



Cpl. Russell Hooper checks his notes as he clears another aircraft for landing at the Beaufort, N.C., airport, July 1. Marine Air Control Squadron 2, Det "C," air traffic controllers, based out of Bogue Field, set up a temporary tower in Beaufort, N.C., during the 4th of July week tall ships event.

2nd MAW controllers ensure smooth sailing over tall ships

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Cpl. Russell Hooper leans out of the large window opening and peers into the hazy afternoon sky. He can hear the distant buzz of a small airplane approaching, but at first, all he sees are sea gulls wheeling lazily in shimmering heat waves near the departure end of runway 14.

It is Saturday, July 1, in Beaufort, N.C., and the tall ships are in town. The festival is the first of its kind in the normally quiet coastal community, and with the expected 100,000 visitors, comes traffic — lots of it.

Air traffic into and out of the town's airport has picked up too. That's where Hooper and his fellow Marines come in. Hooper is one of 12 members of Marine Air Control Squadron 2 who are providing air traffic control to the normally "uncontrolled" airfield.

The small voice in Hooper's headset announces, "Beaufort tower, this is five-zero-tango, on one-mile final for two-six."

Almost instantly Hooper spots the small aircraft, not much more than a moving speck above the treeline east of the field. He replies, "Five-zero-tango, Beaufort tower, you are clear to land runway two-six."

"Clear for two-six, five-zero-tango," acknowledges the voice that now has a Cessna Skyhawk tied to its other end.

Hooper issues instructions to other aircraft in the vicinity. "Two-whiskey-foxtrot, Beaufort tower, you may enter your base leg. You have a Cessna 172 on final."

"Entering base, I have the Cessna in sight, two-whiskey-foxtrot." Hooper: "Three-uniform-delta, Beaufort tower, hold short runway two-six, you have landing traffic."

"Holding short two-six, three-uniform-delta."

For the pilots on the other end of those radio waves, this is a new experience. Beaufort airport is an "uncontrolled" field. Which means radio communication when you come into or leave Beaufort is normally conducted on a common frequency shared only with other aircraft and ground personnel with the local fixed-base operator. Such communications depend on an "honor system" in which everyone expects everyone else to be reporting their positions and their intentions — and accurately at that.

In short — you talk to the other guys and gals that are communicating and you watch out for the ones who aren't.

Or, on a week like this, you could just call in the Marines.

Days before the official start of the tall ship event, MACS-2

Marines hauled truckloads of equipment to a grassy patch surrounded by Beaufort's six runways and began to build a tower. As air traffic control towers go, this one doesn't look like much. The tower "cab" that sits atop spindly-looking metal struts and cross braces is nothing more than a tan metal box, crammed with equipment, a couple of chairs and a crew of three. When the wind blows, it moves. When someone climbs the narrow metal stairs to the outside walkway, you can feel every step vibrate through the metal frame. It clearly wasn't designed for comfort, but this isn't the Air Force either.

But when you climb those metal stairs, duck through the waist-high doorway, and then stand up to observe the airfield through the tower's large Plexiglas windows, you realize that the extra 24 feet of height give you a commanding 360-degree view of the field.

This is the same rig that Marines use to support combat missions in the desert and other parts of the world.

Today, Hooper is the local controller. The Portland, Ore., native's job is to talk to incoming and outgoing aircrews and keep them from getting tangled up in the Beaufort airspace. Lance Cpl. Jack Spangler is filling the data position in the tower. Spangler — practically a "local," he originally hails from Shelby, N.C. — stays in communication with controllers back at Cherry Point and relays clearance information to Hooper. Staff Sgt. James Dosh, the shift supervisor, looks over their shoulders and fills in when they need a break. Unlike Hooper, Dosh is the shy one. Point a camera at him and the Brainerd, Minn., native acts like he's afraid he'll end up on America's Most Wanted. "Hey, point that thing at those guys, they're doing all the work."

Three other Marines sit out the holiday weekend shift in tents below the tower. They are the communications technician, generator mechanic and refrigeration mechanic that ensure quality uninterrupted communications between the controllers, aircraft and other control agencies, keep the electronics in cool working order and keep the tower crew from melting in the blistering July heat.

Later today, a second six-man crew will arrive to take the evening shift. The tower, an isolated island of sanity during this busy time, is providing support to local pilots from 7 a.m. until 11 p.m. each day. But its isolation isn't total. Occasionally pilots and other airport personnel hike out to the small encampment to check out the owners of the voices on the other end of their aviation radios.

During their six-days on the field, the Marine controllers will handle nearly 700 flights.

Kevin Snyder, a commercial pilot for a lumber company on the

western side of the state, flew his company's twin-engine Cessna Caravan into Beaufort twice during the Marines' stay. "Those guys were super!" said Snyder, later. "They were professional and, best of all, very accommodating. They were clearly there to help."

Ryan Segrave, owner and operations manager of Segrave Aviation in Beaufort, had nothing but praise for the Marines as well.

Segrave Aviation is the local FBO, which, among many other things, often helps manage traffic on the ground at the airport. That duty includes manning the "Unicom" radio frequency, the local common frequency used by pilots. As the Unicom operator, Segrave's personnel respond to calls from incoming aircrews regarding runway conditions, which runways are currently in use, refueling information and myriad other bits of information.

"We had around 300 aircraft come in and out of here," said Segrave. "The Marines did a great job of communicating, allowing us to focus on our mission on the ground." Segrave added that many local pilots admitted that they enjoyed the support as well, including the opportunity to practice flying in a tower-controlled environment. "One student pilot flew his first solo flight while they were here," said Segrave. "His instructor was allowed to monitor the flight in the tower with the Marines and to communicate with the student during the flight."

As far as anyone can remember, this the first real air traffic control tower used at the Beaufort airport in its 63-year history, or at least since the Marines turned the field over to Carteret County in 1948. (According to John Betts, the airport manager, the closest thing to a tower since then was a tent set up on the field by the state Department of Transportation one day for a large fly-in event in the early 1980s.)

The airport in Beaufort is officially known as Michael J. Smith Field, or more commonly, Smith Field, named after the late space shuttle astronaut, Navy Capt. Michael J. Smith, who piloted space shuttle Challenger when it exploded after launch on Jan. 28, 1986. Smith was born and raised in Beaufort and flew from this field long before he first stretched his wings into space.

The airport's six runways, angled into a triangular shape, offer very good landing and takeoff room for aircraft as large as small commuter jets. Traffic can be busy at times, but on an average day, the number of flights into and out of here come nowhere close to the traffic seen here during the tall ships visit.

"It was a win-win situation for everyone," said Dosh. "We provided an extra set of eyes for the pilots and our Marines got some extra training in the field."



A Cessna Caravan touches down on runway 21 only yards from the temporary air traffic control tower set up by Marine Air Control Squadron 2.