Nav Canada is a private-sector company. Officially, Nav Canada purports to provide safe, efficient and cost-effective air navigation services, and it employs 5,200 people. Its facilities include seven area control centres, 38 maintenance centres and 50 community aerodrome radio stations.

In the tower, Nav Canada flight service specialist Ken Wooden confided that the airport, and by extension the Nav Canada flight service station, remains a bit of a mystery. "Contractors will come out here sometimes and say, 'Oh, I didn’t know it was so busy out here,'" he said with a laugh.

Wooden, a Nav Canada employee for more than 12 years, has worked in Prince Albert for about eight years and is now the station’s supervisor.

Being a flight service specialist means he tackles a number of duties, but the "big three" are airport advisory, vehicle control and weather observation. Airport advisory is the back-and-forth between the specialist in the tower and the pilot in the plane. Wooden is quick to point out that flight service specialists differ from the more commonly known traffic controllers.

Controllers are needed at larger airports where they tell pilots where to fly. Specialists provide an advisory, but it is up to the pilot to make the final call on where the plane will "fit in."

Vehicle control is sort of like crowd control at a concert. The specialist needs to make sure runways are clear of everything from maintenance trucks to snowplows. "You really don’t want a plane coming in and turning and seeing a vehicle smack on the runway," said Wooden.

The last of Wooden’s big three, weather observation, can involve a fresh wind, or a steady wind out of an unexpected direction.

The centre’s manager, Ian Barclay, noted that much of Canada’s forecasts come from Nav Canada facilities. "That’s also why sometimes you will be driving on 15th Street listen- ing to the radio and the guy is saying it’s 10 degrees and foggy, and you say, 'But the sun is shining,’" he said with a laugh. "That across the river at the airport it might be snowing or something.”

Barclay has been in the business for nearly 30 years. He’s been stationed in Resolute, Nunavut, and experienced days of no sun, and days with no night. "It’s kind of neat because how else would you get to see that?” he said.

And while he doesn’t work the radio much anymore — he’s also the site manager of Nav Canada’s site in Saskatoon and La Ronge — it definitely used to be his favourite part of the gig.

"Actually talking to the airplanes and the pilots and ensuring safe arrival and departure was definitely the best,” he said.

Both Wooden and Barclay got into the business from a love of aviation. "I have been around airports because my dad was in the Armed Forces and I was very interested in planes and aviation,” said Barclay. "At one point I was interested in meteorology and I thought, ‘Hmmm, should I be a meteorologist?’ And then I found this and it all kind of came together.”

There is an emergency aspect to the job as well, but rarely is it used. If a pilot is having landing gear trouble, engine problems and needs assistance from 911 when the plane lands, the flight service specialists are in charge of that co-ordination. Barclay noted that "99.9 per cent of the time’ aircraft land safely, but once or twice per year the specialist in the tower must turn to emergency mode.

Flight specialists can also utilize a direction finder in the tower to help a pilot find the airport if the pilot is lost or confused.

The tower itself sits particularly large, but until March, the Nav Canada crew had an even more obvious existence. A new level was constructed on top of the existing building, allowing the flight specialists a much better vantage point of the airport.

In the tower, Nav Canada flight service station at the Prince Albert airport.

A West Wind Aviation plane arrives at the Prince Albert Airport. Each pilot that comes into the airport communicates with a Nav Canada flight service specialist.

Ken Wooden, a flight service specialist and the Prince Albert airport flight service centre’s supervisor, does a weather check from the observation desk. In front of him is an altimeter, used to measure how high the clouds are at night. Herald photo by Joshua Pagé