



TESTIMONY OF JOHN F. THORNTON,
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BEFORE THE AVIATION SAFETY COMMISSION
JULY 23, 1967

NATCA was recently elected as the sole bargaining agent for the nation's 12,000 Air Traffic Controllers. More than 70 percent of those voting cast ballots for NATCA.

The Controllers who voted for NATCA are extremely concerned by the deteriorating margin of safety in the Air Traffic Control System and the lack of corrective action by the FAA. They believe that a union can make a difference in air safety where they as individuals could not. That is why we are appearing before you today.

NATCA supported the formation of this Commission during testimony last July before the Senate Aviation Subcommittee and we applaud your quick action in holding these hearings.

Due to the tight schedule this afternoon, I would like to make some brief recommendations on ways to improve the safety of the ATC System.

First, legislation should be enacted to restore reporting immunity for Controllers in all cases except those involving gross negligence, criminal offenses or accidents.

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The National Transportation Safety Board recently testified before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation that the FAA should be encouraged to have an adequate program for Controller feedback so that new problems can be identified and corrected.

We could not agree more. Operational errors, near midairs and runway incursions are up dramatically, but the Controllers themselves are frightened to report these incidents. It is paramount that Controllers be encouraged to provide factual assessments of the system and suggested remedies. However, promises of FAA goodwill and NTSB oversight are not enough; immunity is essential to that process.

Second, the number of Full Performance Level Controllers should be increased by approximately 3,000 over the next three calendar years. I stress FPL Controllers and not Air Traffic Assistants. The number of FPLs is the only true measure of the strength of the work force.

There are many facilities that are chronically understaffed and Controllers are working excessive overtime with no relief in sight. The relationship between such relentless stress and human error is obvious. Unless the FAA is willing to restrict flight levels to 1981 levels, we must have more FPLs'.

I am aware the FAA does not agree with us; the agency believes that it can do more with fewer Controllers. NATCA is convinced that the

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agency is dead wrong. You can shuffle flights, rearrange routes and impose delays only so much. The core problem remains: we have too many airplanes in the sky and not enough Controllers to manage them.

Third, this Commission should give serious thought to dividing the FAA's work between two separate agencies. One would promote the commercial aspect of aviation and remain within DoT. The second would be an independent aviation safety agency that would handle all Air Traffic Control, inspection, maintenance and duties related to the integrity of the ATC system.

The FAA cannot have two masters: safety and promotion. Eventually one takes a back seat and in this case it has been safety. It is not the FAA's fault that this has happened but we should not allow the tension between the two halves to continue.

Fourth, the FAA should be required to report back within 90 days to the appropriate congressional committees on any NTSB recommendations. Too often we have seen excellent suggestions by the NTSB swallowed up in the FAA bureaucracy and never acted upon.

Fifth, there should be an independent audit, perhaps by the GAO, into the chronic equipment problems plaguing the ATC system. We have numerous reports of antiquated equipment, malfunctions, breakdowns, software that doesn't work or hardware that lacks software. Moreover, the FAA's long-range strategy, which includes

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Controller work force strength, is based upon the so-called HOST Computer System. It has been delayed countless times and there are reports of fundamental design problems.

Controllers cannot be expected to do their job without the proper tools. The recent tragedy at Cerritos might have been avoided if we had an equipment system for the 1980's, not one designed for the unlimited airspace of the 1950's. New equipment should be brought on line on an expedited basis. However, if we must make do temporarily with the present equipment, let's make sure that we have enough qualified Systems Specialists to maintain it properly.

Six, the practice of contracting-out of FAA facilities should be discontinued. Now more than ever, this essential service must be seen and treated as a whole. It is extremely fragile and should not be subjected to the trauma of having essential pieces contracted out to the lowest bidder. We need a fully integrated system where all of the elements -- whether they be people or equipment -- operate in harmony and up to rigid standards.

This concludes my oral statement. I would like to add that NATCA represents Controllers from every facility across the country and these men and women are willing to help the Commission in any way they can. Thank you.

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