

2020/2021

*Archie League
Medal of Safety
Awards*

JUNE 2022





HOW THE 2020, 2021 ARCHIE LEAGUE MEDAL OF SAFETY AWARD WINNERS WERE SELECTED

For the first time in the history of selecting the Archie League Medal of Safety Award winners, the award selection process was kept within our Union. There were no selection panelists from outside NATCA.

Members of the National Safety Committee (NSC) facilitated the effort of organizing the nominations, acquiring all related material to complete each one, and applying an initial evaluation.

Former NSC chair Steve Hansen (2020) and current NSC Chair Chrissy Padgett (2021) then led the selection process, which included expertise from Director of Safety and Technology Tom Adcock and National Training Rep Jamaal Haltom. The final decisions in 2020 were made by former president Paul Rinaldi and former executive vice president Trish Gilbert, while the final decisions in 2021 were made by President Rich Santa.

2020

Alaskan Region



Matthew Freidel
Anchorage Center (ZAN)

John Newcomb
Anchorage TRACON (A11)

The weather conditions in Alaska are often poor, but they're highly changeable. This can lead to situations where a pilot can encounter difficulty, especially if they're not able to fly in instrument meteorological conditions (IMC). Alaskan Region air traffic controllers are keenly aware of this each time they plug in for a shift.

"I've seen situations where a pilot gets IMC for 30 seconds, they call up needing help, and they're out of it in 15 to 20 seconds," said Anchorage TRACON (A11) member John Newcomb (pictured far left), a second-generation controller who was a member of the 235th Air National Guard ATC Squadron before starting his Federal Aviation Administration career in 2014. "Other times, like this situation where it's prolonged, you're getting PIREPs from other airplanes and ground facilities, or from other pilots who are climbing out, descending in, or in level flight. But it's not uncommon up here."

On this particular Sunday morning, the VFR-rated pilot of a Cessna 172, N758XS, encountered IMC after departing Soldotna Airport (SXQ), headed to Birchwood Airport (BCV). Worse, the initial transmissions from the aircraft were garbled. Newcomb and his colleague from Anchorage Center (ZAN), Matthew Freidel, worked with assistance from their respective facility teams to aid the pilot, including vectors and recommended altitudes. Freidel earlier this month marked his nine-year anniversary in the FAA, all at ZAN. His love of aviation started at age 17 when he learned to fly gliders. He studied first commercial aviation and then air traffic control at the University of North Dakota.

In an area as vast as Alaska, controllers have lots of frequencies, but lots of limitations on their frequencies, such as line of sight. Mountains are everywhere.

“Garbled transmissions are common,” Freidel said. “But something about it felt strange and just compelled me to follow up on the transmission. I couldn’t really understand what was going on for a couple of transmissions.”

Soon, however, Freidel received help in the form of a climbing Peninsula Airways flight. The pilot could hear the broadcast on their end. It served to clarify for Freidel that it was indeed someone he should be talking to as opposed to a bleed-over from another frequency.

“At that point, it changed the whole dynamic of, ‘OK, what am I going to do?’ to ‘What do I need to figure out here?’” Freidel said.

As soon as N758XS appeared on radar, Freidel could finally see what was happening. “It looked like they were precariously heading toward mountainous terrain on the northeastern Kenai Peninsula,” he said. Freidel had a keen awareness of that airspace, having flown around it and been in Alaska for a while, so he knew the other direction was flat with short spruce trees comprising the terrain. Therefore, the impulse was to get the pilot of N758XS turned in that safer direction.

“I think the pilot did a fantastic job of flying her


airplane in a moment of distress because she took the squawk code, she took all of the instructions, she kept the aircraft’s wings level, she climbed when I asked her to climb,” Freidel said.

Once the pilot was pointed in the right direction, the remainder of the event was fairly straightforward, both Freidel and Newcomb said.

Newcomb would soon have responsibility for the aircraft as it entered his airspace. He was plugged in, working to get a briefing started for the south radar position. Fellow A11 member Adam Herndon took the handoff first as Newcomb stood behind him and they discussed the situation. Herndon said he would give Newcomb the sector while he coordinated with ANC, Merrill Field (MRI), and Lake Hood Airport (LHD) to determine weather and visibility conditions.

“It was a team effort right there, and 8 XS did a great job, with wings level, climbed, did not descend,” said Newcomb. He advised the pilot she was close to ANC and “don’t worry about the Class Charlie. Just continue, and flight conditions should improve once you hit the shoreline.” Everything was coordinated by A11 so the pilot did not have to switch over to ANC.

ZAN member Chris Weldy said Freidel did a great job quickly diagnosing a pilot in distress, with initially barely readable transmissions. That set the story on a course to have a safe ending.



“This was a challenging situation, with some factors common in Alaskan airspace: changing IMC conditions, garbled transmissions, and mountains looming as a threat. But Matthew and John displayed teamwork, professionalism, and quick action. Matthew also has experience as a pilot in Alaska himself. This was high quality work.”

— Clint Lancaster, Alaskan Regional Vice President

2020

Central Region



Dean Hittner

Hunter Rubin

James Smart

Wichita ATCT (ICT)

In 1929, the Aeronautical Chamber of Commerce dubbed Wichita, Kan., the “Air Capital of the World.” Nearly a century later, with a world-leading total of aircraft manufactured, it could be argued that Wichita’s busy-and-getting-busier airspace above six airports and McConnell Air Force Base makes it a strong candidate to keep that title. That presents clear situational awareness responsibilities and unique challenges for the air traffic controllers at Wichita ATCT (ICT).

ICT sits on the western edge of the city. On the eastern side, there are three airports lined up in a row, north to south, including two — Colonel James Jabara Airport (AAO) and Beech Factory Airport (BEC) — that are only three miles from each other with similar runway layouts. McConnell AFB is only six miles south of BEC. ICT member Hunter Rubin (pictured above, top right) grew up loving aviation as the son of retired controller Barry Rubin, who worked at Fairbanks ATCT (FAI), Albuquerque ATCT (ABQ), and Albuquerque Center (ZAB). Hunter said he found the perfect facility for him in ICT where each day brings the steady rhythm of traffic as volume rises and fills each radar scope.

“Once you start seeing all the VFR targets tagging up, and traffic picking up here and there, we’re like, ‘OK, here they come,’” said Rubin. He notes that they often open up a second and third radar position because “that east side of Jabara, Beech, and McConnell is just so congested. Everybody watches that area a little more carefully.”

AAO was the site of one of the most notable examples of a wrong airport landing in modern aviation history. In 2013, the crew of a massive Boeing 747 Dreamlifter cargo airplane, arriving from the northeast, mistakenly landed at AAO, a non-towered airport, instead of at McConnell AFB which sat just nine miles away in the distance. That was three years before Rubin started his career at ICT, but every controller at the facility knows situational awareness is critical. The rule is, “if you see something, say something.”

Midday on a Wednesday in January last year, Rubin saw something and immediately acted to prevent a wrong airport landing. Toward the end of his shift, Rubin was working the radar data position issuing clearances to aircraft at AAO and BEC. Fellow ICT member Dean Hittner was providing on-the-job training to James Smart on the radar east position. A Cessna Citation 680, coming in from the southeast, was being vectored for a visual approach into AAO. It was a clear VFR day and the Citation pilot called the airport in sight from 20-30 miles away.

The Citation was instructed to descend to 3,000 feet and the expectation was that the pilot would follow the established procedure into AAO of crossing the airport at midfield and entering the downwind on the west side. The pilot requested to cancel IFR, which is common and encouraged so that the one-in, one-out operations with AAO and BEC can proceed efficiently. The pilot also requested to switch to the Common Traffic Advisory Frequency (CTAF). Smart approved the request and instructed the pilot to remain clear of the Class Delta airspace at BEC. The tower at BEC called and requested takeoff clearance for Gulf Coast Aviation Flight 94 off runway 1, which Smart approved.

Rubin then saw the data tag on the Citation disappear. Suddenly, the aircraft was rapidly descending to 2,000 feet, which was not normal to him. Worse, the aircraft was now deviating off course and turning to the left, pointing to BEC.

“It just didn’t seem right. It wasn’t feeling right,” Rubin said. “I just think he had the wrong airport at the wrong point. I wasn’t expecting that target to disappear the way it did. That caught my attention.”

Rubin quickly alerted Smart and Hittner and they called BEC to advise them. The controller at BEC canceled the Gulf Coast Aviation flight’s takeoff clearance and

broadcast on the CTAF for the Citation to go-around. Rubin saw the Citation’s data tag come back up at 2,300 feet as he passed over BEC. The quick action taken by Rubin, Smart, and Hittner averted both a wrong airport landing and a very dangerous situation of the Gulf Coast Aviation flight taking off into the path of the Citation. There is no taxiway at BEC other than a midfield crossing. Thus, there is normally an aircraft on the runway back-taxiing to the departure end or holding in position. In this event, the Gulf Coast Aviation aircraft had started its takeoff roll when its clearance was canceled.

“They were probably on a collision course,” Rubin said.

Rubin says he is very excited about winning the Archie League Medal of Safety, which he calls, a “really cool honor.” More importantly, he adds, it is validation of the importance to always say something if you see something.

“Whether you’re a trainee or a 25-year veteran, if you see something not right, you say it,” Rubin said. “When you do it, and you get the recognition, you think, ‘people are watching and they do appreciate what I’m doing.’ It’s just a really cool feeling.

“As human beings, we know what should be right and what’s not right, and the same thing with air traffic controllers. If it’s not right, or doesn’t look right, say something. The worst they can say is, ‘that’s how it’s supposed to be.’ But the best thing ever is if you can save dozens or potentially hundreds of lives.”

Hittner, Rubin, and Smart are the first winners of the Archie League Medal of Safety Award from ICT since Mark Goldstein received the honor in both 2005 and 2006. Additionally, the three ICT members won a quarterly NATCA Central Region Safety Award.

2020

Central Region



Sarah Owens
Kansas City Center (ZKC)

At Kansas City Center (ZKC), air traffic controllers on position have a list available to them of fellow controllers at work who are also pilots. If needed, those controllers can be brought to the area to assist a pilot in distress, including things like reviewing emergency checklists. Flying an instrument approach in a small, single-engine aircraft is a very high workload environment, and controllers who are also pilots understand this best.

“The pilot needs to be constantly scanning their instruments and providing continuous corrective inputs to the aircraft controls to ensure that the aircraft remains on course,” said ZKC member Sarah Owens.

The pilot of a Piper PA-28, flying in instrument meteorological conditions (IMC) in February 2020 and encountering some instrument failures, needed help. The controller on the other end of the microphone happened to be the perfect person for the situation: Owens. Now in her 20th year at ZKC, Owens has been flying for the last 14 years. She flies jets, has worked for charter companies and flown around the country, and is also a flight instructor. She’s an Air Force veteran, a member of NATCA’s Air Safety Investigations Committee, and has represented NATCA at numerous pilot-controller meetings including at the annual Experimental Aircraft Association AirVenture Oshkosh.

Owens had just taken over working sectors 44/48 in the Trails Area. The pilot was attempting to intercept the Runway 31 localizer and land at Topeka Regional Airport (FOE) in Kansas but missed the approach and was being vectored back around for another instrument landing system (ILS) attempt. The pilot was instructed to maintain 3,000 feet until he was established on the localizer, which is basically the final approach course. Owens noticed the pilot made a very large turn to the left, approximately 40-50 degrees. This put the aircraft in a position where he would not be able to receive the localizer signal to intercept the final approach course. Worse, he was descending. Owens issued him a low altitude alert. She

instructed him to climb and maintain 3,000 feet. He was at 2,000 feet. Owens worked with the pilot, advising to keep the wings level and climb. Her initial thought was that he was spatially disoriented, or experiencing a mechanical malfunction, or a combination of both. She soon found out the details.

“Being 1,000 feet below your assigned altitude is a dangerous situation when you are that close to the ground,” Owens said.

“When he was at 2,000 ft. MSL (Mean Sea Level), that is approximately 800-900 feet AGL (Above Ground Level). If you look at the ILS31 approach chart at FOE, there are numerous towers that are depicted on the chart. Some of these towers are over 500 feet tall. If he kept descending, his altitude would put him in a dangerous proximity to these towers, which he would be unable to see while in the clouds.”

Vision is one of our most dominant senses. When you are flying in IMC or at night without a visible horizon, it’s very easy to become spatially disoriented. Statistics show that approximately 10% of general aviation accidents are due to spatial disorientation, and 90% of those are fatal. “At this point, I did not know why the aircraft was not on course,” Owens said. “It is extremely easy to become distracted by a malfunctioning instrument; you divert your attention to this new problem that needs to be solved, and now you become spatially disoriented.”

“The pilot informed me that he was having a Static System Failure,” Owens continued. “There are two components to the Pitot/Static System, the Pitot Tube and the Static Ports. In the most basic explanation, the Pitot Tube receives air that provides airspeed information, and the Static Ports measure air pressure, which provides altitude and vertical speed information. Depending on where the blockage was in the system, it would cause failures to different instruments (airspeed indicator, vertical speed indicator, altimeter). With a Static

Port blocked, he was most likely receiving erroneous information from his vertical speed indicator and his altimeter. The vertical speed indicator displays the rate that the aircraft is climbing or descending. The altimeter displays your altitude. Both of these instruments are essential when flying an instrument approach.

“I knew that the weather conditions were better to the east of Kansas City. If the pilot could get back above the clouds, he would regain his ‘vision,’ and would no longer be relying on the instruments that were failed for navigation. Once he is out of the clouds, the emergency is basically resolved.”

The pilot told Owens he was picking up icing. She checked his fuel status and helped him find VFR conditions. He was then able to get the aircraft under control. That’s when they found Lawrence Smith Memorial Airport (LRY) in Harrisonville, Mo., which is 40 miles south southeast of downtown Kansas City and approximately 80 miles east southeast of Topeka.

“My main concern was his proximity to the ground, and obstructions,” Owens said. “I needed to get him back into conditions where he could see visually and not need the failing instruments to navigate. Once I observed that the aircraft’s pitch changed from descending to climbing, I knew then that the severity of the situation was decreasing. The pilot quickly climbed on top of the clouds and was able to navigate visually.”

It was about a 10-15 minute flight for the pilot and all that was left to do for the controllers was coordination, and making sure the aircraft continued flying safely.

Owens is the 11th ZKC member to win the Central Region Archie League Medal of Safety Award, joining Andrew Crabtree (2019), Josh Giles (2018), Andrew Cullen and Jeffrey R. Volski (2017), Liam Keeney and Brett Rolofson (2016), Andrew Smith and Joseph Moylan (2014), Todd Mariani (2012), and Chris Thigpen (2007).

2021

Central Region



Ingrid Owens
Brett Rolofson
Taylor Rosenbaum
Kansas City Center (ZKC)

Kansas City Center (ZKC) member Ingrid “Inga” Owens recently marked her 15th anniversary as an FAA controller and says that she never worked a Yakovlev “Yak” 18T Russian-made aircraft before Sept. 3, 2020, and has not worked one since.

But on that Thursday afternoon in ZKC’s Prairie Area, just six months into the COVID pandemic with the facility staffed with small teams of controllers working their shifts together for safety but still handling busy traffic volumes, Owens was working a Yak 18T that was headed north toward Nebraska from Texas. The pilot encountered two big problems.

First, he was flying this aircraft for the first time, delivering it to its owner. It was burning fuel at a rate exceeding what he was told it would, leaving him with a shortage that led him to declare an emergency. Second, he encountered IFR weather conditions in western Kansas airspace, with 200-foot minimum ceilings.

When he was 20 nautical miles south of Dodge City, Kan. (DDC), the pilot told Owens he needed to land for fuel and was planning DDC as his stop. Owens told him DDC’s weather was 1/4-mile visibility and indefinite ceiling at 200 feet. The pilot asked for an airport with better weather conditions but the closest was about 100 miles away. The aircraft had only 30 minutes of fuel remaining. Owens had fellow ZKC member Taylor Rosenbaum as her D-side controller. Member Brett Rolofson was working as the controller-in-charge.

“I remember at one point saying to Taylor, ‘I feel like this guy’s going to be a problem,’” Owens said. “I was just super relieved that when we asked if he was IFR-qualified, the answer was yes, because my fear was that he wasn’t and then I don’t know what we would have done.”

Owens didn’t know it at the time, but the pilot had more than 20,000 hours of flying experience. She started vectoring him for the ILS runway 14 approach at DDC. Due to his fuel situation, he would have only one chance at an approach into DDC.

“We looked up the weather for Dodge City and it was right at minimums or just below minimums,” said Rosenbaum, who

was trained by Rolofson when he started at ZKC over three years ago. “Garden City (45 miles west) was 100 feet better, so we asked him if he could make Garden City and he said ‘no.’”

Then, Owens said, “it just became a situation of giving this guy as good an approach as we possibly could, making sure he had the information about the weather, doing the things we needed to do to accommodate him. I remember he specifically asked for a short approach, which we’re limited in doing because it can’t be in IFR conditions.”

The pilot asked to be turned inside the approach gate. Owens cleared him for the ILS approach. He was below the glideslope and having trouble holding altitude. He was established on the localizer but could not get the glideslope to work. Owens called mileages and relative position to the airport. She lost radar contact at 1.4 miles and radio contact shortly after that.

When the pilot finally landed safely, the controllers got word from a supervisor who was on the phone receiving updates in real time. “That was an enormous relief,” Owens said. “I don’t know that I have felt a wash of relief like that in my life and I hope I don’t need to again, because it was something.”

Each of the three members praised the teamwork involved in this flight assist and were humble about their own efforts.

“You can’t ask for a better CIC than Brett,” Owens said. “He made all the right moves.”

“I felt like I did as much as I could, but I didn’t do much,” Rosenbaum said. “I helped pull up the weather. I helped pull up the approach. But for me, it was a lot of focusing

on how good of a job Inga was doing, and also how much everyone else in the area was doing. Brett was running up to the weather unit and trying to find a VFR airport. I saw how much of a team effort it was but then saw how much of a good job Inga was doing.

“When you work with good people consistently, you learn each other’s mannerisms and what everybody is best at. Everything kind of lined up perfectly for us that day.”

Said Rolofson, who will mark his 14th year in the FAA, all at ZKC, in June: “Our area is one of the most difficult in the center. We have nine different frequencies in our low altitude. I think that we all have an understanding of the workload that it takes, especially around lunchtime, 2 o’clock. In that time frame, during COVID, it was very, very busy. So we all understand what it’s like to work regular traffic and then understand that when there is a special need, a high-intensity situation, that everybody knows that it just takes a village to start helping the controller get the resources that they need, so they can focus, zone in, and really do their job.

“I can’t speak highly enough of how Inga handled the whole situation, given the way it transpired, and the intensity of it.”

“It’s a humbling honor,” Owens said of winning the Archie League Award. “The support I had around me that day, the rallying that goes on, it makes you so proud to be a controller and be part of this job. That’s the stuff the public doesn’t see that would be neat if they could see.”

This award marks the second time Rolofson has been honored with the Archie League Medal of Safety Award. He also won in 2016 for a flight assist with fellow ZKC member Liam Keeney.

“The teamwork that was displayed in all three of our Central Region-winning events was simply masterful. The more you peel away the layers of issues involved with these flight assists, the more you appreciate the experience, calm professionalism, and attention to detail each of our members used to turn what very possibly could have been tragic endings in all three incidents into safe landings. This was outstanding work and dramatic examples of what our members do best - ensuring safety above all.”

— Aaron Merrick, Central Regional Vice President

2020

Eastern Region



Mark Dzindzio
Potomac TRACON (PCT)

Potomac TRACON (PCT) controller Mark Dzindzio played a key role in assisting Piper PA-28 pilot Karl Muller, who was having difficulty navigating in IFR conditions above the Shenandoah Valley in western Virginia.

Muller began flying in 2015 and earned his license and instrument ratings over the next two years. He had just joined a flying club in Harrisonburg, Va., near Shenandoah Valley Regional Airport (SHD), and bought a home nearby. On this day in late May 2020, he planned to fly up to his previous home airport, Hagerstown (HGR) and back to SHD. The first leg was uneventful. On the flight back, Muller filed an IFR plan.

“I wanted to descend and fly VFR along Interstate 81 (which connects Hagerstown and the Shenandoah Valley) at about 2,000 feet,” Muller said. “But my initial mistake was simply flying into the clouds at 5 or 6,000 feet on my instrument flight plan, at which point I could not descend and go VFR.”

At PCT, the COVID-19 pandemic was in its early stages and traffic was light. “There wasn’t much flight activity. Most things had been canceled,” said Dzindzio, who last year marked his 10-year anniversary at PCT after starting his career in 2009 at Manassas ATCT (HEF).

Muller’s flight needed special attention and an instrument approach into SHD. Conditions were windy. He was having difficulty flying straight and level and his unfamiliarity with both local approach fixes and

using his onboard Garmin GPS sent him off course. By his own admission, fatigue led to confusion and made him doubt where he was.

Dzindzio vectored Muller to the localizer at SHD. But Muller was not able to pick it up or stay on the glideslope. At that point, Dzindzio told him to go around because it was not looking like a very safe approach. Additionally, Air Force Two was on their scope, and Dzindzio had a feeling it was going to be too much to handle combined. So the position was split and another PCT controller sat down to talk with Muller.

It was learned that Muller was inexperienced in IFR conditions, so the number of corrections, turns, and length of turns were limited in an effort to keep things simple and lighten Muller's workload.

"Instead of trying to manage both the iPad and the cockpit Garmin, I made sure I put the controller first, did exactly what he said, and – although I did keep an eye on both the Garmin and ForeFlight – it finally felt like, 'I can do this,' rather than being confused," Muller said. "It was almost a surprise when I popped out of the clouds because I was focused on doing exactly what he said. And once I popped out of the clouds, I was just joyful in telling him, 'airfield in sight!'"

Muller, who credited the voices of Dzindzio and other controllers with having "a calming effect" on him, had the unique opportunity to thank the controllers during a virtual meeting last year.

"It means a lot because I get to say thank you," Muller said. "It was life changing because they saved me in the clouds."

Dzindzio initially wondered why he was chosen to receive the award. "It was a little surprising to be chosen," he added. "It definitely was such a great result, of course, and we knew that there was absolutely a danger of the pilot not landing successfully. When he said he had the field in sight, it felt really good."

Dzindzio is the fourth PCT member to win the Eastern Region Archie League Medal of Safety Award, joining Joseph Rodewald (2015), Matt Reed (2012), and Louis Charles Ridley (2010).

2021

Eastern Region



Jason Dunaway

Joe Mash

Chris Rhodes

Potomac TRACON (PCT)

By Sept. 15, 2020, six months into the COVID-19 pandemic, air carrier traffic volume was greatly reduced, presenting opportunities for many general aviation pilots – and students, with their instructors – to do takeoffs and landings at major airports. One such flight, a Mooney M20 piloted by a student with an instructor, departed runway 1 right at Washington-Dulles International Airport (IAD).

Just a short time later, as the Mooney was at 4,600 feet, the aircraft suffered a total engine failure. The choice to be near IAD turned out to be a most advantageous decision.

“I think because of that lack of full airline schedules, I think this was a nationwide thing; I think people were taking their GA airplanes to places they dreamed of going and this was a good example,” said Potomac TRACON (PCT) member Joe Mash, who talked with the pilot and worked with fellow PCT members Jason Dunaway and Chris Rhodes to help the flight return safely to IAD. “The instructor and their student took their plane to Dulles for a quick in and out flight. (The emergency) could not have happened at a better time or place, that is for sure. Lucky for them.”

Mash, who has spent his entire 16-year FAA career at PCT, said there were three sectors open at the time, plus a controller in charge. They had skeleton crews due to the pandemic, with just 5-6 controllers running an area that, in normal times, takes at least nine and often 12-13 when it’s busy. On this September 2020 day however, Mash said there was a lot of GA traffic, including busy satellite airports.

Mash had been on position for a half hour, handling IAD departures, when the Mooney came off IAD and headed northbound. Another northbound departure, a United Express Embraer 175L, rolled off runway 30. Mash climbed the aircraft out of 2,300 feet, up to 3,500 feet – 1,000 feet below the Mooney – and turned it north.

Shortly after, the Mooney declared an emergency.

“We had just started running the cruise checklist when we heard a loud bang, and the engine started shaking,” the pilot wrote in a statement provided to NATCA for the nomination materials for this award. “I immediately took the flight controls from my student.”

Mash immediately worked to stop the United Express's climb and turn it westbound to get it out of the way of the emergency aircraft, which needed a direct shot to return to IAD. He cleared the Mooney pilot to make a left turn, direct Dulles, and land any runway.

"At 4,500 feet, only a couple miles west northwest of the field, I had altitude on my side," the pilot wrote. "I could likely have made any runway, but I did not want to attempt to go further than my glide would have allowed. I made a quick decision to take 19C. I innately started going through my ABC's of emergency procedures. I quickly realized at that point my objective was not to glide far, but to descend quickly to the runway."

Meanwhile, Dunaway and Rhodes could overhear – and sense – what was going on and it piqued their attention right away. They cleared the final and coordinated with IAD controllers.

"I had the south feeder sectors and the west feeder, the south and west satellite area, and the finals all combined up," said Dunaway, a Marine Corps veteran with 30 years of experience, including the last seven at PCT. "So I had about six or seven frequencies combined up. You catch something, you hear something, but the whole thing lasted less than a minute. I had aircraft all pointed at the airport for different runways, and I just started pushing them around and switching the runways on short notice.

"I had about five or six Dulles arrivals in a base feed configuration to land. Several of them were set up to land 1 center, which was set up to land opposite direction from the Mooney needed to go, so I pushed those guys over to 1 right, got some other traffic out of the way, and held some traffic out until we knew this guy was going to land. It happened quick."

The Mooney was a few miles northwest of the airport at 4,500 feet, and when the pilot elected to land 19 center, "I figured the pilot knew he was a little too high to come straight in on runway 12," Mash said, adding that he thought the pilot would also know he had two miles of runway to expel the remaining energy of the aircraft. He was right. Wrote the pilot, "I began a forward slip on final and was aiming for the front of the runway with anticipation of floating over the runway. I was nearing touching down when I saw the 5,000 feet of runway remaining marker. That was when I knew that we made it."

"Overall, I am proud of the result, and considering the circumstances, it ended in the best possible outcome," the pilot wrote.

Mash said is humbled by the award and "definitely honored" to be a part of the recognition, but added that he felt this was just "another day on the job."

"It is a job and we show up every day, and for the one emergency we get recognized for, there's five or six, or maybe a dozen that we may never get recognized for," Mash said. "But it means a lot to be nominated and it means a lot to win."

Dunaway echoed Mash's sentiments, citing another emergency situation that the group handled involving a helicopter around the same time as this emergency landing as an example of what "routinely happens in this job."

"Joe's been doing this a while and I've been doing this a long time and these emergencies happen," Dunaway said. "We're surrounded by unsung professionals. Every day, people are doing stuff like this around the country and not getting recognized for it. It's pretty cool to be recognized for something like this. It's definitely an honor."

"I love these flight assists because the work done by Mark, Joe, Jason, and Chris exemplifies the great work done every day by members of the Eastern Region. These were terrific services provided to two pilots who needed a calm voice and simple instructions. They got these things and much more. The result was not only a safe landing in both instances, but grateful pilots."

— Brian Shallenberger, Eastern Regional Vice President

2020

Great Lakes Region



Bob Obma
Indianapolis Center (ZID)

During any normal shift in Area 2 of Indianapolis Center (ZID) on a mid-March Saturday afternoon, assisting the pilot of a Cessna 172 Skyhawk who encountered icing conditions would have required the same knowledge, calm professionalism, detailed checklist of tasks, and supreme focus that experienced ZID NATCA member Bob Obma brings to work.

But this particular Saturday afternoon shift, on March 21, 2020, was the first in which three areas at ZID were closed after positive COVID-19 tests. With uncertainty swirling as the nation began its descent into the throes of the pandemic, the challenges involved with handling an emergency situation – like this Skyhawk – increased.

“Quite possibly the craziest week of my life that I can remember,” said Obma, who had just been recertified three days prior to this shift after being off the boards for multiple years with a medical issue. “You’re walking down the hallway and you pass these areas with yellow police tape marking them off. All the lights are turned on but there’s no controllers. You could still see some random data blocks on the scopes. It just felt really strange.”

Traffic levels were still high. The closure of much of ZID’s airspace forced controllers to work on the fly and join together to come up with plans and make them work. There were re-routes around closed airspace, aircraft in Area 2 that are usually not worked in that lower altitude airspace (23,000

feet and below), and other situations that were not planned for.

“Everyone was already on high alert,” Obma said. “Their energy was already revved up.”

Dennis Tyner was piloting the Skyhawk. He departed Prestonsburg, Ky., headed for Lexington, Ky. He encountered icing conditions and requested a lower altitude from Obma. Unfortunately, because of the mountainous terrain, Obma was only able to get him down to 3,100 feet, which was not enough to get the ice off the aircraft. As an experienced pilot himself, Obma knew what Tyner was experiencing in trying to fly the aircraft. Obma declared an emergency for him before starting work to vector him around higher terrain and setting him up for an approach at an alternate airport in Morehead, Ky.

Morehead-Rowan County Airport was right next to Lexington ATCT (LEX) approach control airspace.

Obma said the situation required Tyner to quickly get on the ground due to the amount of ice on the aircraft. Tyner couldn’t descend and burn off the ice due to the minimum vectoring altitude, and couldn’t climb either. Time was critical. Fortunately, it was only about 10-15 minutes until Tyner landed safely.

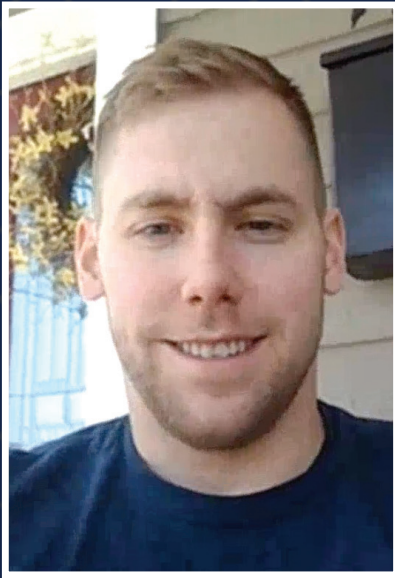
Tyner called the Area 2 supervisor, Aaron Stone, after he successfully landed to express his gratitude. Stone said he could hear loud crashing noises in the background. Tyner told him, with a chuckle, that was

the sound of the ice falling from his aircraft onto the apron.

This flight assist marks the third time Indianapolis Center members have represented the Great Lakes Region (NGL) in the 16-year history of the Archie League Medal of Safety Awards, all in the last three years. Nicholas J. Ferro and Charles Terry won the award in 2019, and Daniel Rak won in 2018.

2021

Great Lakes Region



Matthew Wyrick
Indianapolis Center (ZID)

In the late afternoon of June 16, 2020, Matt Wyrick was working in Area 6 of Indianapolis Center (ZID) when the controller-in-charge (CIC), fellow NATCA member Rachel Gilmore, was contacted by another area that they had worked a Cessna 441 Conquest II (N441LS) minutes prior and suspected hypoxia due to the speech rate and intermittent responses from the pilot.

The pilot regularly flies through Wyrick's airspace to and from their home base in Youngstown, Ohio. Even though he had only been a fully certified controller for a year and a half at ZID before this day, Wyrick recognized the familiar call sign but said this was the first time he has dealt with a case of possible hypoxia. He said he relied on his training. "There have been a few times during lab training in the past, but this was the first time in the live environment," he said.

Wyrick, who is in the sixth year of his FAA career, all at ZID, grew up immersed in aviation. His father, Allan, was a longtime pilot for NetJets. Wyrick said hypoxia came up in some discussions between them.

"He never actively talked about it, flying with me, but for some reason I remember that he always told me to ask the pilot, if it ever happened, to take a look at his fingers. He said that if they were purple, that would be a big sign," Wyrick said. "My trainers went through those situations with me when I was training and said the biggest thing they said to do was descend, and to use really basic phraseology to do it; keep things really simple. That helped a lot."

When Wyrick took control of the aircraft, his area was combined from three sectors to two, a common practice at that time during a period of reduced traffic volume just three months into the COVID-19 pandemic.

"My neighboring controller from Area 3 handed the aircraft off to me," Wyrick said. "He called me on the landline to let me know that both he and the preceding controller from Area 7 were a little suspicious that he might be hypoxic because he sounded a little slow and had a bit of a slurred speech rate."

Wyrick decided to get a feel for the situation. He asked the pilot questions about ride conditions and the weather, and issued control instructions to keep him engaged. "His

response was still a little slow,” Wyrick said. “It wasn’t enough to convince me he was doing OK.”

He knew that the pilot would be landing relatively soon but not soon enough to begin normal descent instructions. However, with the concern rising about the possible worsening hypoxia taking place, Wyrick decided to descend the aircraft two thousand feet, to 27,000 feet. The pilot read it back, slowly, but did not begin a descent. When Matt asked the pilot, he mistakenly reported he was leaving FL 27,900.

The pilot then started a descent, but did not respond to Wyrick’s next transmissions for a couple minutes. Transmissions from the pilot sounded slurred at some points, and other points he keyed up and the transmissions were unreadable.

“It took so long for him to respond, and even when he was responding, it didn’t sound good,” Wyrick said. “Finally, I declared an emergency for him.” Wyrick kept descending the aircraft to get him below 10,000 feet. He informed the pilot there was no traffic anywhere of concern and gave him a pilot’s discretion descent. He complied.

Wyrick spoke with the pilot about his hypoxia suspicions and used an emergency checklist and information in the En Route Information Display System (ERIDS) to ask the pilot questions and understand what he was going through. Wyrick asked two separate times if the pilot had oxygen on board and if it was working. The pilot responded that it did, adding that he didn’t believe he was hypoxic but rather was “really tired,” Wyrick said.

Several pilots who were on the same frequency and listening to the exchanges checked in with the Cessna pilot and told him to check his supplemental oxygen and make sure

everything was working. Wyrick cited that along with many fellow controllers at ZID which he said comprised an outstanding team effort of about a dozen people, one of the best he has been a part of, he said, thus far in his young career.

“I had my CIC standing behind me and I had a good D side that was watching the rest of the sector, because in a situation like that, you tend to get tunnel vision,” he said.

Wyrick handed off control of the aircraft to Cleveland Center (ZOB) when it reached 9,000 feet. The pilot landed safely a short time later.

“Matt remained professional throughout the event and communicated well with the pilot,” Gilmore said. “The pilot reported fatigue, and that may be the case, but Matt did an excellent job of making sure he stayed awake and on oxygen. The aircraft landed safely at its destination thanks to Matt’s attitude of the importance of safety.”

Wyrick said he was honored and humbled by the award. “I was just there doing my job that day and I had a bunch of good people around me who were a huge part of the outcome. I really think the award is more a reflection of everybody I work with. I don’t have a doubt in my mind that any one of the controllers in my area could have sat there and achieved the same outcome.”

This flight assist marks the fourth time ZID members have represented the Great Lakes Region in the 17-year history of the Archie League Medal of Safety Awards, all in the last four years. Bob Obma won the award in 2020, Nicholas J. Ferro and Charles Terry won in 2019, and Daniel Rak won in 2018.

“One of the most important issues for general aviation pilots is taking airframe icing seriously and using controller help to get out of icing trouble. In this case, Bob performed brilliantly and with incredible professionalism to assist the Cessna Skyhawk pilot. The added bonus is that Bob is a pilot himself and he knew precisely what the pilot was experiencing and how to help him fly the aircraft. For Matt, he remained professional throughout an event that had all the signs of possible hypoxia. He communicated well with the pilot and made sure he stayed awake. It was terrific work.” — Drew MacQueen, Great Lakes Regional Vice President

2020

New England Region



Dave Chesley
Boston TRACON (A90)

Late on a mid-summer evening, over the ocean and in the fog, pilot Lihan Bao was flying a short final ILS approach to Runway 24 at Martha's Vineyard (MVY), her second time flying into that airport. The tower had just closed for the night. Shortly after her VOR receiver began to swing left to right, Bao saw a group of bright lights which distracted her. She turned left a bit to try to go back to the approach course but it didn't work, and a few seconds later she and her passenger heard a noise. She had hit something.

Lihan was at 400 feet and started to lose directional control of the Cessna 172 (N677DM). She added full power right away and tried to bring the wings level. Then, she radioed Boston TRACON (A90) and declared an emergency. On the other end of the mic was someone perfectly qualified to assist her, eight-year veteran controller Dave Chesley, who is also an experienced pilot and flies his own home-built aircraft, a single-engine Murphy Moose, with his wife, Jody, who is also a controller (Boston ATCT, BOS) and pilot.

Chesley maintained a calm, reassuring demeanor throughout the entire incident. He guided Lihan with clear instructions as she diverted to Otis Air National Guard Base (FMH), which had a long runway, a 24-hour facility, and was reporting VFR conditions.

"He gave me headings and altitudes with the voice that made me believe we would survive," she said.

Chesley works the Legacy Cape airspace in the South Area of A90, where he also serves as the NATCA area rep. He grew up in Maine surrounded by a wealth of aviation knowledge and experience. One of his grandfathers was a gunner and dive bomber in World

War II. His other grandfather owned small planes and flew outdoor sports enthusiasts to spots in remote northern Maine to hunt and fish.

Lihan had departed with her friend from Caldwell Airport (CDW) in New Jersey. The initial weather report for MVY was VFR conditions but that changed while Lihan was in the air. She decided to land at Groton-New London Airport (GON) in Connecticut and filed an IFR flight plan for the second leg to MVY.

Chesley said it was a fairly normal approach. “It wasn’t until about a two-mile final that things changed,” he said. In one radar return, the aircraft had made a 90-degree left turn.

“I thought to myself at the time that this was either a bad radar return or something could be wrong,” he said. Two more radar returns confirmed the latter. Chesley could tell that Lihan wasn’t flying the published missed approach procedure. The turns, climbs, and descents were erratic. He made two attempts to reach her, with no response. Then came the emergency call and Chesley said Lihan reported they had struck something (later determined to be a tree, causing serious damage to the wing) and the aircraft was uncontrollable. “It’s certainly not the words you want to hear as a controller,” he said. “It’s one of your worst nightmares.”

“He could hear that my voice was shaking and tried to calm me down,” Lihan said.

Chesley knew that as a pilot, you train for emergency scenarios and you learn to never stop flying the airplane. He focused on assisting Lihan with just

flying the airplane, maintaining straight and level attitude, and getting to a safe altitude so they could then figure out their options. With the terrible weather at MVY, Chesley knew another landing attempt there was not the safest option. Low ceilings, fog, poor visibility: “The cards were stacked against us,” he said. Fortunately, to the northeast was FMH and its 8,000-foot runways.

“He told me he would guide me to an airport 15 miles away (FMH), which was VFR there with long runways, and I can land any runway I want,” said Lihan, who was able to get control of the aircraft. “I applied full right rudder and full right aileron to keep my wings level.”

Others in the A90 operation assisted in coordination with FMH, allowing Chesley to concentrate on assisting Lihan. She made a soft landing at FMH “thanks to everyone’s help,” she said.

“A lot of times they say we’re fortunate in this industry that we don’t have to take our work home with us,” Chesley said. “I would agree 99 percent of the time but it’s these instances that you do take home and you do replay over and over in your head, wondering ‘what if I had said this, or what if I had done that and how it could have affected the outcome. Fortunately, I’m very thankful it turned out the way it did and hats off to the pilot for doing such a phenomenal job.”

Chesley is the third NATCA member from A90 to win the Archie League Medal of Safety Award, joining Jesse Belleau (2018) and Ken Hopf (2005).

2021

New England Region



Casey Allan
Boston Center (ZBW)

It was late on a Sunday afternoon, Sunday, March 21, 2021, and 15-year veteran Boston Center (ZBW) controller Casey Allan was conducting on-the-job training for fellow ZBW member Nick Schuler. With COVID-19 still gripping the nation and dragging down traffic volume and complexity, the facility took advantage of an opportunity to start training back up.

Schuler began working a Socata TBM-850 single-turboprop aircraft which was a familiar sight in their airspace, flying north-south routes. On this day, the pilot was headed north to Burlington, Vt.

“It was a pretty normal flight, headed northbound, and Nick decided it was time to start descending the aircraft, because there was a departure coming and he wanted to get it below (into Burlington),” said Allan, a native New Englander who grew up in South Berwick, Maine, just over an hour away from his current home in Nashua, N.H. But after approximately one minute, the pilot still had not started his descent. Both Schuler and Allan noticed that the aircraft appeared to be climbing instead.

Allan immediately thought back to when he was a trainee. “My trainer always quizzed me on ceiling altitude and speeds, so the second I saw it climbing at 31,000 feet, I knew the aircraft was already at its service ceiling. We knew right away that something wasn’t right.”

Schuler gave the pilot a descend and maintain instruction. But the response was hard to understand aside from the words “lost my pressure.” Allan immediately took over the sector and Schuler assumed the D side position.

“I believe he got up to 33,000 feet. He climbed pretty rapidly for an aircraft like the TBM, and it started a right-hand turn,” Allan said. “Once we saw the indication of a turn, my first thought was, ‘it’s going to go into a spin.’”

The aircraft was now turned around and headed south. It was only a few miles from the adjacent New York Center

(ZNY) sector from where it had flown from, into ZBW airspace. “At that point, I just tried to keep talking to the pilot and tried to get him to stay awake as best I could,” Allan said.

Three separate times, Allan tried to get the aircraft to fly a specific heading and a specific altitude. But the pilot continued to descend lower than he was cleared. A rapid descent was underway and it alarmed Allan.

The pilot stated, “Eight Hotel Romeo is descending, I’ve lost my cabin pressure.”

Allan gave him instructions to descend to 10,000 feet, which would be the safest place to be to allow the pilot to regain enough oxygen to escape hypoxia conditions. It would also get him nearer the base of Allan’s airspace or at least get him to slow down his rate of descent.

At 14,000 feet, the pilot still sounded unintelligible. Allan tried to keep the conversation upbeat and normal. “In my opinion, I don’t even think the pilot knew what was happening on the way down, for the most part,” he said.

When the aircraft descended through 10,000 feet, Allan gave an instruction to descend to 6,000 feet, the base of his ZBW airspace sector. “He read that back and started to sound better,” Allan said. The pilot requested vectors for nearby airports. He was directly over Poughkeepsie (POU) at that point. But Stewart International Airport (SWF) was just 15 miles to the west. With its 12,000-foot runway, that was the preferred option.

The aircraft leveled off at 4,700 feet, in New York TRACON (N90) airspace, and was flying straight and level. Controller-in-charge Scott Elms led the coordination taking place to ensure the safe conclusion to the incident. Allan switched the aircraft over to N90, where controllers were able to guide the pilot to SWF. He landed without incident.

“We all worked really well together. It happened very fast,” said Allan. “It was probably no more than 10 minutes overall. But it felt faster than that.”

Allan said being honored with the Archie League Medal of Safety Award is a “strange, bittersweet feeling.”

“People have told me congratulations, but it’s a strange feeling because I don’t want to be congratulated for having this experience,” he said. “It’s just a strange emotion. Getting the award, I’m glad there’s recognition. It makes me feel proud and happy that I was able to do my job. You don’t want to be in that situation, but at the same time, knowing you can handle it makes me feel glad that I was there because it worked out for everybody.”

Allan is the 11th ZBW member to receive the Archie League Medal of Safety Award, joining Bruce Clough, Stephen Roebuck, John Therrien, and Bill Wood in 2009, Stephen Schmalz in 2007, Chris Henchey and Ryan Workman in 2012, and Jeffrey Aulbach, Neil Cospito, and Michael Jacobson in 2019.



“Successful air traffic control is not simply about technical expertise. It requires a cool and calm demeanor to let the pilot know that we are in this together and nothing will happen to you on my watch. Both Dave and Casey’s performances exemplified that fact and helped save lives on the days of their saves.” — Mick Devine, New England Regional Vice President

2020

Northwest Mountain Region



clockwise from top left

**Byron Andrews, Josh Fuller,
Ryan Jimenez, Michael
Sellman**

Seattle Center (ZSE)

As Seattle Center (ZSE) member Josh Fuller's shift was ending on the Saturday afternoon before Thanksgiving in 2019, a supervisor from Area C walked through Area B urgently looking for anyone with pilot experience. A VFR-rated Cessna 182 Skylane pilot in far northern Idaho, Tim Bendickson, had departed Boundary County Airport (65S) on what was supposed to be a 40-minute flight to the southwest back to his home airport in Priest River, Idaho (1S6). Instead, he immediately encountered fog and severe icing conditions, typical for that time of year, ending up in Canadian airspace.

Bendickson, knowing he could not find his own way back to the airport, called ZSE. "I just almost hit another mountain, I don't know where I am," he said.

Fuller grabbed his headset, went to Area C, and told the supervisor he had limited pilot experience but not in a Cessna 182. He plugged in. "My stomach was in my throat," he said, "because I did not have any idea what we were getting into. My first thoughts were, let's just get him on a heading and keep his wings level."

Fuller spent the next two hours working with fellow ZSE members Byron Andrews, Ryan Jimenez, and Michael Sellman. It was an unforgettable team effort that saved the life of Bendickson, who was facing an array of challenges including disorientation that often leads to disaster for pilots. He was also 2,000 feet below the minimum IFR altitude. At ZSE, with 12 seconds between updates on their radar scopes, Bendickson's position changed dramatically with each sweep. "Any adjustments we make, we have to wait 12 seconds to see if those adjustments work out," Fuller said.

"Being in the control room, everyone could feel the weight of the situation," Sellman said.

Sellman was working the low altitude sectors adjacent to where the emergency was occurring. It was a busy football Saturday, with Washington State hosting Oregon State in Pullman, Wash. Sellman worked to free up

frequency space on the emergency sector (sector 8) by instructing other controllers to put any aircraft going to low altitude on his frequency. He said the airspace Bendickson was in is worked with non-radar procedures most of the time. Additionally, he said, “our radio coverage is pretty bad,” except for part of a valley where fortunately Bendickson was when ZSE first started to hear him. But that coverage was spotty when he was over the mountains.

Andrews was training a new controller on high altitude that day. He stopped training and ran over to the low altitude D-side position to assist Sellman and coordinated with high altitude controllers, approach controllers, and flight data. Jimenez worked with Sellman to split up initial coordination duties. He also took key steps to alleviate controller workload and frequency congestion. “We had to keep that sector as sterile as possible, to minimize any chance of interference,” Jimenez said. “We needed to keep Josh’s life as easy as possible in that situation.”

Perhaps the most harrowing part of Bendickson’s zig-zagging path above the mountainous terrain occurred near Scotchman Peak, near the Montana border. It rises to 7,040 feet above the town of Lake Pend Oreille, Idaho. Bendickson’s altitude, captured in three successive radar updates: 7,000, 7,100, and 6,900 feet.

It was clear at that point that Bendickson had no opportunity to go east, given the terrain and his ice-induced descent.

Next, Sellman, Andrews, and Jimenez all played a critical role in using a Washington Air National Guard KC-135 Stratotanker flight – Expo91 – inbound to Fairchild Air Force Base (SKA) in Spokane, Wash., to begin search and rescue instead of landing. The controllers used the flight to find VFR conditions and relay it to Bendickson.

Fuller told Bendickson, “November 2-2 Bravo, you’ve made it a long way so far, so thanks for hanging in there.” Bendickson replied, “Thank you so much!” The crisis was

not over, but everyone involved started to have a much higher degree of confidence in a safe outcome. Expo91 reported that Bendickson, on his current heading, would break out of the clouds in 8-10 miles. Ninety minutes after his initial call to ZSE, he emotionally transmitted that he could see land. After ZSE shipped Bendickson to approach control for handling into Coeur d’Alene Airport (COE), east of Spokane, Wash., the relief was joyous and overwhelming.

“A couple of us unplugged and there was some applause in the room,” Fuller said. “It was kinda cool.”

“Thus far into my career, this was the craziest situation we’ve been involved with,” Jimenez said. “I just think it’s really remarkable that Josh was able to show up and plug into airspace that they are almost completely unfamiliar with. Everybody involved had one goal and we were singularly focused on that, trying to find Tim a place to land safely.”

At the 11th Annual Washington Air National Guard Awards banquet on Feb. 8, 2020, Col. Larry Gardner, 141st Air Refueling Wing (ARW) Commander, showcased what he called an act of heroism by the airmen from Team Fairchild. The crew of Expo91 included pilots Lt. Col. Mike Harris and Capt. Charles Roark from the 141st ARW and Senior Airman Kendall Bryant, a 92nd ARW boom operator.

Calling Seattle Center for help “saved my life,” said Bendickson, who has been flying for 10 years. “They were nurturing and just kept me calm and kept me focused on what my task at hand was. Everything boils down to what my instructor said which is, first and foremost, fly the airplane. That’s what I did.”

“This was an incredible thing to be a part of,” Fuller said. “These guys did one hell of an incredible job. Tim did a remarkable job just holding it together. He’s the one that actually fought for two hours while we coached.”

2021

Northwest Mountain Region



Kevin Cleavland

Chris Keddie

Adam Schulte

(not pictured)

Denver TRACON (D01)

Feb. 20, 2021 had been a routine Saturday winter afternoon in the Denver area, with cold temperatures and all aircraft reporting at least moderate turbulence in the climb and descent over the front range of Colorado.

Denver TRACON (D01) member Chris Keddie was working the West Departure position when United Airlines Flight 328 (UAL328) checked on. The Boeing 777 was en route from Denver to Honolulu. Keddie climbed the aircraft to flight level 230 and advised the crew of the moderate turbulence. Shortly after, he gave fellow D01 member Kevin Cleavland a position relief briefing and then stepped aside to provide an overlap.

Cleavland had just started to set up the position with his preferences when the crew of UAL328 declared a MAYDAY and advised that they had just experienced an engine failure. Remaining calm and composed, Cleavland immediately solicited the crew's desires and gave them a descent clearance and left turn to head back to the airport.

Cleavland stopped all westbound departures and moved aircraft to give UAL328 a clear path. Meanwhile, Keddie and fellow D01 member Adam Schulte continued to assist in the extensive coordination and communication with Denver ATCT (DEN) to determine the best runway to use since they were in the middle of a flow change due to a wind shift.

Cleavland received a call from Broomfield ATCT (BJC) at Rocky Mountain Metropolitan Airport, located nine miles northwest of Denver. The BJC controller had received a call that an aircraft had gone down near them, so they asked Cleavland if he knew anything. He confirmed that he had not lost an aircraft

but that he was working an emergency aircraft so that may have been what the call was about.

At that point, Cleavland couldn't have known that his emergency aircraft was the source of the calls from the public. The engine failure resulted in an in-flight engine fire, causing extensive damage to the engine nacelle (the streamlined enclosure for the engine), and minor damage to the fuselage. Parts departing from the engine cowlings of the stricken aircraft resulted in a debris field at least one mile long over suburban residential areas of Broomfield, Colo. Debris fell through the roof of a private home and significantly damaged a parked vehicle.

Cleavland continued to work the aircraft and allow the crew to troubleshoot the problem. During instances like this, it is easy to forget that controllers still have other aircraft on frequency for whom they are responsible, and this situation was no different. Cleavland professionally provided services to all aircraft under his control.

Eventually UAL328 was ready to return to the airport and Kevin provided vectors for an ILS to runway 26 and a successful landing. There were no injuries as a result of this incident, an astounding fact given the severity of the emergency. This is due to the training and skill of the flight crew and other true professionals like Cleavland, Keddie, and Schulte.

"The only words that come to mind when reviewing these two situations are heroic endurance and true professionalism. In the ZSE event, these controllers banded together for over an hour to assist pilot Tim Bendickson as he was icing up and had no clear path to safety. Having worked and trained directly with many of the people involved, I am not surprised and yet greatly appreciative at the high level of skill and care it took to achieve this outcome. Our D01 members worked quickly and expertly to help get the stricken B777 back to Denver in a high-profile emergency that became a worldwide media story. Our 2020 and 2021 winners not only exemplify the epitome of excellence in the Northwest Mountain Region, but, of the entirety of NATCA."

— Alex Navarro III, Northwest Mountain Regional Vice President

2020

Southern Region



Marcus Troyer
Pensacola TRACON (P31)

It was like most any other ordinary summer afternoon in Pensacola, with a lot of weather, when Marcus Troyer plugged in for his shift at Pensacola TRACON (P31) shortly after 12:30 p.m. EDT. In the skies to the west, U.S. Coast Guard Lt. Commander Brian Hedges was the pilot and aircraft commander on an ordinary training mission in a newly-converted MH65E helicopter. But a short time later, Troyer and Hedges were joined in a search and rescue effort that was anything but ordinary and showcased the essential nature of their respective professions.

Thanks to their efforts, the life of the pilot of a Cessna 172 Skyhawk, Scott Jeffrey Nee, was saved after he crashed into the sandy bank of the Escambia River in a remote area of Jay, Fla., north of Pensacola near the Alabama border, and was seriously injured.

“They are heroes,” said the plane’s owner, Freddie McCall. “They saved a man’s life.”

Troyer had just plugged in when McCall called the facility to report that he was missing an aircraft.

“We weren’t talking to the aircraft at the time,” Troyer said. “We went back and did a Falcon replay to try and see if we actually tagged him up or anything. We did not, so that complicated the situation.” Troyer had experience doing quality control work and was well versed on search and rescue situations.

McCall, who used his own aircraft to look for Nee, located the crash scene and reported that to Troyer, who was in his 12th year of his Federal Aviation Administration career – all at P31 – through this event before initiating a transfer to Houston Intercontinental ATCT (IAH) earlier this year. “I used all my knowledge that I had from working at Pensacola and tried to get Navy helicopters to respond, but most of them couldn’t do it because of fuel,” he said, adding that the heavy thunderstorms in the area posed many challenges. A LifeFlight crew was in Pensacola but had just completed a mission and was in a mandatory cooldown period.

Soon after, Troyer contacted Mobile ATCT (MOB) and asked if they were providing service to any Coast Guard helicopters. He did this because he knew that the Coast Guard has a base in MOB airspace. However, that base is used strictly for training and aircraft testing, not search and rescue. A MOB controller advised Troyer they were talking to a Coast Guard helicopter and he requested them to switch the communications to Troyer's frequency. Troyer made contact with Hedges, explained the situation, and asked if they would voluntarily attempt to respond to the crash site.

"I felt like if anybody was going to be able to do a rescue and get this pilot out of there, it was going to be the Coast Guard," said Troyer, who spent the next 25 minutes vectoring Hedges to the crash site and helped get him around a strong line of storms. At that point, an EMS crew on the ground had reached the pilot and Troyer facilitated communications between them and Hedges.

"We had a very good crew but we didn't have a rescue swimmer on board so theoretically we were not SAR (search and rescue) capable," said Hedges, who has over a decade of experience as a Coast Guard pilot. He was joined on board by Lt. Commander Bob Lokar and Petty Officer James Yockey. Their base is the largest Coast Guard aviation training facility in the country. "This was the first search and rescue case in the MH65 Echo aircraft so it was kind of unique. We didn't plan it that way but our aircraft had an all-new glass cockpit and brand-new weather radar, which actually helped us that day."

Hedges said the unplanned SAR operation was made much smoother due to Troyer. "His demeanor, everything on the radio, was fantastic," Hedges said. "He painted a perfect picture of where we needed to go, what we needed to do, and who was on scene."

Once they reached the crash scene, Hedges said he had to keep the helicopter running at half power to prevent it from sinking into the soft sand on the riverbank. As it

was, he said, the wheels were halfway down into the sand during the brief time he was on scene.

The crew soon took off with Nee and an emergency medical technician on board and headed to Sacred Heart Hospital in Pensacola. Troyer knew Hedges had never landed at that hospital before so he put him in touch with the LifeFlight pilot who was there and could walk him through the landing and any details he needed to know to arrive safely.

USCG Aviation Training Center Commanding Officer, Capt. W.E. Sasser, Jr., sent Troyer a letter of commendation for what he called Troyer's "exemplary response."

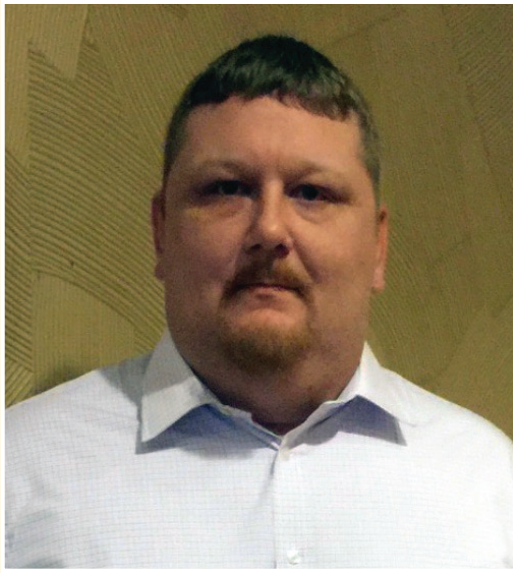
"The professionalism and expertise of your team helped my aircrew to safely navigate numerous hazards through the duration of the mission," Capt. Sasser wrote. "Your controllers were directly responsible for saving a life. I commend your team for their hard work, dedication, and expertise! Bravo Zulu and Semper Paratus."

After he left position following the event, Troyer said he went to his car to try and relax from the incredible adrenaline rush he was feeling. He said all he could think about was the condition of the pilot, and his desire to talk with Hedges to say thanks. Troyer said he is appreciative to P31 colleague Dan Briscan for spearheading the effort to recognize him for this save, and had a suggestion for his fellow members who go through these types of events together as a team.

"Show your appreciation to your fellow brother and sister controllers," he said. "We all say, 'well, that's just part of your job,' but anytime somebody goes through it, the adrenaline's rushing, people handle things a little bit differently. But talk to them after. Give them some praise."

2021

Southern Region



Noah Walker
Greensboro ATCT (GSO)

At approximately 8:30 p.m. on March 9, 2021, Greensboro ATCT (GSO) member Noah Walker was working the approaches into Greensboro, N.C., from the tower cab, as the positions were combined and the radar position was moved to the tower.

Walker was lining up a Lifeguard aircraft to the final for Runway 14. Just before he instructed the pilot to contact the tower, he noticed lights that appeared to be another aircraft in conflict.

He asked the tower controller if he was talking to an aircraft, but the controller confirmed he was not. Walker determined it was a drone flying near the arrival corridor for runway 14. He recognized that the aircraft and the drone appeared to be on converging courses, so he canceled the approach clearance. The aircraft was given a downwind for another runway in an effort to avoid the drone and still keep traffic moving.

Other aircraft were taxiing for departure off both southwest runways that pointed their departure course right at the drone, which they estimated to be the size of small light sport aircraft. So, the two controllers coordinated to have the aircraft taxi to the other side of the airport and depart off runways 5L and 5R, away from the drone.


They were able to depart a few aircraft, but the drone then changed its course and flew to the other side of the airport. After a few minutes, it flew changed course once again and flew directly over the tower that is located very near midfield. Since the controllers could not predict the erratic behavior of this very large drone, they had no choice but to suspend operations at GSO

until they could be reasonably sure the drone no longer presented a threat.

Multiple arrivals were diverted or put in holding and departures were delayed until there were no sightings for a reasonable period of time to ensure that the safety of flight was no longer compromised. The controllers coordinated with the adjacent centers and a ground stop was put into effect for GSO. One of the aircraft affected was a student pilot from a neighboring airport that had come to do one touch-and-go; they certainly didn't expect to spend a few hours on the ground there.

The situation presented such a safety hazard that the Domestic Events Network (DEN) and other entities were tracking the events closely which required a lot of coordination. Local law enforcement and fire and rescue personnel were alerted to what was going on and began a search to try and locate the pilot of the drone. Law enforcement was prepared to shoot down the drone if it came within a distance and altitude that they could safely do so, but it never did. The drone stayed in the area for a few hours, occasionally leaving for a few minutes but then reappearing a short time later. After approximately two and a half hours, the drone departed, and the pilot was never located.

Walker's actions on this night prevented a collision and ensured the safety of the users in the airspace. NATCA is proud to recognize his professionalism and skill to identify the hazard even though it did not appear on radar. It led one pilot to comment on frequency, "Thanks for looking out for us."



"We saw two terrific examples of professionalism with Marcus and Noah. Marcus utilized all of his training and experience. He was proactive and took advantage of all of the resources at his disposal. He reached out and collaborated with multiple entities to bring about a positive outcome. His actions were the epitome of teamwork and professionalism. Noah worked quickly and effectively to ensure the safety of the airfield and the airspace at GSO when it was threatened by an erratic drone. Both of these members represent the Southern Region with honor and distinction." — Jim Marinitti, Southern Regional Vice President

2020

Southwest Region



clockwise from left

Larry Bell

Colin McKinnon

Brian Cox

Fort Worth Center (ZFW)

Pilot and flight instructor Anise Shapiro and her student, Jouni Uusitalo, were flying Uusitalo's Piper PA-46 Malibu on a Saturday last spring from Hereford Municipal Airport (HRX), southwest of Amarillo, Texas, to Graham Municipal Airport (RPH), 80 miles northwest of Fort Worth, Texas. Halfway into the nearly 75-minute flight, they lost the engine for the first time in Shapiro's 23 years of flying. At 14,500 feet and needing quick options, she declared an emergency to Fort Worth Center (ZFW) NATCA member Brian Cox.

Cox asked Shapiro the standard emergency questions of how many souls were on board and how much fuel was remaining. Shapiro responded, "We have two souls, and we have two female pups and four puppies."

Cox, a 22-year veteran who has also worked at Kansas City Center (ZKC) and Denver Center (ZDV), knew this would be no ordinary day on position, but he was struck by how calm Shapiro was in the face of this urgent situation. Cox also has that trait, according to fellow ZFW member Colin McKinnon. "It's definitely awesome that it was Brian working, because he's probably the calmest guy in our building, certainly in our area," McKinnon said.

The Malibu, nicknamed the "Starship Enterprise" by Uusitalo for its relative spaciousness for transporting dogs in their crates, was being used for a Pilots N Paws mission. Shapiro and Uusitalo flew several of these flights last year, each in West Texas. On this flight, the engine failure immediately put Shapiro into instructor mode.

"I practice it (engine out) all the time and run my students through it," she said. "A lot of things

are going through your mind. I think we were very fortunate to have two pilots onboard. I told him what to do, declared the emergency to get help, and immediately pulled the checklist out so we could start running through it all to see if we could get the engine restarted.”

Cox immediately set to work to find landing options. He was quickly joined by Larry Bell, a former accountant, who was the Controller in Charge for this shift, and McKinnon, a pilot, who was assigned to Cox’s D-side and pulled up the visual flight rules chart for Cox to use. Bell and McKinnon were both hired in 2012 and have worked at ZFW their entire careers.

“The first thing I was trying to do was determine where is the nearest airport because, unfortunately, where she was in a spot east of Lubbock is where there are not a lot of airports,” Cox said.

One was Harrison Field of Knox City, Texas (F75), which was at Shapiro’s 1 o’clock and 25 miles away. She had a visual, and an encouraging glide ratio report. Unfortunately, with the trademark strong winds of West Texas forcing a quicker loss of altitude than expected, Shapiro needed another option.

McKinnon took over the ZFW 49 high sector frequencies to help alleviate frequency congestion for Cox. McKinnon also helped identify the closest highway. Bell, a Texas Tech alum who often drives to the campus in Lubbock, was familiar with the area and knew it was Texas State Highway 114. But Shapiro said from the air, it looked less like a “highway” and more like a typical West Texas two-lane mostly dirt road, lined with fences and mesquite trees. She declined that as a safe landing option.

Shapiro and Uusitalo spotted a final option: An open wheat field with no trees or cattle that had just been cleared of hay. Cox gave her a phone number to call when she was on the ground to expedite the process of search and rescue. The landing was smooth. No injuries. Bell quickly found the coordinates of the landing spot and forwarded them to the operations manager. Help arrived about 20 minutes later and they even brought water for the dogs.

Shapiro said she could feel the ZFW team behind her, having her back. “Knowing that you’re not alone actually is more helpful as a pilot than anything,” she said. “They stayed super calm. The calmer each transmission was, the calmer I felt.”

McKinnon said he worked an aircraft with engine trouble a few months’ prior to this incident. “I had the same feeling of, ‘oh man, please, make sure she’s on the ground safely,’” he said. “I thought she did an exceptional job.”

“I think we all agree that if we have an aircraft land in a field, we all sit there afterwards and think, ‘what could we have done better?’” Bell said. “But in this situation, I think we made all the right calls.”

2020

Southwest Region



Christopher Clavin

John (Randy) Wilkins

Fort Worth Center (ZFW)

Fort Worth Center (ZFW) air traffic controller Randy Wilkins has worked enough general aviation traffic in his 13 years there to know that while he and his colleagues aim to provide the best support they can and the most information possible to pilots who encounter difficulty, ultimately, it's up to the pilot to finish off a safe landing.

But Wilkins is passionate about training and developing his base of knowledge in as many different ways as he can to be prepared for challenging situations. That includes researching air safety investigations in his spare time, looking at how past NATCA Archie League Medal of Safety Award-winning controllers handled situations, watching YouTube instructional videos of VFR pilots encountering IFR conditions, and learning about the dangers of pilot vertigo in instrument meteorological conditions (IMC).

“You watch a video and think, ‘well, what would I do? Would I know to say that? Would I know to think about this?’ So I really fall back on those replays,” said Wilkins, who said one of the most important things he learned from watching other Archie League Award event replays is the importance of being calm on the radio, as it helps keep the pilot calm and focused. “If I was a pilot, I would think, ‘if that was me, what would I want to know, and what would I want somebody to say to me before I did this?’ The worst thing you hear about is people getting disoriented and flipped upside-down. The likelihood of getting disoriented in clouds if you’re not used to it is pretty high.”

That was the situation a Cessna 150 pilot faced in Wilkins’s airspace as he flew in solid IFR conditions near the boundary of Kansas City Center (ZKC) airspace, between Oklahoma City approach control and Tulsa approach control. He was lost, definitely under stress, and sought help through the Guard radio frequency. He ended up talking to a Southwest Airlines pilot who was trying to figure out where he was.

Five years ago, ZFW began piping the Guard frequency into the operation. Wilkins says that alerted him to this

situation. He got the pilot onto a ZFW frequency, brought up his location on radar, and gave the data block an EMRG designation for emergency.

“(Guard) is absolutely helpful in situations such as this. I think it’s very important and very useful,” said Wilkins, an Indiana native who graduated from Purdue. He started in engineering but later switched to Aviation Technology, Purdue’s CTI program.

The pilot was having trouble holding altitude and did not have the power to climb well. He was talking pretty well with Wilkins but then became frustrated and began to fly in circles.

At that point, fellow controller Chris Clavin, a Long Island, N.Y., native who began his career at ZFW three years ago, was working initially in the Ardmore sector near the end of his shift but heard the chatter on Guard. He sat down with Wilkins and the two controllers worked to find a place for the pilot to fly to and land safely.

“While Randy’s dealing with talking to the pilot, I was just trying to get the most up to date weather information that I could between Stillwater, Kansas City Center, Oklahoma City Approach, and Tulsa Approach to see if they had any guys going VFR in the airports around there,” Clavin said. “I was just trying to make sure that Randy didn’t have to do any coordination. It was my job to make sure he could focus on the pilot and I’ll take care of all the other stuff.”

The only good weather report was from the west side of Oklahoma City airspace, but the pilot was too far away to reach it with only ¼ tank of fuel remaining. Wilkins told him to focus on his instruments, don’t look out the window, and keep his wings level and airspeed up.

“You could see him going through the process of learning how to fly, either on his instruments or however he was doing it,” Wilkins said. “You could see him getting better and better at taking control of his aircraft. That might have saved his life – the 10 minutes he had to get used to flying in a manner like that, rather than saying, ‘I’ve gotta get

through the clouds now.’ That’s how it looked to me.”

The landing spot was picked – Chandler Municipal Airport (CQB), located near Interstate 44 between Oklahoma City and Tulsa. The ceiling was only 900 feet but better than other options. At that point, Wilkins and Clavin lost radio communications as the pilot descended beneath 2,500 feet. They put him on an advisory frequency, relayed information through another general aviation pilot, and waited for word that he landed safely.

“You don’t want to think the worst, but there’s other things going on in the sector that we had to take care of,” Clavin said. “It felt like 20 years before we finally got the update that he was on the ground.”

Clavin expressed gratitude at being selected as an Archie League Medal of Safety Award winner.

“After seeing previous years’ winners and looking at all of those events, it’s definitely an honor,” Clavin said. “I will be honest and say that, as the assistant, I don’t feel that I deserve nearly as much credit as Randy does. But I’m glad I was able to help and do anything I could.”

Wilkins says he looks at past winners with amazement and a “how did they do that?” wonder, but places high value on each event’s training value. He marvels in particular at the 2013 save by Boston ATCT (BOS) controller Nunzio DiMillo that saved lives when DiMillo saw a Cirrus SR22 erroneously lined up on a taxiway occupied by a JetBlue flight.

“To be categorized like that is an honor, and I really hope that people can take it and learn something from it, because that’s really what this is all about,” Wilkins said. “It’s about honoring the controllers that did a good job, but I try to use it as a training tool to say, ‘here’s what happened and this is what you can do if you get into this situation.’ That’s what I really hope comes out of it.”

2021

Southwest Region



Joe Wright
Houston TRACON (I90)

For Houston TRACON (I90) member Joe Wright, accepting his Southwest Region (NSW) Archie League Medal of Safety Award from NSW Regional Vice President Nick Daniels marks a full circle of sorts, on two levels.

First, Wright, a U.S. Navy veteran who plans to retire later this year after a 26-year career, will be back in the state of Louisiana, where he began his FAA career at Shreveport ATCT (SHV) in 2001. Second, he will be reunited with Daniels, his former co-worker at Fort Worth Center (ZFW). Wright arrived at ZFW in 2004, shortly before Daniels. Wright transferred from ZFW to I90 in 2009, where he experienced quite a bit, including working as one of the 12 employees who stayed at the facility for 76 straight hours during Hurricane Harvey in 2017.

“I’ve been able to see the whole gamut of air traffic, from flight planning in the Navy, all the way through to the tower discipline, the approach discipline, and the center discipline,” Wright said. “I’ve usually been in the right place at the right time.”

Perhaps never was that statement more true than the late afternoon of Thursday, Feb. 11, 2021. Wright was working the Houston Hobby (HOU) final position. The weather was IFR, with ceilings at 800 feet and a storm system moving in from the northwest. HOU was landing on runway 31-left and nearby Ellington Field Joint Reserve Base (EFD) – located seven miles east southeast of HOU – was landing on runway 35-left. The two approach courses intersect at a five-mile final for EFD and an eight-mile final for Hobby. Inbound HOU aircraft stay at 3,100 feet until they cross the intersection, then descend to at or above 2,100 feet a mile and a half later.

“Technique has gotten me through a lot. In this situation, it allowed me to keep things separated a little more clearly than maybe someone who had a different technique,” he said. “You can work the two finals independently of each other, as long as you’re minding your altitudes. You don’t have to blend Ellington with Hobby. You just have to be ready to descend to make their sequence work.”

On this day, a Piper Cherokee was cleared for the ILS to EFD. A Gulfstream G400 was being vectored behind the Cherokee for the ILS into HOU. After giving the Gulfstream

a turn towards final, Wright noticed that the Cherokee appeared to be struggling to stay on the localizer.

“This individual I noticed, when flying the pattern, was just not as steady and didn’t seem as confident as other training that’s going on,” he said.

Wright noticed some variations in the pilot’s headings and altitude variations. He advised the pilot of those things and got him on the approach on the first attempt. He seemed to be stable and Wright switched him to EFD tower. He went back to working other traffic but then observed the Cherokee pilot approach the marker in an unstable fashion and determined there was no way he was on the localizer which was used to keep aircraft aligned with the runway.

Wright then noticed the aircraft turn to the right and start climbing. Without hesitation, Wright issued the Gulfstream an immediate left turn and climb away from the Cherokee. While he was doing this, EFD called to inform Wright that the Cherokee had lost his gyroscope.

Wright had four HOU arrivals on his frequency, with the first in sequence being taken off the approach on a vector away from the Cherokee, which requested vectors for another try at the ILS although the pilot seemed unable to maintain a consistent altitude. In the background, an emergency was declared and other controllers searched for other airports with better weather conditions.

“He seemed a little rattled and rightfully so,” Wright said of the Cherokee pilot. “I knew, in my 26 years of aviation experience, with no gyro and those weather conditions, if you get disoriented it can go bad very quickly. My intention was to do the very best I could for him control-wise, but also

keep him calm. If I got tense, it may have caused him to have a little bit of a problem in concentration.”

The other aircraft in the pattern headed into Hobby heard what was happening. Wright continued to work them as he monitored the Cherokee’s position. “When I had an opportunity to slide one in, I would get them into Hobby,” he said.

The Cherokee pilot got back onto the localizer but soon descended into a tight, steep turn. Wright saw his altitude drop rapidly, starting from 2,400 feet, then to 2,000 feet. “I asked him, ‘are you OK?’ and he said, ‘I don’t think we’re OK,’” Wright said. “That’s when I knew it was a dire situation. That’s when I came to the thought that I was going to offer this man some assistance that he can’t see. I never want to take control of the plane or put them in a position where my actions are going to cause them a problem. But he was clearly in a situation that was not good.”

Wright advised the pilot to roll to the right and pull back. The pilot didn’t acknowledge, so Wright called out to him a couple of times. The pilot then broke out of the cloud ceiling at 700 feet and reported he could see the ground. Wright advised him he was in a safe area, with no obstructions or traffic. The pilot said he could see EFD, so Wright issued him a contact approach. The crisis was over and the pilot soon landed safely.

I90 FacRep Luke Miller said Wright’s “unflustered demeanor, attention to detail, and professionalism throughout this incident were exemplary. His actions may have saved the lives of both people onboard the aircraft. His ability to continue to expertly work Hobby arrivals was particularly impressive.”

“The teamwork displayed by Brian, Colin, and Larry in responding to the in-flight emergency, Randy and Chris in demonstrating calm professionalism, and Joe in executing perfect technique to help a pilot in trouble truly exemplify the work done every day by the air traffic controller workforce in the Southwest Region and across the country. Through their training and experience, these members were instrumental in ensuring their events had a positive outcome..” — Nick Daniels, Southwest Regional Vice President

2020

Western Pacific Region



Michelle Bruner

Jamie Macomber

San Diego ATCT (SAN)

Duffy Fainer holds three skydiving world records and has encountered eight parachute malfunctions and one emergency ocean landing in 46 years of jumps. His first in-flight emergency in 15 years of flying airplanes, late in the afternoon of Wednesday, April 22, 2020, gave him a different kind of feeling. But he credits the calm, professional, expert handling provided by San Diego ATCT (SAN) NATCA members Michelle “Shelly” Bruner and Jamie Macomber with helping him to a safe, albeit nerve-rattling, landing.

Duffy’s home airport is Montgomery-Gibbs Executive (MYF, formerly known as Montgomery Field). He departed on his usual route of flight in his Grumman American AA-5A Cheetah, N365PS, heading west of the Miramar Naval Air Station airspace toward the Pacific Ocean. After Fainer crossed over Crystal Pier, located on the ocean just north of Mission Bay, he realized the throttle was not working properly. It was stuck at the 2,000 rpm point, which was enough to enable him to sustain level flight but it wasn’t going to let him climb. Fainer was at 800 feet at that point in a coasting climb that then took him to 1,200 feet but no further.

“I just felt dread because I knew most likely this was not going to resolve itself,” Fainer said. “I knew that I wasn’t in a good position to try and get back to Montgomery Field, which was six miles away. I was stuck at an altitude that I knew I would have had rising terrain on my way back and that didn’t seem like a good idea flying over houses and suburbs and buildings.”

So Fainer called SAN and was immediately soothed by Bruner’s familiar voice. “She said, ‘whatever

you need,” Fainer said, “which gave me a lot of confidence and sense that somebody was there backing me up despite the fact I was in the cockpit all alone with my sad little airplane.”

“I knew something was up on his first transmission,” said Bruner, the daughter of a Navy mechanic who spent more than five years in the Army before starting her Federal Aviation Administration career 11 years ago. She’s been at SAN for the last 10 years. She noted that Fainer, a professional announcer and host, has a very familiar voice and callsign.

“We’re very familiar with him coming into the airspace but he always calls with all of his requests all at once,” Bruner said. “So this time, when he just called me with his callsign, I’m like, ‘OK, this is going to be different.’ I think instantly the adrenaline started kicking in. I had to figure out what was going to happen, what’s my plan - A, B, and C.”

On that day, in that month, just weeks after the start of the COVID pandemic, traffic was light at SAN, which worked in Fainer’s favor. But it still required the experience of the tower crew to safely handle this emergency.

Once Fainer said he needed to come in, Bruner and Macomber worked swiftly. Anticipating a possible conflict with normal IFR departure traffic off runway 27, Bruner proactively assigned a heading to SkyWest Flight 3378 to deconflict with Fainer. She also issued

a go-around to United Flight 1869, which was on a mile final. Macomber handled the declaration of emergency with the airport and handled coordination with adjacent facilities and the fire crews.

“I think at that point, you’re just listening to what’s going on around you and picking up the loose ends; the little bits that need to be done,” said Macomber, who has also been at SAN for 10 years after working at Oakland Center (ZOA) for the first two years of her career. “Shelly sent the United (plane or flight?) around, so I called and let everybody know this guy’s going and why he’s doing it, and then it was about clearing as much room and taking as much of the kind of paperwork part of it off of her as much as possible.”

The rpm gauge started to drop aboard the Cheetah and Fainer didn’t know how long the aircraft would sustain itself in flight. He had to make a decision before it was too late to glide anywhere. Beneath him was Fiesta Island, just three miles north of SAN. It has a two-mile stretch of sand that terminates into hard-packed dirt where it meets the water.

But Bruner had a better idea: She offered him an uncommon opposite-direction landing on runway 9, saving Fainer time and altitude.

“When she said runway 9 was available, and I was looking at 27 – which was another mile and a half to two miles away if I was going to approach it from that direction - it gave me an option I wasn’t really

continued on next page

Western Pacific Region *continued*

considering,” Fainer said, “but my hesitation was I didn’t want to tie up their nice big airport. I didn’t want to be ‘that guy’ that left a big smoking hole in the middle of their runway.”

He needn’t have worried. Macomber recalled a similar experience when a military Beechcraft T-34 lost an engine offshore and they had to bring them in to SAN for an emergency landing on runway 9.

Fainer didn’t know the extent of the problem at the time, a detached throttle bearing, which attaches the throttle cable to the carburetor arm like a trailer ball and hitch. All he knew with one mile to go was that he wasn’t sure if he was going to make the airport and if he did, he wasn’t sure how he was going to stop the aircraft.

At 140 miles per hour and downwind, Fainer killed the engine over the Engineered Material Arresting System (EMAS) before the numbers of runway 9, and put the plane into a steep sideslip bank, figuring that sooner or later it would run out of airspeed. He floated for a good mile down the runway. “I was wondering when it was all going to end,” he said. Finally, it did. He put it down and exited at the 7,500-foot mark.

Fainer said that if he had attempted to return to MYF and tried that same maneuver he used to land at SAN, “I would have ended up in the In-N-Out Burger on the other side of the (Cabrillo) freeway.” He repeated one of the important lessons from this incident for other pilots that he wishes to share: Don’t worry about where your car is, or your hangar; worry about landing safely. “If you’re gonna have

a drama you want to go to the longest runway, and have as many services waiting for you as possible,” he said.

“We’ve seen a lot of episodes lately where pilots overflow perfectly good airports with the intention of trying to get elsewhere and it didn’t end well for them. That’s one thing where aviators could do better. And the other thing is we’re typically afraid of, or intimidated by, the big Class Bravo airports and don’t want to infringe or impose or be a burden. I would certainly encourage aviators, especially after my incident, to ask for help and expect that controllers are going to make getting you down safely as their first priority.”

Bruner said she has gone to the Archie League Awards banquet 6-7 times and watched the playbacks of winning events closely. “You always hope that when that situation comes along, that you will be that calm voice; that you will be that helping hand to that pilot,” she said.

Added Macomber: “In those moments, your priority is just, ‘everything I have to do to make sure this person is safe, let’s do that.’”

Fainer, who grew up under the approach path to runway 24 left at Montreal-Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport, sparking a love of air traffic control, said he relishes his interactions now with ATC.

“Half of the fun of flying for me now is having a professional and cordial communication with the controllers and making my flight successful in that

regard,” Fainer said, “not just landing safely but knowing I had a good communication with all the controllers en route.”

2021

Western Pacific Region



Jeremy Hroblak

Scott Moll

CJ Wilson

Los Angeles ATCT (LAX)

Around 3:30 a.m. on Aug. 19, 2020, the crew of FedEx Flight 1026 (FDX1026), on approach to Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), notified LAX member Scott Moll that they needed to conduct a go-around due to an unsafe landing gear indication. As any tower controller can tell you, this isn't uncommon and usually ends with the pilots taking a little time to work out the issue and then returning for an uneventful landing.

With that in mind, and adhering to normal procedures, FDX1026 was vectored out over the Pacific Ocean to work the problem. At this point, numerous challenges began to present themselves for this flight. The first was relatively small. After some time, the pilots asked for a low approach at 1,000 feet over the runway to get a visual confirmation as to the status of the gear. But the darkness and the height of the aircraft above the tower made it nearly impossible to confirm what Moll and his ground controller, CJ Wilson, thought they saw. The left main landing gear appeared to be retracted.

Moll began to coordinate a second low approach with Southern California TRACON (SCT), this time at 300 feet above the runway. Wilson and Moll coordinated with airport operations to get vehicles on the field, and with another FedEx crew that had just landed, to assist in visually inspecting the landing gear to ensure as many eyes as possible would be on that aircraft as it made a low approach. It was confirmed: the nose and right main gear was down but the left main gear was still up.

Another large challenge appeared at this point. Having exhausted all their options, the crew of FDX1026 determined they would have to attempt an emergency landing. The two controllers knew that the workload in the tower was about to increase exponentially. So,

they recalled Jeremy Hroblak back from his break to conduct the immense amount of coordination and communication associated with the controller in charge position.

The crew of FDX1026 requested the longest runway at LAX, runway 25R. But another challenge presented itself because the runway was closed due to the city venting gas from a complex on short final for that runway. None of the three controllers on duty that night had ever seen the city do this venting procedure before, or since. But on that night, it had an impact.

When Hroblak arrived in the tower, he coordinated with the city to halt the venting and make runway 25R available for the stricken Boeing 767.

Yet another issue had been lingering for nearly a week prior to Aug. 19. The crash phone, used to summon the Aircraft Rescue and Fire Fighting crews, was out of service, which complicated the required, and urgent, Alert 2 notification. An Alert 2 indicates that an aircraft is having major difficulties. Jeremy got in contact with the fire captain on his personal cell phone and utilized that means of communication throughout the event.

An immense amount of coordination occurred over the next few tense minutes leading to FDX1026 making

an emergency landing on runway 25R, just after 4 a.m. The flight crew abandoned the aircraft on the runway due to the potential for fire, and both survived, though one did suffer a broken leg while using the escape ladder.

Despite the numerous challenges presenting themselves, Moll, Hroblak, and Wilson, through their skill and professionalism, were able to address them all, contributing to the most successful outcome possible.

The captain of FDX1026, Bob Smith, wrote a letter describing the event from his perspective. He concluded the letter by saying, “As we say at FedEx to a team member for a job well done ... Bravo Zulu! Thank you for your professionalism, and for your significant contribution to an aircraft incident that, because of your actions, ended with a safe landing and minimal damage to our aircraft.”

NATCA is happy to report that the crash phone was repaired the very next day.

This is the second Western Pacific Region Archie League Medal of Safety Award-winning event from LAX, joining Michael Darling’s award-winning save in 2007.

“These two events provide inspiring examples of quick action and teamwork by Michelle and Jamie, and Jeremy, Scott, and CJ. In the case of the San Diego save, we don’t often get the opportunity to talk after an emergency with the pilots we help land safely. But in this case we did, and pilot Duffy Fainer was very grateful for the service he received. At LAX, we also received a wonderful personal message from FedEx Captain Bob Smith, who recently retired. He is also grateful for the service he and his first officer received from our members. We are tremendously proud of each of our winners for representing our region with honor and distinction.”

— Joel Ortiz, Western Pacific Regional Vice President

2020

Region X Commitment to Safety Award



Al Arcese

Engineers New England (ENE)

The Region X Commitment to Safety Award is given annually to a Region X member who has shown a profound dedication to ensuring the safety of the National Airspace System (NAS). The award is peer-nominated, and any Region X member in good standing can be nominated for work done in their role as an aviation safety professional.

Congratulations to Engineer/New England Region (ENE) member Al Arcese. Arcese is a Civil Engineer/Project Execution Lead in the Boston Navigation & Landing Aids Engineering group and is the NATCA Air Traffic Safety Action Program (ATSAP)-X Event Review Committee (ERC) representative. He has been employed with the FAA for over 31 years and has been a member of NATCA immediately upon being eligible to join in 1997.

Nominated by ENE Alternate Regional Vice President (ARVP) Bob Aiken, he had this to say of Arcese: “Al Arcese is a true professional that is the face of the ATSAP-X program. His dedication as an experienced NavAids Engineer, a commercial rated pilot, and flight instructor comes through every day. I can’t think of anyone more deserving of this award.”

“It is rare to find the complete package of a true aviation safety professional,” said Region X VP Brad Davidson. “Al is extremely knowledgeable, hard working, dedicated, an excellent communicator, and brings a wide variety of personal and professional experience to the benefit of both the FAA and NATCA. Al’s role as our lead for the ATSAP-X program is just a demonstration of his commitment to safety.”

“I am incredibly humbled and surprised to receive this award,” said Arcese. “I am grateful to NATCA for all the hard work done for its members and for aviation safety. I have always felt very strongly about organized labor and was thrilled when we were allowed to join. I have actually been both a member of NATCA and ALPA concurrently. As a former airline pilot, and currently an active charter, Chief Pilot and Flight Instructor, aviation safety has always been incredibly important to me. I was honored when I was asked to play a part in initiating the Voluntary Safety Reporting Program for Region X. I commend NATCA for recognizing the hard work and safety contributions that our Region X members make to the NAS, and for giving them a voice and a process for elevating their safety concerns. I thank all of the other ERCs and all of NATCA’s many safety programs for welcoming and working with Region X and for their support. I feel very strongly about promoting a collaborative culture within the FAA, and I have seen firsthand how this positive culture benefits the flying public. I have been very lucky to have a supportive family and friends throughout my career, and thank them as well.”

2021

Region X Commitment to Safety Award



Barry Hammer

Engineers New England (ENE)

Cindy Hirsch

Engineers NW Mountain (ENM)

Terry Washington

Engineers Southern (ESO)

The 2021 recipients of the Region X Commitment to Safety Award are Barry Hammer (Engineers New England, ENE), Cindy Hirsch (Engineers/Northwest Mountain, ENM), and Terry Washington (Engineers Southern Region, ESO). They are the NATCA members who are the leads for their respective FAA regions for the Runway Incursion Mitigation (RIM) safety-related program from the FAA Office of Airports (ARP). They are managing the RIM program on behalf of their regions, working in concert with regional and national FAA staff to execute it.

Reducing runway incursions at the over 500 towered airports in the National Airspace System (NAS) is a top priority for the FAA. Runway incursions occur when an aircraft, vehicle, or person enters the protected area of an airport designated for aircraft landings and takeoffs. The FAA Office of Airports (ARP) initiated the RIM program in fiscal year (FY) 2015 to improve safety at locations with history of incursions based upon research that showed a relationship between certain runway, taxiway, and apron configurations and the likelihood of runway incursions. The result is a risk-based, data-driven program that works to reduce runway incursions by helping airport sponsors identify and address risks at specific on-airport locations that have a history of runway incursions.

In FY 2012, ARP initiated a research study to examine the relationship between taxiway layout and safety risk. This effort involved developing a Geographic Information System (GIS) database with these problematic taxiway geometry (PTG) locations, pilot deviation and vehicle/pedestrian deviation runway incursions (including wrong runway events and surface incidents), and hot spots all shown graphically on an image of the airport layout. As a result, the

RIM program was launched in FY 2015 in an effort to mitigate the non-standard geometry factors present at these locations, with the intention to reduce the number of runway incursions.

Examples of problematic taxiway layouts include direct taxiing access from ramps to the runway and wide expanses of taxi pavements along the runway.

To be designated a RIM location, the area either experienced three or more runway incursions in a single calendar year (CY), or its cumulative incursion counts averaged one or more incursion(s) per year of data analyzed. The incursion data is examined annually. Since the 2019 database update, cumulative incursion analyses are limited to the previous 10 CYs of available RI data.

According to the “RIM Program Mitigation Analysis Fiscal Year 2021” report, at the end of FY 2021, there were 129 RIM locations in various stages of mitigation. Mitigation strategies include changes or enhancements to signage, markings, or lighting; closures of runways or taxiways; new construction; changes to airfield operational procedures; and outreach and education to airport users to enhance situational awareness. The lead times for mitigations can be very long, as many of

the locations are examined in the context of an overall master plan for the airport.

According to the same report, as of September 2021, the RIM program mitigated 74 runway/taxiway locations since its inception.

Airport Sponsors work with FAA Airports Division staff members, other FAA lines of business, and industry to plan and implement projects. Projects may be funded all or in part by programs executed by the FAA Office of Airports including Airport Improvement Program (AIP) grants, other Federal grants such as those resulting from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and Passenger Facilities Charges (PFCs).

Airports Division RIM Program leads in each region work to educate the various parties on the types of problematic layouts, help to review and validate the concerns at each location, encourage that progress be made with mitigations, and assist with mitigation solutions.

The post-mitigation runway incursion rates are formally tracked, analyzed, and reported out on an annual basis following project completion. This analysis allows the team to identify successful outcomes or know when more work needs to be done.

“I am excited and honored to introduce Al Arcese, Barry Hammer, Cindy Hirsch, and Terry Washington to all of my brothers and sisters who may not yet know them. Al is the epitome of advancing aviation safety through professionalism, dedication, knowledge, and influence. Al brings a multi-faceted background to NATCA for which we all benefit from. Barry, Cindy, and Terry are outstanding representatives for their profession and this great Union, with a tremendous work ethic and excellent dedication to safety that is exemplified in the results of their work to make our nation’s airports safer through the Runway Incursion Mitigation program in the FAA Office of Airports. I am very proud of our Region X members today, and every day!”

— Brad Davidson, Region X Regional Vice President

2020

Federal Contract Tower



Brad Burtner
Pompano Beach (PMP)

NATCA charter member Brad Burtner retired from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) on Jan. 3, 2008 after three decades of working traffic at four different facilities. Like many other retirees, Burtner headed to Florida, but he didn't hang up his headset or put away his Union membership card.

Instead, two days later, Burtner started a new chapter as a Federal Contract Tower (FCT) controller at Pompano Beach ATCT (PMP). Four years later, he worked to organize the controllers to choose NATCA to represent them, adding to a growing list of the Union's FCTs, which currently totals 116. That same year, Burtner started his six years of service on NATCA's National Organizing Committee.

In late 2019, it was something Burtner did on the job that has earned him a new round of respect and admiration. NATCA this year is excited to announce the addition of a new category for FCT saves to join the nine geographic regions in the 16th annual Archie League Medal of Safety Award program. The first FCT winner is Burtner and NATCA will be honoring him and his fellow 2020 award winners on Aug. 11 at the 18th Biennial Convention in Houston.

Burtner worked at Cincinnati ATCT (CVG) from 1986 to his FAA retirement date after spending his first decade in the FAA at New Orleans-Lakefront ATCT (NEW), New Orleans Moisant ATCT (MSY), and Lake Charles ATCT (LCH). He said it was an easy decision to continue working at an FCT.

"I still enjoy my job and I like the camaraderie at work," said Burtner who also serves as both PMP FacRep and Southern Region Alternate Vice President representing FCTs. "Everybody gets along great. It's fun to work there."

Late on a typically clear weekday morning at PMP in December 2019, Burtner was working local control and had four aircraft in the pattern. One was N955Q, a Beechcraft N35 Bonanza, which Burtner says flies in 1-2 times daily.

“You sit in the tower for a year or two and there’s no events,” Burtner said. “You’re busy with traffic, but it gets to be routine.”

But on this day, with this aircraft cleared to land on runway 10, something was off. “It didn’t look right, so I put binoculars on,” Burtner said. The aircraft was over the approach lights and in the flare, the transition phase between the final approach and the touchdown on the landing less than 10 feet above the ground, ready to touch down. That’s when Burtner noticed the landing gear was up and immediately issued a go-around.

The pilot was able to throttle in, pull up, reestablish the aircraft in the pattern, and manually lower the landing gear. He returned and landed safely. Afterwards he called the tower and advised that he had an armature problem that caused the gear malfunction. He said the go-around instruction saved the aircraft.

Donnie Snyder, the Chief Executive Officer of Buy, Fly, Sell, LLC, the company that owns the aircraft, was very thankful for Burtner’s quick actions. He visited the tower to personally thank Burtner and the staff and present Burtner with a special framed certificate. It reads, in part,

“It is my honor to present this Recognition of Excellence letter to Bradley Burtner for his exemplary actions on this day. Furthermore, I commend the entire ATC staff at KPMP. They are one of the best in Florida.” Snyder also wrote that “Brad’s actions prevented damage to our aircraft, runway closure and all the other unpleasant events that follow an aviation incident.”

Robinson Aviation, Inc. (RVA) operates PMP. Its Area II Manager, Bruce Bivins, wrote a letter of appreciation to Burtner. “It is this special attention to duty and quick action that allows the system to have the safety record it enjoys,” Bivins wrote. “It is always a pleasure to learn employees’ vigilance and attention to detail has helped keep the flying public safe, and it gives us the opportunity to say ‘thank you’ from RVA and the users of the system. On behalf of Robinson Aviation (RVA), I would like to commend you on your performance.”

Burtner said he feels very honored to receive the first Archie League Medal of Safety Award for FCTs.

“It’s always nice to be recognized,” Burtner said. “I’ve been working for NATCA since three or four years after its founding (in 1987). It’s always nice being recognized for things by your Union and know people appreciate your work and know you’re still doing a good job.”



“Brad has been an invaluable Leader for NATCA for many years and he continually shows his love and commitment for the profession. He is committed to lead by example and on this day showed how what may seem mundane can become extraordinary very quickly.”

— Jim Marinitti, Southern Regional Vice President

Honorable Mention

CENTRAL REGION

2020

Darrell Bott, ZKC
Patrick James, ZKC
Philip Lapoint, ZKC
Javier Salmon, ZKC
Derrick Willis, ZKC

2021

Buel Warden, T75
Dave Bown, T75
Damion Curtis, STL
Annie Wolf, STL
Brett Hansen, ZKC
Brent Scott, ZKC
Ryan James, ZKC

EASTERN REGION

2020

Bronson Burriss, EWR
Randy Throckmorton, EWR
Joanna Remigio, JFK
Gaetano Chetta, PHL
Adam Cohen, PHL
Matthew Bode, ZNY
Zachary Clark, ZNY
Joseph Lanzetta, ZNY
Richard Rogers, ZNY
Richard Soucheck, ZNY

Christopher Stolworthy, ZNY
Dominick Vernice, ZNY
Orville Whyte, ZNY

2021

Jeff Simmons, PCT
Chris Rhodes, PCT
Chris Jubeck, PCT
Dallas Dudding, PCT
Matthew Harper, PCT
Dan Fostel, AGC

GREAT LAKES REGION

2020

Zachariah Schneider, MSN
Micah Bales, RFD
Jason Maurer, RFD
Wayne Short, RFD
Nicholas Derado, ZID
Steven Sexton, ZID

2021

Ted Kratochvil, IND
Shawn Hyde, IND
James Lister, IND
Tyler Yensel, IND
Raymond Cooper, ZID
Matthew Demasie, ZID
Sam Schmitt, RST
Dan Carrico, ORD

NEW ENGLAND REGION

2021

Israel Cruz, BTV
John Lombardi, Y90
Joseph Pelton, Y90
Robert Hixon, Y90

NW MOUNTAIN REGION

2020

Justin Simpson, D01
Hunter Panetti, HIO
Edward DeLisle, P80
Jeremy Prus, P80
Joseph Laporte, ZLC
Christopher Watson, ZLC

2021

Brian Gosselin, EUG
Caryn Morrison, ZLC
Lindsey Boerman, ZLC
Wayne Withers, BOI
Joe LaPorte, ZLC
Royce Bockelman, ZDV

SOUTHERN REGION

2020

Nicholas Klose, BNA
James Williams, CLT
Michael Driscoll, DAB

Sean Caldwell, ILM
Derek Hartman, ILM
Benjamin Olkowski, ILM
Cameron Purser, ILM
Craig Monroe, SDF

2021

Kelly Franklin, ZME
Dylan Reisling, ZME
Jamaal Baker, ZME
Jessica Huffman, ZME
Harry Kaufman, JAX
Edwin Brignon-Perez, ZSU
Giovanni Martinez, ZSU
Nate Henkels, ZMA
Brandi Licious, ZMA
John Lennox, ZMA
Daniel Garcia-Barbon, ZMA
David Bayne, GSP
Sam Perkins, GSP
Dion Ferrier, GSP
Chelsea Fleenor, GSP
Anthony Downing, GSP
Martin Rojkes, ZMA
Hugo Alfaro, ZMA

SOUTHWEST REGION

2020

Joshua Kwapy, ACT
William Buvens, HUM
Shane Ooten, SHV

Christopher Alexander, ZFW
Ryan Baird, ZFW

Catherine Caloca-Miller, MYF
Dustin Tanaka, MYF

2021

Brad Benedetto, ZFW
John Grant, ZFW
Wendy Smith, ABQ
Antonio Bermudez, DFW
Brandon Pettit, ZAB
Stephen Barnes, ZAB

WESTERN PACIFIC REGION

2020

Michael Holbert, CRQ
Michael Mallette, CRQ
John Macchiaroli, LAX
Kelsey McKendrick, LGB
Clinton Meche, LGB
Kyle Vercautren, LGB
Nicholas DiBenedetto, SNA
Nicholas Roth, SNA

2021

Bryan Caldwell, P50
Kevin Kosterman, P50
Alicia Scott, MYF
Chase McNeil, MYF
Jason Gilsdorf, MYF







