

An Eye-Opening Day: Flying ATC Controllers



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By Mike Jones

A cluster of 27 pilots and planes met on a crystal-clear October morning at Wayne Executive Jetport in Goldsboro, North Carolina to offer airplane rides to approximately forty newly-minted air traffic controllers at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base. It was my good fortune to be able to participate in this event with my always reliable 1979 Centurion, N7591N.

This was the fourth iteration of the “Fly the Controllers” program and the conclusion to the “Summer Series” of education and safety events with the local controllers. Orchestrated by the enormously energetic William “Bill” Miller, a retired F-4 and F-15 pilot, all the expenses for the program were donated by the Goldsboro Wayne Aviation Association.

Young Eagles for Adults

Just like a “Young Eagles” mission, the pilots flew the controllers in their own airplanes, free of charge. In some of the planes the student controllers, sitting in the co-pilot seat, attempted to work the radios. This allowed them to get a bit of the feel for the conflicting demands on the pilot’s attention during a flight.

The event started with an excellent pancake breakfast at a large hangar on the ramp at Wayne Executive. Long tables allowed the controllers, spouses and pilots to mingle as they munched. A series of formal safety briefings explained

the procedures and frequencies. These were very helpful because many of the pilots were from distant 'dromes and unfamiliar with the general area.



Photo 1: As the controllers enjoyed their breakfasts, late-arriving pilots checked in with Laura Miller to get their passenger manifests.

The route started with a VFR eastbound departure from Wayne to a low-approach at Kinston Regional Jetport. The planes then turned west and flew down the massive runway at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, home to a fleet of F-15 Strike Eagles and lumbering KC-135 tankers.

The students then attempted to find a prominent visual reporting point often used by

Seymour-Johnson Tower before they eventually returned to Wayne Executive.

Most of the pilots flew “high speed” low approaches at Kinston Regional and Seymour Johnson which is somewhat less thrilling than the same accomplishment in an F-15. Even at 100 feet of altitude, it’s a snooze to fly a 12,000 foot runway. “Top Gun” we were not.

The aircraft were sorted into six “flights” of five airplanes, with the fastest planes leaving first. The plan — created by experienced F-15 pilots — was for each airplane to wait five minutes between departures but most ignored that suggestion and departed with normal general aviation spacing. Five minutes in a GA plane feels like a life-time when the runway is clear.

Once in the air, the proto-controllers were tasked to perform three chores simultaneously. They needed to listen and understand instructions from the controllers at the various airports, keep their eyes peeled for traffic, and try to

follow along with the aviating. During my flight, after a few minutes my “co-pilot” exclaimed, “You’re so busy! There’s a lot going on here!”

All three of my passengers were flabbergasted at the difficulty at seeing other airplanes, even though the sun was bright and the skies were clear. Finally, approaching Seymour-Johnson, one in the backseat made a less-than helpful traffic call.

“I see him, but I don’t know how to tell you where he is.” That was a learning experience for all of us.

After our flight, we chatted about the workload on the pilot. Especially in hard IMC, I cautioned my students, think about the environment in which the solo-pilot is working.



Photos 2 & 3: Volunteers were very busy on the ramp; some were preparing breakfast while others were marshalling and parking planes. Is there anything better than pancakes and coffee in an airplane hangar?

“Maybe he’s in turbulence, managing his approach and navigating, working the radios or managing a malfunction, and suddenly you want to rapid-fire a

revised clearance,” I cautioned. “Just give him a break to digest it all.” They agreed that sounded like good advice.



Photo 4: Seymour-Johnson is the home to the nation's only F-15 Strike Eagle training wing. Many pilots stay in the area after retiring to teach newcomers the systems and procedures. Here retired colonel "Boo Boo" Miller briefs the controllers and pilots on the plan for the day.

"I'm so glad we're able to help the airmen better understand what's going on in the cockpit," Miller said later. "When the controllers understand both perspectives... the pilot's view and the scope view... everybody benefits. We look forward to doing it again next year."

ATC Training

In the Air Force, new air traffic controllers receive an enormous quantity of training before they ever press the "transmit" button. Usually a student controller is a young enlisted person straight out of Air Force basic training. They attend sixteen weeks of basic airspace and aeronautics training at the Air Traffic Controller School at Keesler AFB in Mississippi. The course is very technical and the attrition rate is high; about a quarter of the candidates drop-out before the end of the class.

The apprentice controllers then transfer to their permanent assignments at Air Force Bases all around the world. Once the airman arrives at Seymour-Johnson, it takes eight to sixteen months of on-the-job training before becoming a fully-qualified "certified" controller.

Brian "Rock" Rockwell, Deputy Chief Controller of the 4th Operations Support Squadron at Seymour-Johnson Air Force Base Approach Control,

reported there are about 35 controllers and ten trainees at the base at any one time. The students arrive in a slow but constant trickle to prevent the training burden from becoming too onerous on the certified staff. Students are assigned to either a “tower track” or a “radar track.” Seymour-Johnson is relatively unique having both types of services at the one base.

Military controllers usually spend their entire first enlisted period of six years at one base before they cycle to other facilities around the world. Thirteen of the Seymour-Johnson controllers are civilians, like Rock, and live in the area. Their experiences are particularly useful because they offer continuity to the military controllers.

The Seymour-Johnson air space is busy. They handle about 65,000 operations annually, which is equivalent to a typical commercial airport at a small city. 80% of their traffic is civilian. They use modern ATC computers which interface effortlessly with FAA facilities which surround the base.

The “Fly the Controller” program is very exciting and



Photo 5 & 6: These guys think of everything, including having a “ground boss” to coordinate taxi and take-off schedules and prevent congestion on the ramp. The lower photo features the author and his passengers. Their unanimous #1 take-away was the difficulty of seeing other airplanes, even big ones, from inside a bouncing, noisy cockpit. Left to right: Jones, Dana, Dillon and Alex. (Modern privacy policies discourage the identification of active-duty military personnel.)

enjoyable to the new controllers. For some, it is their first flight in a GA airplane. They also get to see the world as the pilot sees it; to understand what the pilot is doing and the workload they carry. “It’s a big multiplier for our training program,” Rock told me. “It helps the students to see the world from the other end of the radio.”

About the Author



Dr. Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who has been flying his 1979 Centurion for nearly 20 years. A lifetime ago, as a young Air Force lieutenant, he was an air traffic controller at a radar site close to North Vietnam, providing ATC services to aircraft during the fall of Saigon. You can reach him at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.