

Joe S.
Bakersfield Tower (BFL)

When were you hired?

I was hired 6-11-07.

Are you a Certified Professional Controller? If so, how long did it take you to reach this level?

I am a CPC. In total, it took 8 months and that was including going back to Oklahoma City for RTF.

What was training like?

Training is a very unique experience. The training process can be tedious at times, learning information from many different controllers all with different techniques and ideas. You have to be able to weed through the different "techniques" of your trainers and choose which techniques will work best for you and mold yourself.

Another difficulty of training is being able to absorb information from your trainer while working live traffic. Even though you are training on position, the airplanes do not stop coming. Mistakes and plateaus in your training are very common and it can be very discouraging; always keep your head up and continue to progress forward. Training is not always fun, and sometimes it seems like the only feedback you are getting is criticism, but this is the nature of the beast.

I am at a level 7 up/down facility (ATCT/TRACON combined). Here you can expect on average a 16 month training program. Expect to come to work everyday and train. While in developmental status, training is your #1 priority. Controllers strive for perfection and hold themselves to very high standards. Every controller has good days and better days, no matter what, do not get discouraged.

Can you describe the facility and area where you work?

I work at Bakersfield Tower (BFL), located in the central valley of California. BFL is a level 7 up/down ATCT/TRACON combined facility. There are a total of 3 radar sectors along with the tower positions. In addition to itinerant jet traffic throughout the day, there is a flight school on the field that keeps us busy with training activity.

What did you do before coming to work for the FAA?

Before I got hired with the FAA I attended Embry Riddle Aeronautical University, where I received my bachelor's degree. After graduating, I worked ramp control at JFK International Airport in New York, and then went on to become an operations controller for an airline. Almost 3 years after I graduated, the FAA hired me and I became an Air Traffic Control Specialist.

Why did you choose a career in air traffic control?

Ever since I was able to talk I loved aviation. For as long as I can remember, I always wanted to be an airline pilot. I decided to go to Embry Riddle to fulfill my dream as a pilot, and I did. I received my commercial pilot license and still fly today. Although I had such a strong passion to fly, I decided in my sophomore year of college it may not be the best choice for a career. I looked into Air Traffic Control as a degree program and career, and found out air traffic was more fascinating to me than flying. Fascinating, fun, exhilarating, and aviation all in one; there is no better career.

What does being a NATCA member mean to you? What made you want to get involved?

The importance of NATCA to my career is indescribable. From the day I joined the FAA, I understood and appreciated what NATCA does and has done, day in and day out, for our career. I understood the need for a collective voice, unionism, solidarity, and the collective spirit that NATCA offers in order to keep the prestige of our career.

You cannot put a price on the brother/sisterhood that NATCA offers. Growing up in a family of 5, and after joining NATCA; I now have thousands of family members. Any question or concern, I can call or e-mail any one of my union brothers or sisters and receive a TRUTHFUL answer almost immediately. The great thing about NATCA, there is always someone there with the knowledge and the will to help a fellow controller. The importance of increasing the size of this family is crucial and the more specialists we have the stronger we are.

In my opinion, if NATCA did not exist, neither would FAA air traffic controllers. NATCA has and continues to show how important and specialized controllers are to the NAS. Presidents in the past have tried to contract air traffic controllers out and it will continue to happen in the future. NATCA has put a stop to a number of facilities being contracted out. After the PATCO strike in 1981, controller's felt there was no need for a union. That idea only lasted for 5 years, as NATCA emerged and has been an outstanding collective voice for air traffic controllers ever since.

What advice can you offer to those following in your footsteps?

Always, always stay positive. This job is very demanding and you must work for it. This career demands an enormous amount of skill, concentration, and dedication day in and day out. When you arrive at your facility - study, study, study. You, the trainee, are a huge part of the success of the certification process. Go to work everyday well rested and ready to train/learn. DO NOT have any confrontation with anyone in the facility, especially management. Let NATCA do all the talking/representing for you.

What is an average day at your facility like?

An average day at BFL is to show up, receive a briefing on the current operations from a supervisor and then go to work. Controllers transfer between the TRACON and tower all day long. There is no set day, whether you will work tower or TRACON only. We rotate between the two all day. BFL currently has 3 developmentals with 3 more on the way. Our goal is to have 2 of the developmentals at CPC status before the next wave of controllers arrive. Training is a priority and the OJTI's are constantly training the developmentals. BFL is open from 0600L to 2315L daily, there are no mid-shifts.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

What do I like most about this job? That's hard to say. I love being an air traffic controller. The adrenaline rush of being relieved off position after a busy session is amazing. Being involved in aviation and moving aircraft all over the sky everyday is probably my favorite part. Taking aircraft from all over and bringing them all to one piece of concrete with the skill, precision, and knowledge we use everyday is like no other job in the world.