# Plane controllers fight boredom, not ulcers, air crashes

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When the average person thinks of an air traffic controller, the image that probably comes to mind is a chain-smoking, disheveled character chewing on his finger nails as he tries to keep planes from splattering into each other.

However, that is not the situation in the tower at Eugene's Mahlon Sweet Airport.

There are four controllers at work, only one of whom could be called busy. The other three handle a plane every five minutes or so and are able to relax — joking, slurping coffee and fighting monotony.

Controller Gary Nelson says his job "is hours of boredom with seconds of terror. I forget who said that but it is a good way to describe what goes on."

Chief controller Tom Jost says Eugene has an average of 455 takeoffs and landings a day.

"That's not real busy," says Jost, "but it's enough to keep us from getting bored."

Jost explains air traffic work at Mahlon Sweet isn't too stressful because of the number of flights, but "since we don't have radar and everything we do here is manual, there is a lot of stress involved."

What? No radar? How do you know where planes are?

"We have to rely on the pilot's reports," says Nelson.

Aircraft in Oregon airspace are controlled by a master computer in Seattle. Flights to Eugene are turned over to the Mahlon Sweet tower when they are 30 miles from the airport. A pilot relays his position, estimated time of arrival and other information to the tower. He is given final landing instructions 10 miles from Eugene.

Nelson brings in a United Airlines 737 from San Francisco.

"Ah, Roger United 932, we have you clear on 34 for landing."

Now, you know exactly where that plane is?

"Yeah, he'll come bustin' out of those clouds" — Nelson points to the south — "in a couple of minutes." The jet emerges from the damp sweatshirt sky. This time Nelson was right.

Jost says the quality of pilot today is high, as he says, "It has to be." However, it hasn't always been this way.

"Yeah, back when I first got into the business, I had to wonder how a few of them got into the air," Jost says.

As it is, there are Sunday pilots just as there are Sunday drivers.

"We had a woman fly in here from Portland last year," says Jost. "She asked for permission to land and we assigned her a runway. She said 'Okay' and then landed on another runway.

"So we asked her why she didn't land where we told her to. She said, 'but this is the runway I used when I flew into Eugene last time.'"

A big, effervescent guy, Jost says 95 percent of all controllers are extroverts. He goes on to explain "This is a job where you have to be certain in your decisions. In this case, the meek very definitely do not inherit the earth."

Air traffic control is becoming a popular business. Jost says more and more people are going into it and that there is no problem finding qualified people. He estimates four of every ten applicants for the air traffic training school in Oklahoma City, only will make it into the field.

"Two will be disqualified through the physical — heart trouble, high blood pressure, bad eyesight, this kind of thing— and four others will decide the effort they have to make isn't worth it. There is a lot of work involved in becoming an air traffic controller," Jost says.

As federal employees, the Eugene controllers have their salaries set by Congress. Jost says the average Eugene controller makes about $22,000 and can retire at age 50 with a pension of $12,000 a year.

Jost says most of the Eugene controllers are pilots themselves, and in his own flying he often finds himself criticizing the controller who handles his approach.

"Y'know, I find myself saying, 'Geez, I could have got myself down by now.' It's like anything else, we all think we're the best at whatever we do," Jost said.

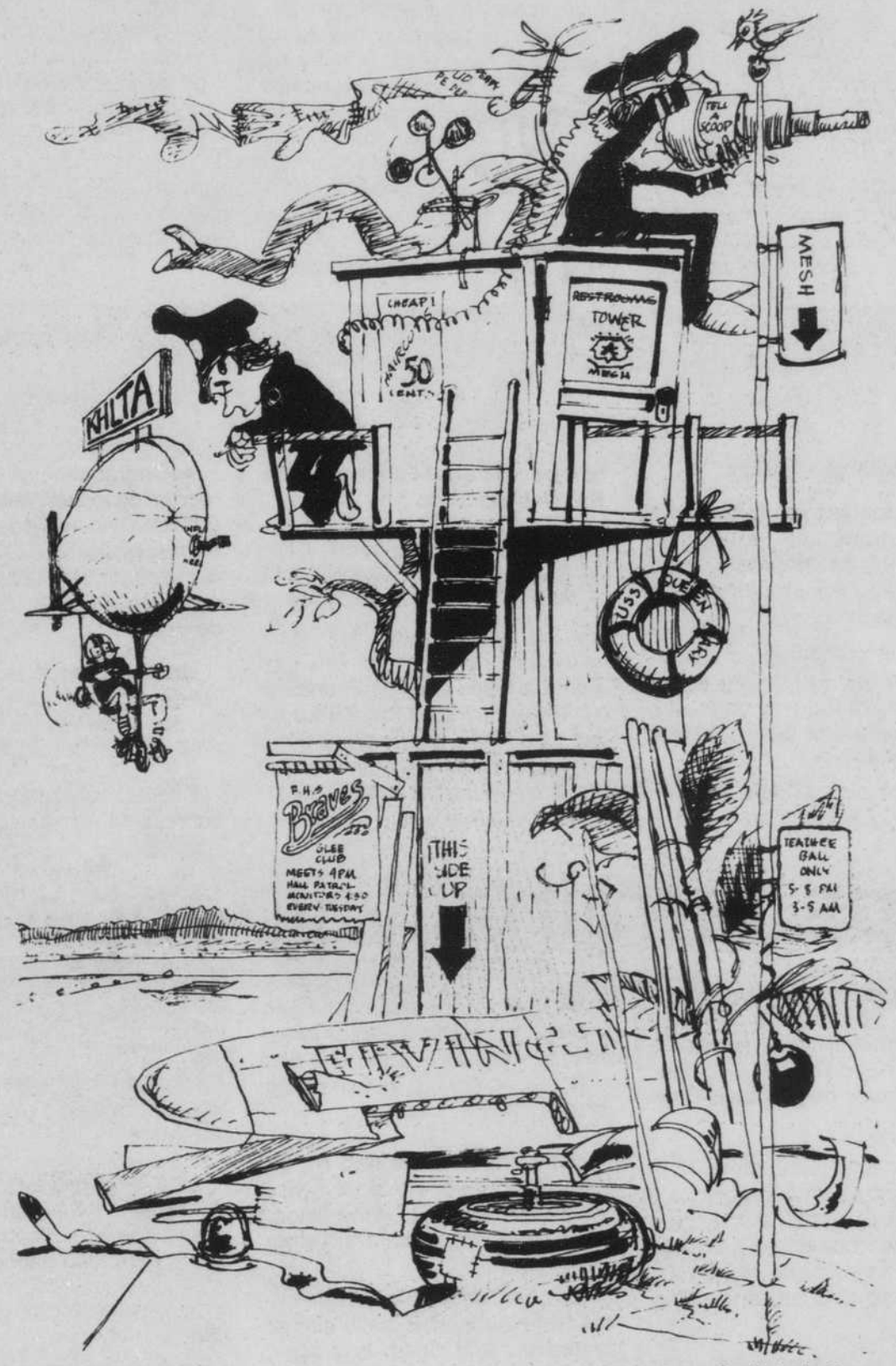
Without radar or computers, the equipment in the Eugene tower is not as intimidating as one would expect. The most sophisticated thing is a direction finder (DF), a contraption that locks onto a plane's radio signal.

On the screen of the DF, a green blip throbs showing the direction in which the signal is coming from but does not indicate distance.

The controllers say their job will be "a whole lot easier" once the tower gets radar, an area of three or four miles can be allotted around each plane. Right now, 20 or 30 miles must be provided.

Is there anything else he'd like to make his job easier?

"Well," says Nelson, "a higher tower would help."




Graphic by Jim Payne

# *Oral bidding for timber returns to NW area*

The House voted Monday in favor of oral bidding for Forest Service timber, a practice recently banned but once long used in the Pacific Northwest.

"Passage of the oral auction bill represents a great victory for the small, independent mills of the Northwest," said Congressman Jim Weaver, D-Ore. Tuesday.

Weaver lauded the restoration of oral bidding as assurance of "a stable timber supply for the communities who rely on federal timber."

Presently, lumber companies must submit sealed bids for timber located on public land.

Sealed bidding, traditional in the East and South, has been required nationwide for only the past eight months. The practice has been opposed vigorously by the timber industry in the Northwest, where most commercial timber is located in national forests.

Monty Montgomery, Associated Oregon Loggers (AOL) executive vice-president, said Tuesday the vast majority of AOL members are delighted with the House vote.

"We don't have an official position on sealed versus oral bids," Montgomery said. But an unofficial show of hands at the annual AOL conference in Eugene last month showed 80 to 90 percent of the AOL favored oral bids, he said.

The Senate adopted a similar repeal last September, so the measure now goes to Pres. Carter for his signature or veto. The administration has opposed the bill.

Weaver, however, said, "The White House has assured me that Pres. Carter will sign the bill because of its importance in fostering a diversified and healthy timber industry."

A 1976 law that went into effect only last July required sealed bids unless the agriculture secretary — after a Forest Service investigation — prescribed another procedure because of local circumstances.

The House Agriculture Committee leadership, labor groups and timber industry supporters said the repeal measure would allow a return to oral auctions, but would limit them to prospective buyers who had submitted sealed bids that exceeded the timber's appraised value.

But the House Environmental Study Conference disagreed, saying the measure effectively would allow a return to historic bidding patterns that have been in practice since 1945.

Under that practice, the agriculture secretary and the Forest Service tailor procedures to particular markets, emphasizing competition and economic stability over price-fixing problems.

Until the new law went into effect, sealed bids were the norm in the South and East, auctions in the Northwest — where most of the public forests are — and a mix elsewhere.

The 1976 law assumes that collusion is a greater problem than local economic balances, said Rep. John Krebs, D-Calif., the law's author. He said the Justice Department has six collusive-bidding investigations in progress.

"Our position is that if there's going to be collusion, it can happen just as easily with sealed bids as oral bids," said Dave Fidanque, Weaver's aide in Eugene.

"This law formalizes a way for the Forest Service to monitor bidding patterns" to prevent collusion, Fidanque said.

The sealed-bids mandate was voted into law by a House-Senate conference committee on new forest-management policy without the traditional hearings and committee action. The House previously voted to require sealed bidding on relatively small sales.

Supporters of repeal said communities that depended economically on timber going to local mills established a pattern of bidding through oral auctions to assure that the needs of all local firms were met.

Supporters also said 20 mills have been forced to close since the new regulation went into effect, and complained that outsiders are able to outbid local interests under sealed bidding. The Forest Service said it could not confirm any mill closings.

The service has declared 183 towns economically dependent on public timberlands, mostly in the West, where the agency's sealed-bidding regulations allow 75 percent of the annual sales to be by oral auctions.