



**Inside Washington Center:** The overnight solitude of this area gives way to frenetic activity after daybreak. The M-I control room that Jerry Tierney and his colleagues worked in was replaced by this remodeled version during the late 1990s. / Paul Williams

control. Good controllers know their limits. They can sense when one more plane will propel them into the abyss and scatter their concentration like a collapsing house of cards. Tierney had been pushing tin for sixteen years and could tell he was nearing the edge of the precipice. There was nowhere else to stack planes in the north while they waited for their turn to land. He called another controller at the center to briefly shut off the relentless streams from Maryland and Virginia in the south.

Seated behind him, a supervisor snapped to attention and leaned forward. “We’ve got to get them in,” he said.

“I’m not taking them,” Tierney responded, his eyes raking over the scope as he plotted his next several moves.

The supervisor’s voice grew edgy. “You have to accept those aircraft.”

Under pressure from Congress and the airlines, the Federal Aviation Administration was publicly proclaiming that the air traffic system had fully recovered from the strike. After enduring a period of cutbacks, the airlines published thicker timetables month by month, testing the limits of a largely inexperienced work force only half as big as in 1981. This was where the rubber met the runway.