

leable, optimistic work force that they could have done anything in the world with if they had treated them properly.”

It was not to be.

During a brief honeymoon, managers and rank and file worked side by side in a heroic effort to keep the traffic moving. The harmony was short-lived, however, with an agency that could not shake off its past habits.

As the turbulence subsided for the transition force, too many autocratic managers reverted to their former roles. Controllers’ complaints about excessive time on position, inadequate staffing, hasty training, and unreliable equipment were, for the most part, dismissed as whining. Suggestions on operational procedures and new equipment were rarely solicited and usually ignored. Yelling, intimidation, and a fundamental lack of respect became commonplace. Once again, managers relegated the front-line crew to the status of hired hands rather than acknowledging them as partners in providing air safety.

By refusing to accept any responsibility for conditions that led to the strike and allowing the same problems to fester, the agency sowed new seeds of discontent that inevitably blossomed into another union.

Howie Barte, a founder of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, notes that many people were involved in the grass-roots effort to form the new organization. But, he adds, “No one could hold a candle to the best organizer we ever had—the FAA.”

**Ed Mullin:** A longtime tower controller at Dallas Love Field and an early NATCA activist, Mullin faced special challenges in the Southwest, where strong anti-union attitudes are prevalent. / NATCA archives



## NATCA Takes Flight

On the morning of May 6, 1987, a single-engine plane towing a white banner with black lettering droned above the vast Dallas Metroplex.

The cryptic inscription on the banner—“Vote NATCA”—left many who saw it scratching their heads. But its intended audience understood the message and stood proud. Ballots had just been mailed across the country to more than 12,500 controllers, who would decide whether to officially sanction a labor organization that had been in the making for more than three years.

At Love Field in Dallas, the control tower manager expressed astonishment as he peered through binoculars at the streaming pennant. Standing nearby in the cramped glassed-in cab, where water leaked through the ceiling tiles when it rained, controller Ed Mullin could not resist chuckling. As a regional representative for the fledgling group, Mullin had devised the banner ploy to boost voter turnout in the decidedly anti-union state of Texas. If controllers saw their name in lights, so to speak, the recognition might convince them that NATCA had a chance to succeed. A satisfied smile played on Mullin’s lips while he watched the plane disappear to the south for a pass over Redbird Airport.

The hour-long flight also called for appearances above Addison Airport, Fort Worth Meacham Airport, the perimeter of Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, Fort Worth Center, and the FAA Regional Office