

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL IN THE U. K. IN THE EYES OF A GLIDER PILOT

(The following is a copy of the address by Philip Wills at the 1961 Annual Dinner of the London Lodge of the Guild of Air Traffic Controllers, with some elaborations in an endeavour to make clearer the case presented. It is reprinted here from SAILPLANE AND GLIDING, which had reproduced it from the Journal of the Guild, because of increased concern on the part of the SSA Directors of increasing air space restrictions in the U.S.)

I must confess I was pretty startled when I, of all people, was invited this evening to come and make a speech, and I don't know who is the braver of us. But I have been assured I can say what I like, and need not bring my bullet-proof waistcoat, so here goes. The trouble is that after-dinner speeches should by rights be full of fun, and Air Traffic Control is a subject on which I find it singularly difficult to be amusing.

You no doubt know my own position in this complicated and maddening business, as fighting for the glider pilot's share of the air. But you may not know my history, so I will start off by boring you with a bit of that.

During the war I was Second in Command of Air Transport Auxiliary, and in four years we ferried over 400,000 aircraft of all shapes and sizes, in all weathers, without radio or navigational aids of any kind, and without collisions. At one time, with everyone else round London, night after night we would hear 1,000 aircraft over London alone, half trying to find the other half and shoot it down, with earnest chaps on the ground indiscriminately pumping 30,000 shells a night up into the lot. No collisions, either with aircraft or shells. Then indeed our skies were "overcrowded." Nowadays we use this damnably maligned word if we have more than four aircraft in the whole corridor between London and Manchester.

After A.T.A. I followed my boss, Gerard d'Erlanger, to the newly-formed B.E.A., which for a short time consisted of him and me and our two secretaries, peering over the top of a pile of 30,000 unopened letters

in two rooms in Berkeley Square.

At one of the first meetings I went to at the Ministry of Aircraft Production, I was presented with the broad outlines of the Viscount, and asked if B.E.A. wanted it. At that time we were unencumbered with anything like a Board, and I gave instructions to proceed. Over the subsequent two years, one of my vivid memories is of a two-man department in the Ministry responsible for—shall we say?—the fire-fighting equipment to be installed in the aeroplane. The two men concerned were splendid chaps in nearly every way—honest, hard-working and technically competent. But it became evident that to them the Viscount was simply a vehicle designed to carry the last word in fire prevention and extinguishing gear, and when we pointed out that to carry all they required would leave no room for any passengers, they were profoundly disinterested. A suspicion crept in that perhaps they couldn't see the wood for the trees.

I have told this story because, over the last few years, as I have plodded my way along the labyrinthine Ministerial corridors from A.T.C. meeting to A.T.C. meeting, a suspicion has in turn crept in that these two chaps may have come to rest in your department. Several times, at the far end of a long corridor, I have seen two backs turning the corner very like theirs. I have come in at a door at one end of a room to see another closing at the other end, with the same two backs seen through the diminishing crack of the door. Could it be . . . ?

If I am right, they have this time triumphed, because the radio equipment necessary to anyone wishing to fly around freely in our small island today costs more than a light aeroplane itself, and can't be got in anyway. So there are virtually no privately-owned light aircraft in this country.

I must confess I feel sorry for you folk, and I hope you feel sorry for us. You are expected to bear the responsibility for the prevention of collisions in the air but, with the pos-

sible exception of the London Zone, are given stone-age equipment which only makes it possible to do so by imposing restrictions which have kept the air so empty that, in fact, if your duties were tomorrow reversed, and you had to try to *create* collisions, the commonest expletive coming out of control towers would be: "Damn! Missed again!"

As you are no doubt told *ad nauseam*, London Airport has recently descended from 41st in the list of busiest airports, after Little Rock, Arkansas, to the undistinguished place of 83rd, after Charleston, South Carolina. All the traffic handled by all airports together in the U.K. is less than that handled by Chicago, where the restrictions are less severe than those imposed in London, and even less, God help us, than those imposed in that aerial Sahara, the Manchester Control Zone.

Unfortunately the equipment used presents an absolutely false impression of the risk. On the radio, you and the pilots hear a jumble of voices which sounds absolutely frightful unless someone peers out of the window and can't see an aeroplane in the sky from horizon to horizon. On your screens you see two blips, immensely exaggerated in scale, apparently about to collide, but in fact the two real aircraft never get within miles of each other. Whilst your radio and your radar screens are indeed overcrowded, the actual sky remains as vast and as empty as ever. So please don't come to believe your absurdly inadequate instruments, and ignore the hard *fact*—the only thing that matters—that in the 16 years since the war there have been only two collisions involving airliners, although we have had aircraft under different and unco-ordinated controls flying through each other's systems in a nearly random way; and it is hard to believe that even the most sophisticated system could have bettered that record. What a sophisticated system *could* have done would have been to equal it with ten, twenty, or even fifty times the volume of traffic.

What you have lacked in equipment, our joint masters have tried to replace by restrictions on the use of the air, and look what we have lost! In the United States we see over 100,000 small aircraft flying happily around. France is dotted with airfields stiff with small aeroplanes; whilst here we have about 500 all told, mostly completely obsolete. A