

...sheer panic (continued)

[continued from page 1] the amount of fuel, and the extent of the fire.

Hectic minutes later, the plane landed safely and the fire was extinguished.

"It had been really slow that morning," Rick said later. "I wasn't expecting it. But that's the time things like that always happen."

This was a fairly typical day for Rick Hamm, air traffic controller. Rick, who lives at 755 Terrace Avenue in Mount Joy, describes his job as "long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer panic."

In the emergency described above, a lot of responsibility was resting on Rick's shoulders. 19 souls were on board the burning plane, and he was required to act quickly and precisely to set up the landing.

An airplane pilot's job is to land and take off safely: the traffic controller's job is to avoid collisions, both in the air and on the ground.

An airplane pilot often has extremely limited visibility, worse than that in any auto or truck. A 747 pilot, for example, can barely see his wingtips, let alone what is above, below, or behind him. Because of air traffic control, the pilot doesn't have to concern himself with other aircraft — the controller keeps them out of his way.

The job of keeping fast-moving planes apart has been compared to three dimensional chess, or weaving a giant rug in the sky. It's complicated, and demands the ability to make sound decisions instantly. "Sometimes," Rick says, "you don't have any basis to decide, so you'll mentally flip a coin, and divert one plane. Then you have time to think about the resulting situation." What makes this game against collision so tense is the consequence of losing.

Rick told the *Times* about an air controller friend of his who works at O'Hare airport in Chicago, a "boiler room" tower that controls one of the busiest flight areas in the world. After he got off work, this friend went into a bar and bought salted nuts.

"Do you want peanuts or cashews?" asked the girl behind the bar.

The man found himself totally unable to make this one extra decision after a day of split second life and death decision making. He told the girl to decide for him.

Much has been written about the nervous tension and early heart attacks in Rick's profession. Rick claims he isn't bothered by tension, and he has a hobby to help him unwind — air traffic control.

Rick spends many weekends coordinating and leading activities of the local Civil Air Patrol, a volunteer auxilliary to the Air Force.

During mock airplane crashes and searches, Rick is usually on three or four radios, coordinating the exercise, driving his jeep, and observing how the cadets of Squadron 308 do their work.

Rick has been in the CAP since high school, and it was his involvement in that group which led him into air traffic control: When he graduated, he joined the Marine Corps with a guarantee of training in that field.

Incidentally, the CAP is ready to perform not only peace-time duties — they sank two Nazi U-boats during World War II, and lost 52 pilots in the line of duty.

Rick spent 20 hours on a recent weekend CAP exercise. "It's not really relaxation," he says, "But I do enjoy it. I wouldn't do it if I didn't."

"I have to keep busy," he goes on. "I'd go bonkers if I had a day off with nothing to do." Rick has many unfinished projects around his house that were started on such days, and never finished due to his hectic schedule.

Rick does have one hobby that doesn't involve flight control — flying. He already has his private pilot license, and is working on the commercial and instrument tickets.

"Talking with other controllers, as a pilot, helps give me perspective on my job," Rick explains. "There's an ego thing between pilots and controllers, and flying puts me on the other side of it. Sometimes I listen to another controller and think, 'I hope I don't come across like that!'"

Pilots tend to think of controllers as "traffic cops" according to Rick. This is natural, since the controller's orders must be

obeyed by all pilots. Rick tries to avoid any curtness and often explains why he is giving a certain directive to a pilot, time allowing.

"Every word you say is by formula," Rick says. "But there are various ways to say 'No.'"

The most extreme disagreement Rick ever had with a pilot occurred while he was a Marine Corps controller at Quantico base in Virginia. The conflict in a military setting is aggravated by the fact that controllers are enlisted men, while pilots are all officers; hence they are more irked at any bossiness in a controller.

It all started when Rick told a helicopter pilot, who was circling in a holding pattern, to turn around and circle the other way. (The pilot's circle was inside a plane holding pattern, and he was going the opposite way, thus increasing the risk of collision.)

Rick gave the order, but the pilot radioed back, "Negative," and kept circling the wrong way.

Rick asked again. And again. Each time the officer merely said "Negative" and ignored him.

Finally Rick told him to comply or depart the

pattern, reminding him that he was breaking a rule. The helicopter departed the pattern all right — he flew straight across a runway (fortunately empty of traffic at the time) and landed next to the tower.

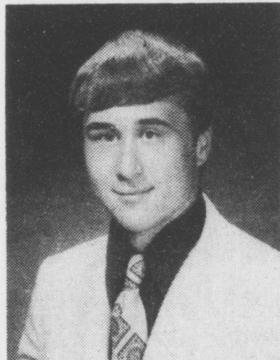
Rick was busy with many other aircraft just then, but he did look out the window to see the outraged pilot storming out of the copter and into the bottom of the tower.

Still jockeying flight paths, Rick heard the irate officer stomping up the tower stairs, cursing and describing just what he was going to do to that controller.

A fight in the tower could have caused crashes outside as well as in: Rick jammed the door closed and called his CO. The pilot was hauled off before he could break in, and was suspended for 90 days.

Despite the pressures he is under, even in normal situations, Rick doesn't let himself get rattled. He can't. "Attitude is the important thing. I've seen plane crashes, in the Marine Corps, but I don't think of a 747 as 450 people. I think of it as a flight. I just do the best job I can."

Tim Eshelman on dean's list



Tim Eshelman

Tim Eshelman of Mount Joy made the dean's list at Juniata College this fall.

Tim, the son of Mr. and Mrs. James M. Eshelman of RD2 Mount Joy, was one of 36 students whose index was better than 2.75 out of a possible 3.0.

Tim is a sophomore majoring in engineering.

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