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## **TEAMING UP**

Villeneuve Airport tower controller Lisa Berthiaume (right) and ground controller Paul Tziklas work together to manage the traffic in the air and on the ground at the airport. There are two controllers on duty in the tower on any given day.

## **Eyes in the Villeneuve skies**

**By Cory Hare**

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It's a lazy fall day at the Villeneuve Airport, windless and sunny.

There's not much going on — the odd vehicle tootling between businesses, a few distant planes circling, the odd helicopter thump-thumping around. It's about what you'd expect at a small rural airport.

You might think that being an air traffic controller here is like a paid vacation. Think again.

### **The tower**

It's 65 steps up to the observation deck, a 16-sided booth with slanted, tinted windows overlooking both runways, which lie to the west and the north. At the moment, it's the western runway that's in use, so the shades along the eastern half of the tower are down, creating a relaxed, shady atmosphere.

Low-rise computer screens and digital readouts peer from a desk-level counter. The cool, carpeted environment, with its panoramic view of stubble fields, brings expectations of an IMAX movie about bird migration.

With her face largely hidden behind Hollywood-style wraparound sunglasses, Lisa Berthiaume is handling the air traffic, her lips delivering a steady stream of aviation jargon, auctioneer-style.

"Victor Sierra Oscar, you are number two. The traffic you are following has established one-and-a-half-mile final."

Berthiaume has five moving targets on her radar screen. Each blip shows the aircraft's call sign, altitude and speed. The screen is secondary information for her, however, because she can see each plane through the bank of windshields before her.

The planes are flying circuits, the pilots performing "touch and gos" on the runway before circling three miles out to prepare for their next approach.

Berthiaume's job is to keep the planes apart and moving steadily. To do this, she has to know each aircraft's capabilities: its rate of climb, air speed and manoeuvrability.

"You can't park them somewhere and tell them to wait because they can't stop," said site manager Todd Trischuk, who oversees controllers at the Villeneuve, City Centre and International airports.

While the controllers' tasks are "proceduralized" as much as possible, they still have to adapt to each specific situation, Trischuk said. Their job is to form a plan and execute it. To do this, they need a good sense of spatial orientation, have to be good under pressure and above all, they need to be confident and decisive.

"Controllers own the airspace and they tell the pilot where they're going to fly. That's just the way the system works," Trischuk said.

"You could be talking to a 747 with 500 people on board and telling them where to fly. There's a lot of responsibility. The right people for the job get a charge out of that."

Villeneuve Airport doesn't handle jumbo jets, of course, but it's the region's principle training facility for light planes and helicopters. This makes the site every bit as challenging for controllers as the Edmonton International or City Centre airports.

"Here you've got a lot of trainer aircraft, pilots that do things you don't expect because they're learning," Trischuk said.

The tower operates every day from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. The site has nine controllers on staff and typically operates with two at a time, the same as at City Centre and just one less than the International, Trischuk said.

The controllers on shift split their duties between handling airborne craft (tower control) and orchestrating ground movement (ground control.)

### **Landing a gig**

NAV Canada operates Canada's civil air navigation service and hires controllers for 41 towers. The private sector corporation took over from Transport Canada in 1996.

Becoming a controller involves a preliminary aptitude test that's accessible through the NAV Canada website. Suitable candidates then take a more in-depth test and proceed through a pair of challenging interviews.

For those who succeed, classroom training follows for about five months, then several months on the job alongside an experienced controller. Once on the job, pay ranges between \$57,000 and \$123,000 a year.

The job has a reputation for being extremely stressful, but Trischuk isn't sure it's worse than other work.

"There's obviously pressure. You can't really make a mistake," he said. "We pick personality traits that can deal with that."

Because every airport is different, controllers are certified to work at just one location at any given time. Like pilots, they have to constantly use and review their skills to stay current, Trischuk said.

The occupation is in the middle of a "baby boomer bubble" and has seen a number of veterans retire in recent years. NAV Canada is always looking to recruit and there's always interest from the younger generations, he added.

"Most people do it as a career for their whole life. It's not a skill that's easily transferable to anything else," he said.

"We've got a lot of controllers that are 30-plus years, some even going on to 40 years."

### **An art in itself**

St. Albert resident Paul Tziklas, 46, has been in the industry for 25 years. His career has taken him to postings in Fort McMurray, Tuktoyaktuk, High Level, Hay River and now Villeneuve.

On this shift, he's handling the ground control duties with barely audible interjections into his mike. Between the intermittent calls, he shifts around the tower checking readouts and tidying up. Tziklas learned about the job about a year after high school.

"Every time I drove by an airport, watching the planes take off and land kind of intrigued me," he recalled.

He likes his work because it puts him in a position of authority and involves problem solving and implementing solutions.

"It's almost an art in itself to control aircraft," he said.

"You can go from working one aircraft to working six, seven aircraft in a matter of a minute."

The job does bring stress, but Tziklas calls it good stress because he feels in control.

The company has support groups and other programs for those who want them, he said. Other stress-relieving strategies are short walks around the tower, a few deep breaths or a vigorous run after work.

During slow times brought on by bad weather, controllers review their procedures to ensure they stay current. They take refresher training every three months.

Tziklas plans to stay with his career as long as it isn't a chore. At this point he expects to reach retirement as an air traffic controller.

"I love it," he said. "I feel good every day when I go home."

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