

The Scenes Flight service specialists the unsung heroes of air travel

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Erle Lowen's office has quite possibly the most spectacular view of any workplace in Grande Prairie.

At the start of every shift, Lowen - a **Nav Canada** flight service specialist - drives across the tarmac of the Grande Prairie Regional Airport, climbs to the top of the towering flight service station and takes his seat behind a sea of instruments and a 360-degree view of the airport and all that surrounds it.

"For me, it's been the best job because it's exactly what I wanted to do," said the 18-year veteran of the job, adding the work is perfect for him, a pilot and aficionado of all things surrounding flying.

"The biggest deal with doing the job is knowing what everybody can do: What's the airplane capable of, what's the pilot capable of?" he said, adding his experience as a pilot helps him out when it comes to dealing with pilots of all backgrounds and experience levels.

"The number one thing is being able to listen and to figure out what's going on and being able to communicate effectively."

Though flight service specialists at the Swan City airport give no orders to planes, they are a pilot's best friend when it comes to getting into and out of Grande Prairie safely.

Lowen and his fellow workers provide information such as wind speed and direction, altimeter information (how high Grande Prairie is from sea level), which of the two roughly two-kilometre-long runways is in use and local air traffic information and request clearance from air traffic control on the plane's behalf.

"Flight service provides an advisory service," Lowen said, explaining their main mandate "We give the pilot enough information to make a decision. The most important part of that is providing traffic information: Where is that next guy compared to him? The onus is on the pilot to make sure that (they) have enough information so that (they) can make the decision to keep everything safe. When you get into air traffic control, they're about two things. They're about keeping airplanes off the ground so that they don't run into things and to keep them from other airplanes."

Lowen said he and the rest of the flight service crew provide these crucial pieces of information to roughly 40,000 flights each year.

In addition, flight service specialists at the airport take at least one reading every hour at the on-site Environment Canada weather station. If you've ever wondered where weather channels and websites get their updated information, thank the flight service specialists.

So next time you fly and happen to glance at the tower, thank the flight service specialists for being the unsung heroes who make every effort to ensure your flight safe around the Swan City.