Working to keep the skies friendly

Clyde Pittman develops innovations to keep O'Hare's control tower up to date

Tribune photo by Rung T. Yu

The new control tower at O'Hare International Airport rises behind Clyde Pittman.

By Gene Koprowski
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Clyde Pittman places his hands on his hips and surveys the new control tower at O'Hare International Airport. The surroundings look like cutting-edge surplus from the bridge of the Starship Enterprise. There are flat-panel monitors, custom-made computers and custom-made printers. Pittman's lieutenants scurry by, wearing sleek headsets, uttering commands to pilots on 3,600 incoming and outgoing aircraft at the airport every day.

This is air traffic control — 21st Century style — and it is the brainchild of Pittman, a Wheeling resident who, colleagues say, is one of the most innovative managers in the Federal Aviation Administration. For his efforts, he recently received praise from Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley and the White House.

Pittman conceived of the idea for the computer system at the new control tower at O'Hare, commissioned companies to design special computers and then worked through the holidays in late 1996 to get the whole thing up and running. This year he plans to introduce some even more intriguing advances and is also proposing a project to let the U.S. and Canada share air traffic control data.

The new system, called the Automated Flight Data Processing System, controls the slotting of the planes on the runway — that is, the order in which flights are scheduled to depart and land. It was designed to reduce the amount of paper-passing that controllers have to do and ultimately to bring O'Hare a step closer to achieving a safer, yet totally paperless, system.

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Every morning, Pittman gets to work just after 6 a.m. and hunkers down in the so-called "War Room" at the FAA offices in Rosemont. There, he and other senior FAA managers from around the U.S. — and from headquarters in Washington, D.C. — discuss any problems that have occurred overnight and how to quickly solve them.

Through this process, Pittman and others discerned that the flight control system at O'Hare was dated. Productivity — and safety — had to be improved, and a better way to manage the launching and landing of aircraft had to be developed, Pittman said.

As recently as late 1996, much of the air traffic control operation at O'Hare was not computerized. Sure, there were radar and weather monitoring systems. But directing the planes on the runways was still basically a manual task. Traffic control operators typed commands onto pieces of paper and arranged them on a board in the tower. Records of departing flights were sent to record keeping in a container, which was shot through a metal tube, similar to the tubes once common at drive-through tellers at banks or mail chutes in older downtown buildings.

"Gravity was the main operating force," Pittman says. "Sometimes the records would get

SEE O'HARE, PAGE 2