



# U.S. MARINES IN JAPAN

Recruiting | HQMC | Units | Career | MarineOnLine | Marine 4 Life | News | Family | Publications

[Main Home](#)

[Public Affairs Info](#)

[Press Releases](#)

[Ops / Exercises](#)

[Image Archive](#)

[Video Archive](#)

[Contacts](#)

[AFN](#)

[Local News Links](#)

[DoD News Links](#)

Okinawa Marine

[Back to Okinawa Marine Page](#)

[Back to Archive Page](#)



Air traffic controllers, who carry the responsibility of keeping a safe flow of traffic for pilots, aircraft and crew, overlook the flight line on MCAS Futenma.

*\*View/download a high res copy of this image.*

## Futenma's air traffic controllers keep eyes on busy skies

Lance Cpl. Mark S. Allen

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION FUTENMA (March 15, 2002) -- In the movie "Pushing Tin," actor John Cusack flamboyantly choreographed a group of incoming and outgoing flights as an air traffic controller, but for the Marines who actually wake up every day and fill the billet, there is a whole lot more to pushing tin.

To become an air traffic controller, Marines must pass a 16-week academically challenging course with a high failure rate. Marines who overcome the rigorous curriculum are not yet qualified air traffic controllers. They still have to check into their unit to continue their training under the close watch of a seasoned controller.

"The course makes sure the Marines have the mental capacity for this job, and many Marines can't keep up with the pace," said Buffalo, N.Y., native, Gunnery Sgt. Virgil D. Pippens, staff noncommissioned officer in charge, Air Traffic Control, Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, MCAS Futenma. "Once the new Marines get here they continue their training for six months before they can become qualified."

There are four different types of air traffic controllers, and all play their part in ensuring that aircraft land safely.

The ground control section is responsible for keeping a two-way communication with every vehicle or person on the airfield with the exception of the runway. The runway belongs to the local controller who gives clearance to landing pilots. Coordinating and

requesting information from other airfields, within the other sections of the tower, is the flight data position. Overlooking everybody is the tower watch supervisor.

A new controller can become a ground control or flight data position controller, but to have the qualification to become a local controller can take years. With the numerous flights taking place every week, the responsibilities of the local controllers are only given to experienced controllers who can reliably safeguard the aircraft and crew.

"Sometimes we have a lance corporal, who is a locked on natural born controller and becomes a local controller quickly, but some can't do it and have to find a new job," Pippens said. "Wanting to become qualified as a local controller makes it challenging and competitive, but every one still works so well together."

Accountability for every take off and landing on the flight line could seem stressful to an untrained Marine, but Pippens admits a regular work day in the tower is business as usual.

"The idea of this job could be stressful, but this job isn't any different than anything else," Pippens said. "Is being an air traffic controller mentally draining? Yes. We're responsible for providing an efficient flow of traffic with the ultimate goal of safety, but this is an outstanding job for our Marines."



Lance Cpl. Dwight P. Thompson, ground control air traffic controller, H&HS, MCAS Futenma, checks the wind indicator for the flight line on MCAS Futenma, Feb. 14. (Photo by Lance Cpl. Mark S. Allen).  
[Lo Res](#) [Hi Res](#)

---