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July 5, 1999

Mr. Steven J. Brown  
Associate Administrator for Air Traffic Services  
FAA Headquarters, ATS  
800 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20591

Subject: AIRCRAFT PILOTS IN EMERGENCY SITUATIONS CANNOT RELY ON FAA TRACONS  
FOR RADAR SURVEILLANCE APPROACHES!

Dear Steve,

I have been a pilot and a FAA TRACON air traffic controller for over thirty years. I work at Houston I-90 TRACON. Fifteen months ago I sent the enclosed video and staff study with recommendations to correct this serious deficiency in the National Airspace System (NAS). Nothing in the way of action has been forthcoming. Therefore, Steve, you are my last hope to correct this overlooked deficiency from within the FAA. I simply request that your office review the submitted material and respond in writing. The problem in a nutshell is as follows.

1. Over the past 25 years, nearly a third of the FAA's 186 TRACONS have canceled their published ASR approaches. These facilities therefore have neither training nor currency requirements on ASR approaches with the result that most of the staff are now not even vaguely familiar with this invaluable emergency tool. Unfortunately, the real reason published ASR approaches were canceled was that Air Traffic Evaluation Teams almost always found a few controller training records not meeting the quarterly ASR approach currency requirement. No published ASR approaches - no training record deficiencies. In addition, many paranoid supervisors and controllers had the belief that writing up a Flight Assist Report, while it might have resulted in a Letter of Commendation, had an at least equal chance of resulting in controller retraining due to a procedural or phraseology error located via microanalysis of the tape. As a consequence, when the decision to cancel published ASR approaches was made, the facility managers were not fully aware of how frequently published ASR approaches were actually used in emergencies since many were never written up.
2. The majority of controllers and their supervisors believe that if there is not a published ASR approach in their airspace, then an ASR approach can not be utilized under any set of circumstances, (a published approach is legal, an unpublished approach is illegal). This includes aircraft in distress. David Haddad has been an Operational Supervisor at Charlotte TRACON and now at DFW TRACON. Both facilities do not have published ASR approaches. In April 1997 at Charlotte and again in December 1998 at DFW, Mr. Haddad had to intervene when controllers had made the decision to vector aircraft in distress (caught on top on an overcast, low on fuel, with non instrument rated pilots) to an area of known VFR conditions. In both instances, fuel exhaustion would have occurred before reaching VFR conditions. In both cases, Mr. Haddad directed the controller to conduct an emergency ASR approach. In both cases the controller refused either because they felt the approach would be illegal and did not want the liability risk, or they had never received training on how to conduct an ASR approach. Both situations were very critical to the safety of the pilots involved. Therefore in both instances, Mr. Haddad relieved the controller in question and conducted an emergency ASR approach that resulted in the safe landing of the aircraft involved. Because of the amount of time that has passed since published ("legal") ASR approaches were canceled, this problem is pervasive not only among front line controllers, but throughout our organization all the way up to

and including Headquarters AT staff. Consequently, I can give you specific examples of situations where supervisors would not allow controllers to run unpublished ASR approaches when pilots were in emergency situations similar to the ones that Mr. Haddad chose to successfully take action on.

All FAA TRACON personnel have had the opportunity to receive training in emergency CPR to enhance the safety in their work environment and personal lives. Yet in the past sixteen months Houston TRACON has had a need for zero emergency CPR's and nine emergency ("illegal") ASR approaches (see attachments regarding two of these that I personally conducted). Would it not be prudent on the part of the FAA to provide first aid training (in the form of ASR approach training for emergency situations) to the control staff so that the enhancement of safety is afforded to our customer? It would be difficult to convince the audience of "60 Minutes" that a family of four had to perish in a crash which could have been prevented with something as incidental as refresher training and a couple of changes to an FAA handbook..

I am prepared to offer my services along with Mr. Haddad to develop an emergency ASR training course for use in facilities where published ASR approaches have been canceled. The Southwest Regional Office has all the necessary tools to complete this task. We would also be willing to give a presentation on this problem with the suggested solutions at your next Regional AT Division Manager's meeting. Critical, however, to the resolution of this issue is that the recommended changes, as detailed in the enclosed staff study, be made to the FAA 7110.65 Air Traffic Control Handbook and FAA 7210.3 Facility Operation and Administration Handbook with ATO-120. I would also be willing to do whatever is necessary to coordinate and implement these handbook changes.

Thank you in advance for your time and attention.

Sincerely,



Clint Matheny - IAH TRACON

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enclosures - video and staff study

attachments