

Introduction

UNION RISING

Sitting amid the darkness of Washington Center in Leesburg, Virginia, an air traffic controller spoke incessantly into the tiny microphone of his headset. His accent revealed the soft twang of the West Virginian hills, but his strong, confident voice cut through the air like the boom of a howitzer.



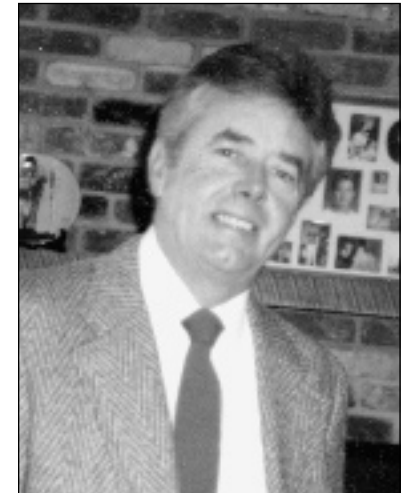
Despite his cocky demeanor, his restless eyes darted repeatedly across the radarscope before him, its round screen lit up like a pinball machine in the dazzling throes of a bonus round. Twenty-two green blips flashed and danced on the glass while two stacks of airplanes pirouetted in unison over Woodstown in southwestern New Jersey and Yardley, Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia. The aerial ballet formed the swirling headwaters of a river that streamed northeast across his scope—and through his mind—before flowing on to New York’s LaGuardia Airport.

Jerry Tierney’s hands were full on this day in 1984. Besides the rush of planes, he was grappling with the aftershocks of a cataclysmic strike that wiped out three-quarters of the air traffic control work force in August 1981. Chronic low staffing

frequently forced controllers to juggle more than one portion of airspace at a time. Tierney was riding herd over the Woodstown and Dupont sectors. Like many of his brethren, he was also toiling through yet another grueling six-day workweek.

Sporting a bushy head of dark brown hair, neatly cropped above the ears, and wearing his usual button-down shirt and slacks, the medium-built Tierney had earned a well-deserved reputation as one of Washington Center’s finest controllers. Colleagues respected his honest, sincere attitude and strong work ethic, and they cheered his zero tolerance for nonsensical edicts from management.

In his largely unseen world, where professionals balance the science of physics with the art of choreography, a thin line separates chaos from



Courtesy of Jerry Tierney

Jerry Tierney: Now retired, the West Virginia native began his air traffic control career in 1968 at Washington Center.