

Experienced air traffic controllers at one large FAA facility on the East Coast reported that there is at least one "confliction", sometimes as many as five, on an average day at the facility. Most of these potential collisions, they said, go unreported.

One final example provides dramatic accent to the situation. The FAA's own surveys show that an air traffic controller should not handle more than 11.5 aircraft at a time; yet, controllers from throughout the U.S. report to us that they handle as many as 15 to 25 at a time and sometimes more.

FAA officialdom, in some quarters at least, is aware of the problem and has sounded dire warnings of what may happen if corrective measures are not taken.

A transcript of remarks made by Oscar Bakke, the FAA's Eastern Regional Director, before a September 1964 meeting of air traffic controllers in Syracuse, New York, typifies this awareness. He told the controllers that "we are overdue for another collision," and that on a statistical basis, some of the very men in the room with him at that time would be "directly and personally involved in one of the greatest tragedies aviation history has ever known and it's going to be an air traffic tragedy."

Mr. Bakke warned the controllers, "The traffic situation in the New York area is fast becoming more and more tense, very, very rapidly, and the increase in traffic throughout the agency, both enroute and terminal, is reaching serious proportions."

He said, "... we are now approaching an era in which air traffic control problems never have been more serious and at this very time the ATCS (Air Traffic Control System) is being squeezed to the maximum extent."

More recently, on January 11, 1966, the chief of the Eastern Region's Air Traffic Division addressed all divisional personnel in the following words: "The mounting number of system errors occurring in the Eastern Region has become a matter of great concern. I fully realize that all control personnel share this concern when a system error occurs, but I wonder how many of us have reflected on where the current trends, if continued, will take us?"

"What does the term 'system error' mean? Aside from the official definition, it means simply that a failure in the air traffic control system has endangered one or more aircraft. It means that human lives might have been lost as a result. We must never lose sight of this fact."

These remarks, coming as they do, from top management echelons within the FAA, lend strong credence to the charges of the National Association of Government Employees and its air traffic controller members.

The controllers reported examples in profusion of situations relating to workforce and equipment in direct contradiction to the public statements of the agency.

One instance of FAA economizing at the expense of safety occurred last year at the Newark, New Jersey, control tower. Controller members of the N.A.G.E. local there charged that the decommissioning of the "airport detection radar" and the "precision approach radar" caused an extremely unsafe condition on the airport's number four runway in adverse weather conditions.

The FAA replied, in effect, that the controllers did not know what they were talking about.

According to the chief of the area air traffic branch, "... the operation of air navigation and traffic control facilities is accomplished in accordance with Agency policy, the formulation of which results from a much broader knowledge of economic and operational considerations than may be apparent locally."

Again, sacrificing safety on the altar of economy, the official responded that, "All expenditures of Federal funds must be examined on the basis of cost versus benefit."

The official concluded by suggesting that the employees confine their complaints in the future to the facility level, rather than attempting to bring them to the attention of the agency's higher levels.

The agency response completely ignored the fact that the absence of the decommissioned radar equipment forced controllers to grant unauthorized radar approaches to runway number four in emergencies; that only the week before the union's complaint one arriving aircraft nearly landed on top of a departing craft because of the lack of the precision radar.

Another cogent answer to the FAA's claim that it maintains up-to-date equipment can be found at the Toledo, Ohio, facility.

The activity utilizes ASR-4 radar. However, the cables which connect the transmitter site to the indicator site (the control tower) continually fill up with