

From a speck on radar to a safe landing involves the work of air traffic controllers

Story and photo by LCpl L. S. Lewis

Averaging a hectic 400 aircraft radar approaches a month, Marines behind glowing radar air traffic control screens at Futenma's Marine Corps Air Station have brought their pilots into safe radar approach landings an impressive 50,000 times.

This safety record has added emphasis since ninety percent of the time there's a student directing the aircraft down with a qualified Marine monitoring the action.

Coaching a plane down by radar isn't easy, as Cpl Joseph G. Hendrickson explains. "First the plane's course is tracked, and we pick up the aircraft when it's only a small dot on the radar screen.

"We talk the aircraft down to within a mile of the end of the runway," says Hendrickson. "If the pilot still can't see well enough to land, we guide him all the way to the runway. He's still the one in control, but we must direct and give him all the help we can through radio communication."

The air traffic controller can provide a Marine pilot with a lot of help. Behind the controller is a minimum of 14 weeks formal training at Millington, Tenn. And to keep controllers updated, ready for airfield operations and familiar with radar equipment, each new duty station requires air controllers to become a student all over again.

"We start at the bottom with each new assignment," Hendrickson notes. "Students have to requalify in tower and radar room operations. They also have to learn the geography of each new base and area so they can safely direct a plane to the runway.

"On-the-job training we get here is very effective," emphasizes Hendrickson.

Of the squadron's 27 air traffic controllers, 10 are qualified in all areas and responsible to monitor other Marines. Qualifications here are exacting because some air traffic problems are unique to Okinawa.

Within a 10 mile radius, there are three major airports: Kadena Air Force Base, Futenma, and Naha International Airport. This creates a real problem with available air space, which sometimes becomes limited.

All three airports have worked out a system, dividing air space like a layered cake.

"Air space under 2,000 feet and within five miles of Futenma, belongs to us in the sense that they are under our control," said MSgt James E. Strasser, noncommissioned officer in charge.

"Kadena's air space is from 2,000 to 15,000 feet and 50 miles out. When one of our planes comes in at that altitude, we radio Kadena to request air space," explained Hendrickson. "If a plane's flight is outside Kadena's limit, we call Naha."



Cpl Hendrickson on watch