

## The First Women Controllers



1943 Chicago's Orchard  
Place Airport control tower

During World War II, women entered the ranks of air traffic controllers and aircraft communicators in large numbers to replace men who joined the war effort. Since then, historians have long tried to identify the “first” female controller. In fact, many have long considered Mary Chance VanScyoc as the first woman controller, while others report Ruth Thomas, Madelyn Brown Pert, or Marian McKenna Russell as the first. In fact, there is some evidence that Mary Gilmore became the first CAA center tower operator specialist in September 1941 (she may have been employed by a local airport authority and hired by the CAA when it took over control duties from the airport).

There are several reasons why we may never be able to identify the first. On August 25, 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the First Supplemental National Defense Appropriation Act, which provided \$12,186,000 for the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) to construct, operate, and maintain airport traffic control towers. The law required the Secretaries of Army and Navy to certify a list of 39 airports as essential to national defense, and the CAA would assume air traffic operations at those airports from the local airport authority. To staff these towers, the CAA hired many of the controllers employed by the airport authorities and already working in the towers. Because of a dearth of records, it is unknown whether any women were among those hired when the CAA began taking over airport operations in November 1941.

With the U.S. gearing for war, more and more men left the CAA to join the war effort. And, with a new personnel policy that stated “no person shall be selected for employment in the CAA who is eligible for military service,” the agency faced the possibility of critical personnel shortages. The need to staff the towers and centers resulted in a formidable recruiting effort. To prepare for an onslaught of new controller recruits, CAA established seven training centers, one in each region in the continental U.S. (New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Kansas City, Fort Worth, Seattle, and Santa Monica), to instruct its new cadre of airport and airway traffic control operators. Each region did its own recruiting, hiring, training, and placement of personnel. The first classes began on November 1, 1941. It is not known how many women, if any, entered these first regional training classes. A photograph of the graduates of the first class held in Atlanta shows 25 men and no women.

With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and U.S. entry into the war, the War and Navy Departments designated additional airports as essential for CAA to take over air traffic control operations. By the end of fiscal year 1942, CAA operated 59 towers and by the end of fiscal year 1944 that number had grown to 115. In addition, since 1936, the agency had operated en route airway traffic centers, and by the time the U.S. entered the war, the CAA operated 15 such centers; that number jumped to 23 by

June 1942 and to 27 by 1944. With classes already underway, in January 1942, CAA Administrator, Donald Connolly urged the regional offices to recruit “older men and women as air traffic controller replacements for draft-age personnel.” The agency hoped to train 1,200 traffic controllers by June 30, 1943.



1943 Washington Airway Traffic Center

Controller training consisted of four weeks of theory followed by practice in the operation of an airport control tower. Initially, both female and male applicants had to be between the ages of 20 and 45, have a private pilot’s license, and 18 months of air traffic control experience or a high school or college education. New hires earned \$1,800 per year, with advancement to \$2,000 per year upon satisfactory completion of training, which usually took about six months.

By late 1942 women comprised approximately 40 percent of the controller trainees. An article in the *Civil Aeronautics Journal* in December 1942 reported that “women graduates of past sessions are already serving satisfactorily in a number of airport control towers and airway traffic control centers.” Although the journal did not indicate when they were hired, it did identify Billie Gallagher and Martha Olson as already working in the control tower at St. Louis and Marcelline Price and Carolyn Lorenz in the airway traffic control center at the same airport. The article noted that all four had completed CAA pilot training courses before the agency had closed that training to women, which meant they probably joined the CAA before the agency dropped the prerequisite for a pilot’s license in June 1942.

When the war ended, many of the men who had left CAA to join the war effort reclaimed their jobs. Although many women controllers quit after the war to raise their families, a number of them stayed on the job and rose through the CAA and later FAA ranks. For example, Margaret Lorenzen Jenkins began as an air traffic control trainee with the CAA at Fort Worth in 1943. She progressed steadily as an air traffic control specialist moving to El Paso in 1945 and New Orleans in 1947. In 1959 she moved to the Southwest regional office in the Manpower Utilization and Training Section as a GS-12. A promotion to a GS-14 took her to the new Southern Region headquarters in 1961 as a specialist in the Training and Management Group, Operations Branch, where she became the highest ranking woman in the region.

Because of the large number of women trained by the CAA during World War II, the fact that the regions hired and trained their own recruits, and, a general lack of documentation, evidence remains anecdotal about who might have been the first female controller. Documentation such as oral histories, personal stories, and even newspaper and journal articles, provide us information on the lives and careers of these pioneer women. Even though we cannot positively identify the “first,” we know that women such

as Mary Chance VanScyoc, Ruth Thomas, Madelyn Brown Pert, Marian McKenna Russell, Mary Gilmore, Gloria Langmade Yow, and Carol White Stirr paved the way for future generations of women. Their love of aviation and their desire to serve their country make them role models for all women.