

A letter from a flight service worker

25 June 2005

The following letter was sent by flight service worker in response to the article, “Bush administration begins to privatize the skies”.

Everyone states that Flight Service workers file flight plans and disseminate weather reports. This sounds very simple, but may I add a few of the details of our jobs. I say jobs because there many tasks involved.

When I file a flight plan for a pilot, most of the time it's routine. However, as I'm receiving the information I'm also being a detective. Countless times a pilot will file the wrong altitude for their direction of flight. A flight plan may include a routing which would take the aircraft into a TFR (Temporary Flight Restriction) that would put the president in jeopardy, or over a disaster sight with the media and police trying to limit the loss of life, or into a military area that is hot, or over a stadium filled with 50,000 people. A disaster is prevented before anyone leaves the ground every day. It is not just filing a flight plan!

September 11, 2001 was a day we all wish never happened. Flight Service had a call to action never put in our manuals. Every aircraft in America was grounded. At BDR (Bridgeport Flight Service) we were coordinating with Otis Air Force Base in the Cape (Cod), filling flight plans for the F-15s for many weeks and in fact months to protect the airspace over NYC. Bradley Air National Guard and Westover Air Force Base were also involved and in our airspace. Then the calls started coming in from General Aviation—a huge increase of pilots asking when and where they could fly. All of Flight Service was extremely busy for a long period of time, and what is in place right now is a proven system. The FAA administrator quoted saying Flight Service did an “exemplary job” with time-off awards for the great service. Now four years later we get another time-off award in the forum of a Rif [reduction in force] notice!

Weather briefing is the part of our service that prevents the most loss of life. We are trained to

interpret the NWS (National Weather Service) products for accuracy, add the pilot weather reports, know the aircraft capabilities along with the local area knowledge of weather patterns and terrain to help a pilot, make a go or no-go decision. On many occasions we will VNR (Visual flight Not Recommended) a pilot and literally prevent them from being a statistic on the leading cause of death in aviation. We also have to tailor a pre-flight weather briefing according to the pilots' capabilities—are they students, newly rated pilots, or seasoned pilots. I have talked to many IFR pilots (Instrument Flight Rules-able to fly without reference to the horizon) out of flying at a particular time because of certain conditions like thunderstorms and icing. Again this is pre-flight, before the flight.

In-flight, air-to-ground communication is critical, including weather and aeronautical information. Pilots flying across the 58 sectors of airspace now in place receive the local area knowledge of the controllers that handle that specific sector of territory. The In-Flight position receives many routine calls or may receive one that needs a quick response. A pilot calls and says: “I'm lost and need help; I'm over a lake with an east/west highway.” The in-flight controller knows their airspace and can help that situation much better than one from another area. A controller that lives and breathes the weather they brief has a tremendous advantage over one that is remotely located. A lifeguard pilot carrying an organ calls and asks us to relay a new estimated time of arrival. The Air Force calls to ask us to scan the emergency frequency 121.5 for ELT (Emergency Locator Transmitter) signals. A military pilot calls for a change in destination that requires multiple coordinations. A pilot calls and is in trouble with a mechanical or electrical problem and needs the closest landing. All these scenarios are everyday events throughout the US.

Flight Data (FD) is a position that interoperates and disseminates many different kinds of messages. Flight

Data and In-Flight relay ATC (Air Traffic Control) clearances to pilots at airports without a control tower or when the tower is closed. FD coordinates search and rescue efforts. Many times a concerned family member calls to report an overdue pilot. Flight plans go overdue and the FD specialist goes into action.

We also must distribute NOTAMS (notices to airmen) of airport runway conditions during snow, ice or maintenance. This includes the dissemination of information about navigational functions, tower light outages, military operations and much more. An example of why this position is located near the In-Flight position: A snowy evening at Bridgeport, I'm working in-flight and a pilot calls, he's on the in-bound and wants the current weather. I give him the weather and at the same time I hear my co-worker say, "Roger, Bridgeport airport closed." This information was not even typed into the system and we made a call and the pilot was able to land without incident in very bad weather.

The Flight Service option is truly the un-sung hero of ATC. We prevent accidents every day by advising pilots on the information they need to make safe flights.

We help the in-route and approach part of ATC by talking pilots out of going into bad weather, which would certainly make it more complicated than it already is for them.

Does this type of work sound inherently governmental or work to be privatized?

DA

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