

By early 1942 it had become obvious to the Civil Aeronautics Administration that they were facing a serious personnel shortage at their flight service stations. Many of the men were being drafted – local draft boards having little sympathy for their pleas that their work was vital to the operation of the nation’s airways. In addition, many AC’s had seen previous service as U.S. Navy radio operators, and with the nation now at war they were volunteering to return to the service. Faced with the prospect of closing facilities or instituting 60-hour work weeks, the CAA embarked on a most daring plan. Within weeks announcements had gone out to all parts of the country that Civil Service Examinations would be held for the position of Aircraft Communicator, GS-1, with the generous salary of \$1440 per annum. Previous Civil Service announcements offered a per annum salary of \$1220, and had been restricted to males with some radio operator background. This new announcement was not restricted to males, and did not require a background in radio operation.

In early 1942 I was chief operator at a tiny telephone exchange in northern Minnesota. In 1939 I had registered as a freshman in the Department of Aeronautical Engineering at the University of Minnesota. I was to be bankrolled by a well-to-do aunt, who had promised to lend me the tuition money for four years at the University. I had scraped enough money together to pay the first semester’s tuition and rent an attic room near the campus. Then came the fateful day when my aunt asked what my studies would be – would it be nursing, or teaching? When I told her I had my sights on being an aeronautical engineer, she hit the ceiling, and my four years of tuition money just flew out the window. During the following two years I attended a local business college and worked at whatever jobs I could find. I had all but given up my dream of a career in aviation, and then I found the announcement of the civil service exam. The words “Aircraft Communicator” struck me. Maybe this would be as close as I could get.

I successfully passed the civil service exam, which at that time was essentially a test to determine if I could read and write. In mid-October I reported to the Transportation building in Chicago to begin my three months of training. At the end of the three months we were handed a list of the Third Region facilities that were short-handed, and were asked to choose which facility we would prefer. None of them were in Minnesota, so I chose Battle Creek, Michigan. I knew nothing about Battle Creek except that I had sent countless box tops to the cereal companies in that town in exchange for de-coder rings, and memberships in various “secret societies”. I arrived at Kellogg Field in Battle Creek, Michigan, on the 16’s: It was the 16th of January, 1943, the thermometer had hit 16 below that morning, and there was 16 inches of snow cover. I had been told to park at the southeast corner of the hangar, and the facility chief would “let me in.” I found the hangar, and discovered that a five-strand barbed wire fence separated me from the hangar door. The facility chief soon appeared, and it became obvious that “let me in” meant that he would hold down the two lower strands of wire with his foot, and would lift up the upper three strands enough for me to crawl through.

The flight service station was on the second level in the northeast corner of a civilian hanger. It had been in operation for several months before the Army Air Corps took over operation of Kellogg Field. It took very little time for our ex-Navy facility chief to clash with the Air Corps field commander. The five-strand barbed wire fence which completely surrounded the airport (with no access gate to the hanger) was a declaration by the field commander that he was now in charge, and that he considered any ex-Navy people on the base as an unnecessary nuisance.

The Air Corps had built a temporary wood control tower on the northwest corner of the field, and it had been recently staffed by CAA personnel. An Air Corps weather station had been established on the northeast corner of the field, but since it lacked a barometer, anemometer and weather teletype, the hourly observations had become a joint effort by Air Corps and flight service observers.

As the new kid on the block, I was informed that my hours of duty would be midnight to 8 AM, Monday through Friday. My duties were to monitor the aircraft frequencies, record the hourly weather report and transmit it by teletype, and, most important of all, to scrub the station floor each night, apply a coat of paste wax, buff the wax to a super-shine, and clean the copper cover of the barometer with metal polish.

Unbeknownst to me, our facility chief had been in frequent contact with the personnel of the Regional Office, informing them that if they had the temerity to assign a female to his facility that he would promptly resign and go back into the Navy. They did, and he didn't! In retrospect, I realized that his wash and wax routine was an effort to get me to throw in the towel and go back to where I came from. It didn't work – I washed and waxed without complaint until we ran out of paste wax. The facility chief then submitted an emergency requisition for more paste wax, and the response from the Regional Office was that he had received a year's supply of paste wax only two months earlier. What, they asked, was he doing with all that wax? The wash and wax routine then changed to once a week, with the facility chief furnishing the wax.

After about six weeks I was allowed to rotate shifts like the rest of the crew, and the facility chief had mellowed enough to realize that I might be smart enough to assist in record keeping and filing, providing I stayed out of his office.

About two months later, the field commander, who had also mellowed a little, suggested that the flight service station move into the base operations building, right next to the base weather station and adjacent to a sturdy new wood-frame control tower. Access to that building would be through the main gate of the airfield, thus avoiding the daily ordeal of climbing through the barbed wire fence. Air Corps personnel assisted in the move, so that by the time I was scheduled to report for duty at 4 PM, all equipment was in place and in operation. I approached the main gate, stopped the car, rolled down the window, and was about to announce that I was on my way to work when a very nervous young MP with a gun ordered me to "dismount and be recognized." It was such an unexpected and ridiculous order that I burst out laughing. That was the wrong response. I quickly came to my senses, got out of the car, showed him my ID, and said I was on my way to the flight service station. When I arrived at work and mentioned my experience to the officer in the weather station, he visibly paled. "Don't do that again" he warned. "that nervous kid with the gun could have shot you!". That was the first of many lessons that this naïve girl from a Minnesota farm would learn about Air Corps security in wartime. When Bill Breniman became Third Region Chief of the Communication Operations Division of the Civil Aeronautics Administration in the late 1940's, he set out on a tour of all the Third Region facilities. Eight states were included in the Third Region, and the Flight Service Stations numbered 68. His stated goal was to meet as many of the Aircraft Communicators under his administration as he could, and to listen to their suggestions and/or complaints. It had come to his attention that some of the personnel of the male-dominated facilities were expressing their unhappiness with the influx of female employees through systematic harassment. I was on duty the day Mr. Breniman and his staff visited Battle Creek. He pulled me aside and asked many pointed questions – how was I treated by the other ACs at the facility – had I been able to find satisfactory housing – were there overt signs that I was not welcome at the facility – had I been subject to harassment, etc. By this time in my CAA career I had good working relations with my fellow Communicators, and had made peace with the facility chief, so I could honestly say that all was well, and I had no complaints. Just in case, however, Mr. Breniman gave me his office telephone number in Chicago, and asked that I call him immediately if I encountered any hostility.

From that point on, I had a soft spot in my heart for Bill Breniman. He was truly a friend to the working girl. Several years later, when Mr. Breniman organized the Society of Airway Pioneers and sent out applications for membership, I immediately joined the Society. A few days later I received a letter from Mr. Breniman with my membership certificate, and a membership number of "99". Mr. Breniman explained that membership numbers were assigned in order of applications received, and my application would have merited a number in the low 60's, but since I was the first female employee to join the Society, he had arbitrarily assigned me the number "99", since he had great admiration for the female flying group "The 99's", and felt that I would appreciate that significant number. I did, indeed!

There was a military presence at Kellogg Field for the duration of the war. B-24 bombers built in Willow Run used the "gun butt" (firing range) to line up their guns before turning the aircraft over to the Air Corps, and AirEvac aircraft brought Korean War soldiers to Percy Jones Hospital for treatment of wounds and frostbite. As the war activities dwindled, the CAA operated tower was closed, and a skeleton crew of military personnel remained on the field.

In 1955 the flight service station moved to the vacant wood-frame military tower and became a combined flight service station and tower. The military had long since left the airport, and in its place was an Air National Guard base, which is still functioning. Airline service had resumed, with Lake Central and later North Central airlines, and corporate and civil aviation had returned to the field. In 1957 I became a journeyman airport traffic controller. By this time I realized that I would never become an airline pilot, I would never design airplanes as an aeronautical engineer, but so what? It had been a whole series of adventures and learning experiences – enough to last me for a lifetime.

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