



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

## Watching over the horizon

By JOSHUA PAGE

HERALD STAFF

At the Prince Albert airport there is a somewhat hidden, small blue tower where nine people work.

In the tower, Nav Canada flight service specialist Ken Wooden confessed 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 is 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 specialists 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 air 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 specialists need 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 simple stroll on an observation deck, but its importance is much more complicated.

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 listening 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. "But 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



Flight service specialist Brad Hengen scopes out the runways while working in the flight service station. Hengen has been in the business for 22 years, and has been in Prince Albert for 17 years. Herald photo by Joshua Pagé



The Nav Canada flight service station at the Prince Albert airport.

Herald photo by Joshua Pagé

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 radios much anymore — he's also the site manager of Nav Canada's sites 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 or

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 specialists 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 isn't particularly large, but until March, the Nav Canada crew had an even less 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.

"That helps cut down on the amount of position reports you had to request on the radio," said Barclay.

Instead of asking over and over again for an updated position, when the aircraft is within a couple of miles of the airport, you can



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. Herald photo by Joshua Pagé

### DO YOU KNOW ...

#### Facts about Nav Canada

- ▶ Nav Canada is a private-sector company.
- ▶ It employs 5,200 people, including air traffic controllers, flight service specialists and engineers.
- ▶ Its facilities include seven area control centres, 41 control towers, 58 flight service stations, eight flight information centres, 38 maintenance centres and 50 community aerodrome radio stations.
- ▶ In 2008, there were 11.7 million aircraft movements, such as takeoffs and landings, associated with Nav Canada area control centres, control towers, flight service stations and remote aerodrome advisory services.
- ▶ Because becoming a flight service specialist is extremely specialized, applicants can come straight out of high school and then apply with Nav Canada for proper training. Training takes about one year, according to Wooden.
- ▶ Officially, Nav Canada purchased Canada's civil air navigation service (ANS) from the federal government in 1996 for \$1.5 billion.

actually look up and see where he is."

The less chatter on the radio as a landing nears, the better, he added. The station is also manned around the clock.

But wacky hours are just fine with flight service specialists, added Wooden.

"You never know what to expect in terms of traffic and what type of aircraft you are going to see that day," he said.