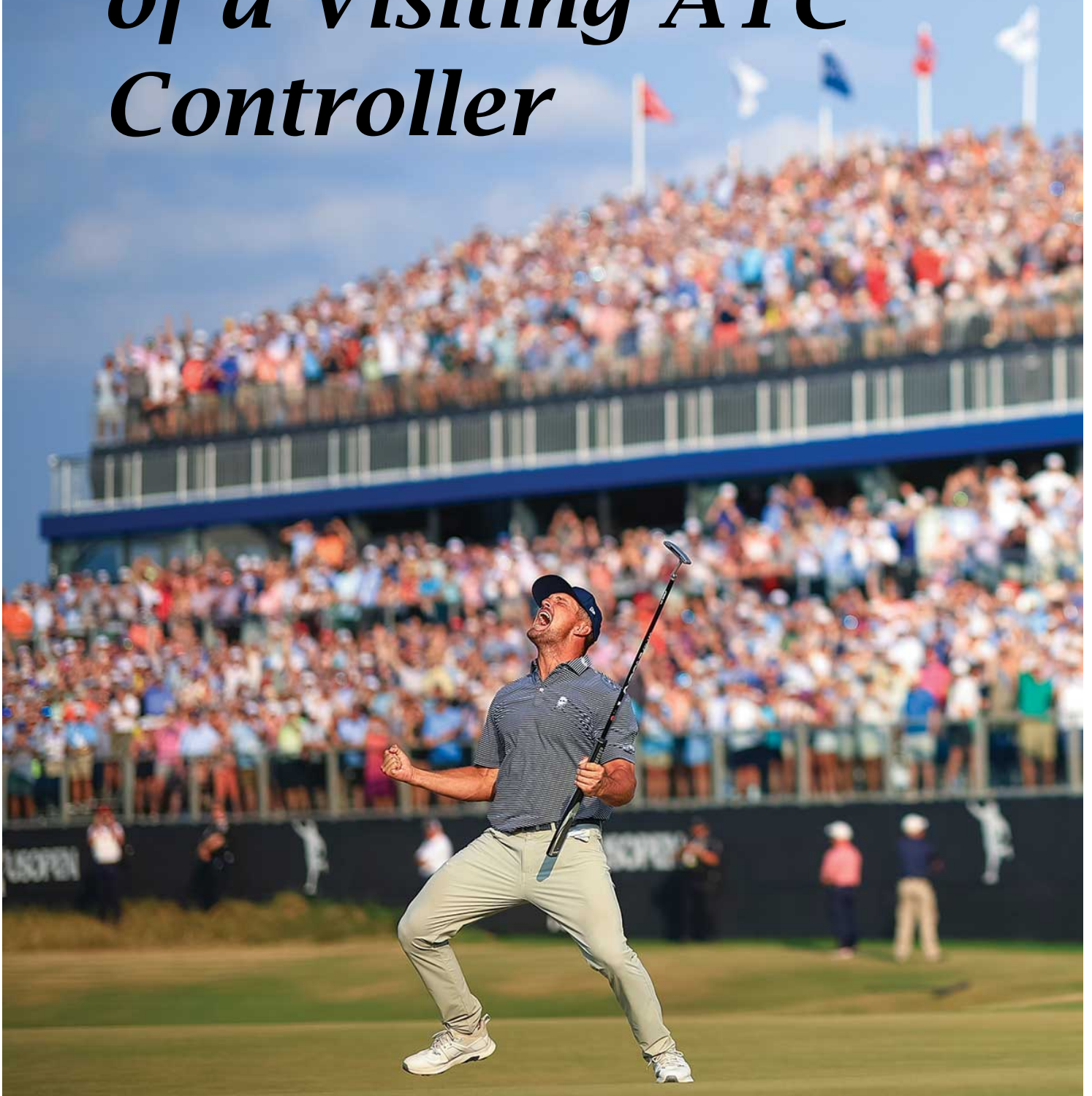


# Life on the Road: *The Peripatic World of a Visiting ATC Controller*



# *Life on the Road: The Peripatic World of a Visiting ATC Controller*

*By Mike Jones*

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George Cline is a North Carolina native, thin of hair and wide of waist, puffing up the stairs of his temporary control tower after years of sedentary work and Southern cooking. He learned his trade in the Air Force while still a teenager. His first assignment was at Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina, at the peak of the Vietnam mess.

“We [Pope] were a training base for the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne. It was nothing to have fifteen C-130s in the pattern at once, plus C-141s, F-111s, and A-10s,” he recalled. “That’s where I really learned to work airplanes.”

After the Air Force, Cline took his skills to the FAA.



*George Cline shows of his one-of-a-kind mobile control tower, built on a frame similar to that which would be used for NASCAR racing teams or a large horse trailer. The system is towed behind a massive Ford F450 pick-up truck. The lower portion is an office and breakroom; the raised tower is on the right, and the open upper deck is used for airshow commentators.*

Quickly Cline became a supervisor and evolved into something of an expert at arranging ATC services for special events. He eventually retired from the FAA and opened Airboss. His first big contract was the U.S. Open in Pinehurst in 1999. Since then, his business has grown and his company's calendar is jammed.

"We've done all the Clemson home [football] games, eight or nine games a year, for twelve years. We do all the Old Miss home games in Oxford, MS," he recited, counting events on his fingers. He manages the "Warbirds over Monroe (NC)" airshow, the Masters golf tournament in Georgia, the Sebring race in south-central Florida, and a large annual meeting of political figures at St. Simons, GA. "Anytime somebody doesn't have a control tower and they need one, they call us," he laughs.



*George Cline (black shirt) and his long-term colleague, David Short, scan the skies at the Pinehurst Airport during the 2024 U.S. Open.*

Working with Cline was David Short and Bobby Miller. Short, who lives near Charlotte, NC, is an FAA "lifer" with 36 years in control towers. He's a big guy, but with a thoughtful, gentle, Southern-style of speaking that instills confidence.

During the Vietnam era, he joined the Navy instead of being drafted into the Army. "They asked me, how'd you like to be an air traffic controller? And I said, what's that?" Short laughs at the memory. "They said, you won't have to do KP duty, or guard duty, or anything like that. So I said, OK!"

Once in the FAA, Short jumped around to different towers. He worked in St. Petersburg and Miami, FL, then Kentucky, Georgia, and North Carolina. He even served as a special representative to NASA at Patrick Air Force Base, adjacent to Kennedy Space Center. Amusingly, Short supervised both Cline and Miller in the Greensboro tower. Short and Cline retired on the same day. "I loved it, every minute," he said.

Bobby Miller looked to me like a modern-day Johnny Cash, all dressed in black. Like Cline, Miller also was introduced to controlling by the Air Force. "The guys at Lackland [the Air Force training base] just put me into air traffic control. I loved it so much I just stayed with it," he said. His career spanned eight years in the air force, followed by 22 years with the FAA, working in California, Nebraska, and the low country of South Carolina.



*Bobby Miller is another long-time FAA tower controller who retired into the exact same job working for Airboss. He's scanning the flight strips which advise the tower about departing and arriving flights. Miller sorts the strips in his preferred manner and places them on top of the black radio box awaiting calls from the pilots.*

In terms of their personal schedules, the teams rotate in and out, per the needs of the project and their personal schedules. "We have four who usually work at Manteo, two who help us with Oxford, and a couple others who help at Clemson," Miller said. "It's almost always George, David or me, and the other guys just rotate in and out as needed."

It's a nomadic life. "George told me he's going to have 64 tower and airshow contracts this year," Miller added. "He's never home, hardly."

“We kinda pick and choose the events we want to work, depending upon what’s going on,” Short explained. “Bobby [Miller] does it a lot, for long periods of time, but when I get done here, I’ll be home until the late summer football season.”

Miller laughed at that. “What’s he’s politely trying to say is I don’t really have a life. And that’s pretty much it.”

“We’re fortunate, because Dave, George and I have known each other for over thirty years,” Miller said. “Dave Johnston, he’s over at Manteo this week, I’ve known him 30 years. John Baker has 32 years. You have to trust the people you’re working with.”

At the end of the day, the team retires to a local hotel, a condo, or a rented home. Cline tries to find nicer places, even though they might be more expensive, because the job is hard enough as it is.

“Here [in Pinehurst] it’s the Residence Inn, at Clemson we use a Best Western. At Manteo we rent a nice condo right on the water, it costs me \$5,000 a month,” Cline explained. “Here [in Pinehurst this week] the rooms are \$600 a night, four times their normal prices, and I had to pay for the hotel rooms a year in advance.”

It’s also exhausting work. “We’re not young guys. We work 12, 13 hours straight through,” Short said. To keep costs down, “We don’t have shifts like the FAA does, no, we just work through and stay until the last airplane goes. It’s all about the service.”

Short laughed at Miller’s banter. “Our rule here is, as long as it’s fun and we don’t scare ourselves, we’ll keep doing it.”

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## *About the Author*

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Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who has more than 50 aircraft types in his logbook. His pride and joy is his Cessna T210, which has carried him to every corner of the U.S. and Canada for more than twenty years. He's always accessible at [PilotMike2012@gmail.com](mailto:PilotMike2012@gmail.com).

