



by **haley shapley** | photography by **molly decoudreaux**

# The Watchers

## Air-traffic controllers battle stress and the unexpected to keep our skies safe.

**IT WAS A DECEMBER EVENING IN ALASKA** when a pilot flying a four-seat aircraft over the rugged Talkeetna Mountains in the dark realized he was in trouble, stuck above an overcast layer and his windshield starting to frost. "Um, I'm in a little over my head," he said over his radio.

On the other end of the line was second-generation air-traffic controller Ryan Williams, whose calm voice—along with weather reports and information from other aircraft—helped guide the pilot safely to his Wasilla destination.

Once the city was in sight, the relieved pilot radioed Williams again: "I'd like to buy you dinner if I could."

Williams declined, needing no reward. For him and his fellow 14,600 air-traffic controllers across the nation, such situations are all in a day's work.

Still, for his performance that day, Williams was honored with an Archie League Medal of Safety Award, created 10 years ago by the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) to recognize the "saves" made by those who watch over our skies.

"While many controllers often feel that they are 'just doing their job,' their hard work is viewed by others as remarkable and extraordinary," says Sarah Dunn, senior communications and public affairs associate for NATCA.

Emily Birkland in California's Oakland Center is another Archie recipient: She helped a father and son whose floatplane's engine failed on the way to their annual fishing trip. They were stranded in the Pacific Ocean, trapped in a kelp bed amid 10-foot swells. "It was pretty overwhelming when it happened," Birkland remembers. "Time was of the utmost importance."

Birkland, who was a pilot and flight instructor before getting into air-traffic control, contacted a nearby pilot to locate the downed aircraft, then enlisted another pilot's help when the first plane at the scene had to leave due to low fuel. Over two hours, she and fellow controller Roy Teshima stayed in touch until the two men were rescued—just moments before their floatplane flipped and sank. "If any controller had been in that situation," says Birkland, "they'd have done exactly the same thing I did."

Yet not everyone is cut out for this kind of work. One of the most stressful jobs a person can do, air-traffic control requires intense concentration, the ability to multitask and make split-second decisions that could mean the difference between life and death. Every day brings new challenges. "It's such a hard job to staff," Birkland says. "Even with my pilot experience, I thought it was going to be easy and it was so hard. A lot of times, I'm talking to 25 airplanes, and that happens four or five times a day—I have all this stuff to get done and watch and take care of."

Birkland, Williams and their colleagues across the country have made the United States' air-traffic control system the safest in the world. These trusted gatekeepers may be out of sight, but their presence is felt on every flight you take.



**Oakland air-traffic controller Emily Birkland earned an Archie League Medal of Safety Award for her performance under pressure.**

### U.S. AIR-TRAFFIC CONTROL BY THE NUMBERS

**70,000**: Flights per day guided by air-traffic controllers

**1,600**: Takeoffs and landings per hour

**750 million**: Passengers per year

**56**: Mandatory retirement age

Source: natca.org