Medal. Prior to the stand up of the current major air commands (MAJCOMs) in June 1992, one command owned all military air traffic controllers. Air Force Communications Command (AFCC) were the operators of the free world's largest military air traffic control (ATC) system. Now, military controllers are divided up between each MAJCOM, who govern and provide ATC oversight for their specific mission. However, a new central agency has been formed in Washington D.C. to provide a standardized method of governing air traffic control in the Air Force. Our focus will concentrate on the years AFCC had overall authority of the controllers.

AFCC received an early warning of a potential strike in March 1980. It was hopeful at that time a suitable settlement between management and the civilian worker force could be worked out. However, as the year progressed, talks took a turn for the worst.

In the latter stages of August 1980, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Air Traffic Services, Colonel Allen W. Gray, "Directed all major air commands to identify essential ATC needs in order to be considered in development of FAA contingency plans." (5:1) Between August 1980 and March 1981 AFCC (and division counterparts) developed and submitted a contingency plan for the strike to the Air Staff, of which was adopted. The Air Force took a proactive role to ensure all known potential areas of concern were considered and planned for prior to a walk out.

Talks between the Professional Air Traffic Controller Organization (PATCO) and the FAA continued to spiral down, the strike began August 3, 1981. Approximately 17,000 civilian air traffic controllers had made the decision to walk off the job, leaving the nation's traffic control system without qualified personnel to man the facilities, and impacting the world's air traffic system.

The following evening, at approximately six o'clock, Raymond Van Vuren, Director of the FAA's Air Traffic Services Division, "Requested that Colonel Budesheim of the air staff arrange for the immediate deployment of one hundred controllers to New York, Atlanta, and Chicago."
(1:15)

Within three hours of the request, AFCC controllers started reporting for duty at FAA facilities in New York, Atlanta, and Chicago. (1:16) Controllers deployed using privately owned cars and aircraft from the Military Airlift Command rather than by commercial airlines.

Between August 3 and 12 August 1981, the Air Force deployed 413 enlisted controllers to 36 different FAA facilities. Some of these the world's busiest facilities, with the most complex traffic environments, truly a challenge for anyone walking in off the streets to assume the responsibility of separating aircraft from one another.

Our enlisted controllers made the transition from a military to a civilian environment with ease. Numerous FAA and Air Force officials were surprised to see these young enlisted members performing all duties with such a high degree of competence and enthusiasm. For example, Mr. Harry Hubbard, chief of the Washington D.C. air traffic control facility, was amazed when approximately thirty enlisted military controllers arrived for duty at 6 p.m.; they ask for all pertinent FAA training materials. The controllers took the study material to a motel that night and reported for duty the next morning ready to test in some of the written portions of the facility

examination. The Detroit Metropolitan tower chief reported similar experiences and pointed out that enlisted military controllers, studying during off-duty hours, had accomplished two weeks of training in two days. (1:31)

Numerous FAA officials--constantly cited the controllers professionalism both in appearance and conduct. This and their "can-do" attitude assisted in offsetting the strike's impact on commercial aviation. Although these controllers were giving their best, let's consider some other factors from the strike.

During August and September 1981, the Canadian, French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese controllers followed with sympathy strikes and slow downs of varying length. (6:105) In the European Theater for example the 322 Airlift Division reported, "The strike had a heavy impact on the westbound flow of strategic aircraft. Duty officers had to precoordinate air traffic control slot times with Corta at the Paris Orly airport the day prior to aircraft operations. Final coordination was then necessary with Frankfurt Center. There were numerous occasions where aircraft had to be diverted to alternate routes or where crews had to be put back into crew rest due to differing slot times." (6:105) With time, and as the worldwide ATC agencies became used to the new flow structure, air traffic control in the European Theater returned to some kind of normalcy. (6:106) However, back home many units such as the 410th Bombardment Wing were suffering from the effects of the strike.

Headquarters Strategic Air Command provided the following guidance to the bomb wing. "Although we prefer instrument flight rules (IFR), it may be necessary to utilize visual flight rules (VFR) for training flights during the strike if the air traffic control center cannot provide IFR service." (8:9) Under IFR service, aircraft are afforded constant radar separation from all known traffic. However, under VFR service, aircraft must assume a see and avoid from other traffic,

given the speed at which aircraft fly, it's easy to see how dangerous this becomes. Aircrews were not the only ones to face a perilous situation. Controllers had to face angry mobs of striking controllers daily either going to work or coming off shift.

Tensions increased at numerous FAA facilities after President Reagan fired the striking controllers. For example, at Detroit Metropolitan Airport, strikers harassed and verbally threatened military controllers who crossed picket lines. One of the more serious disturbances occurred August 17, a group of PATCO pickets stopped a vehicle carrying military controllers, rocked it, banged on the hood, and shouted threats and obscenities. (1:34) These enlisted controllers handled these types of situations well and demonstrated commendable restraint in some highly inflammatory encounters with strikers, rarely responding, and refusing to be intimidated either by the strikers or job difficulties.

Some other difficulties the controllers faced were pay, housing and transportation problems, encountered by the first deployment of controllers. AFCC immediately convened a conference with all division senior enlisted advisors to devise a strategy to combat these problems. The strategy had each senior enlisted advisor act as a troubleshooter and headquarters liaison to head off problems early. This program lasted until the end of the deployment of the controllers, and proved to be an excellent vehicle to head off problems before they became overshadowing. This was the first time in AFCC's history that senior enlisted advisors had been used in such a capacity; enlisted taking care of enlisted.

There were numerous other initiatives to ease the hardships of the controllers. A sponsor program was developed where a remaining unit member would be assigned to take care of the deployed controller's families by resolving medical, vehicle or any other problems that arose. Also, unit commanders of deployed controllers ensured each one had current study material

mailed to them for promotion testing; with testing dates set up and test monitors available to administer the promotion tests. (6:33) Another area of concern was the probability of the military suffering a mass exodus of controllers to take up the empty slots left by the striking civilian controllers.

Contrary to the opinions of many senior Air Force officers, exposing enlisted personnel to higher paying civilian jobs did not result in a mass exodus of controllers from the Air Force. There are a number of reasons the expected exodus did not happen. Those who had been in the Air Force long enough to think about retirement were not interested in a switch. (6:33) General McCarthy, commander of AFCC stated, "The people programs clearly helped to maintain high reenlistment rates, but based on the testimony of scores of deployed controllers, one can only conclude that non-financial motivations were also key factors in persuading many of them to stay in the Air Force. In other words, the enlisted controller was and is one of the command's most adaptable and committed resource." (1:51) I offer a further explanation of why the exodus did not occur. In a letter on the subject of professionalism in 1970, General Chapman, then Commandant of the Marine Corps, said "...professionalism is made up of many things, but it is grounded in the belief that high standards in performance and discipline are vital to success." Money was not an overwhelming issue with these young controllers, but a calling to serve their nation when she called. (3:34) These enlisted controllers when called upon, left their families, homes, and safe environments in a time of national crisis. They endured harassment, physical attack, pay problems, housing, and still showed up for work everyday in those FAA facilities. Their "can-do" attitudes spread through out the facilities they were assigned, they wore the uniform with pride, clearly identifying who they were, and what they stood for. These enlisted controllers displayed the four attributes of a professional mentioned earlier.

Over 612 enlisted controllers deployed over a 23 month period. Although most deployments lasted an average of six to nine months, several lasted much longer. An extreme example was Technical Sergeant Paul F. Brady from the 2066th Communications Squadron, Myrtle Beach AFB, South Carolina, who departed for Denver Air Route Traffic Control Center on August 6, 1981. Initially, he was on temporary duty for 60 days, but officials extended his orders to 179 days; after that, it was just one extension after another. He was the last controller to leave an FAA facility, returning to Myrtle Beach 23 months after his original deployment. He claimed life at the Denver facility caused a great deal of job tension. In his words, "The work was hard. We worked eight hours a day, six days a week on rotating shifts." (1:31) There are countless other examples of putting service before self, acquiring a high degree of knowledge and skills, maintaining self-control, and receiving the best award of all; mission complete!

Of all the controllers deployed, the percentages of junior enlisted personnel is amazing. These controllers adapted fast, while maintaining the highest professional ethic through out the deployment. These young enlisted controllers fully realized and understood the impact of their competence and behavior, and answering their country's call.

In recognition of the enlisted controller's and AFCC's support of the FAA during the 1981-83 period, General Charles A. Gabriel, Air Force Chief of Staff, expressed his thanks, "To those who served in this critical period and also those who stayed behind to keep our military system in operation." (1:28) All controllers who deployed to FAA facilities received the Humanitarian Service Medal. Job Well Done! What was the impact of the involvement of enlisted controllers during the 23 months they manned these critical FAA facilities?

The PATCO strike occurred at a time when the military's image was at a low ebb. Given the public's perception, it was understandable that large segments of the general public and FAA management doubted our ability to support the FAA in a safe and efficient manner.

When the call came, 100 controllers were ready; they demonstrated their "can-do" attitude by arriving at the nation's three busiest facilities within a matter of hours. Two weeks after the first call 488 Air Force controllers were in place at 126 FAA locations. (2:11) By September 1, 1981 over 200 enlisted controllers were "positioned certified" during the first month of their deployment. Once these personnel were at their respective TDY locations they not only worked eight hour shifts, but spent many off-duty hours studying, and preparing for the next position certification.

The strike not only affected the travel of millions of Americans and military aircraft, but overflowed into the world scene. The direct contributions of the military controllers kept the nation's airways safe and operating and avoided a massive disruption of the nation's air traffic control system.

Controllers not only maintained superior self control when confronted by angry strikers, they refused to be intimidated. Housing, pay and transportation needs were quickly rectified. Sponsors were appointed to take care of their home life, freeing them to concentrate on their jobs, and lessen some of the worry. Senior enlisted advisors were appointed to take care of all their needs, and commanders ensured promotion opportunities remained the same as if they were still back home. Because of these programs the expected exodus of military controllers to a man starved FAA did not occur. The "people" programs clearly helped to maintain higher reenlistment rates.

The professional competence of each controller was displayed continuously throughout the 23 months. However, I would like to offer a better definition of professionalism than those offered

by the experts. The enlisted controllers displayed three critical attributes of a professional; Duty Honor and Country! They did receive the Humanitarian Service Medal for their sacrifices, and stayed until the job was finished.

Support to the FAA following PATCO's strike August 3, 1981 was one of the most important events in military ATC history. It demanded unprecedented cooperation between FAA and DOD and demonstrated to the former and to the flying public the skill and the professionalism of enlisted controllers. Above all, it showed Americans that the controllers were ready and able to perform their ATC mission and to contribute to the nation's well-being during peacetime.

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