

“No,” Tierney said firmly. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not safe. I know how many aircraft I can handle.”

Preoccupied with the twenty-two targets hopping across his scope, Tierney did not notice the supervisor slide over to the keyboard at the data position next to him. His superior typed the computer ID codes for two or three more planes from the south and pressed ENTER after each number, transferring responsibility for them to Tierney. One by one, the pilots checked in on his radio frequency.

Suddenly realizing what was happening, Tierney exclaimed, “Hey, why am I talking to these guys?”¹

Fortunately, no near misses occurred.

Incidents like this, although more serious than most at the time, typified the tumultuous culture of an air traffic system staggering back to its feet after a reeling blow. The Reagan administration’s dismissal of more than 11,000 federal employees—who broke the law by walking off the job—ranks as one of the most regrettable chapters in aviation history. Careers, families, even a few lives were lost in a complex showdown of egos, greed, and legitimate air safety and workplace issues.

For those who stayed on the job and the le-

gions of replacement controllers who joined them, an unfortunate sequel awaited. More than half the world’s air traffic flew in the United States, creating an immense challenge for the FAA to restore its decimated work force.

Aside from the sheer numbers of people involved, time pressures weighed heavily on the system. New controllers typically spent several months at the FAA Academy in Oklahoma City, followed by two or more years of on-the-job training before they were considered fully qualified. Even then, the seasoning process had barely begun.

But adversity also

presented a singular possibility.

“The FAA had a golden opportunity to treat the new group of controllers well and never have to face organization,” says Alexander “Doc” Cullison, former president of the Marine Engineers Beneficial Association, a labor union that has supported air traffic controllers. “They had a mal-

“
The FAA had a golden opportunity to treat the new group of controllers well and never have to face organization.

— Alexander “Doc” Cullison,
 former president of the
 Marine Engineers Beneficial Association



Alexander “Doc” Cullison: A marine engineer who became a union representative for MEBA, Cullison helped to organize controllers in 1986-87. / NATCA archives