

1977

Cleared To Land! The FAA Story, By Frank Burnham

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Recommended Citation

Robert Burkhardt, *Cleared To Land! The FAA Story, By Frank Burnham*, 43 J. AIR L. & COM. 635 (1977)
<https://scholar.smu.edu/jalc/vol43/iss3/7>

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Book Reviews

CLEARED TO LAND! THE FAA STORY. By Frank Burnham. Fallbrook, Ca.: Aero Publishers. 1977. pp. 254.

In the vast federal bureaucracy, where agencies and administrations move about like jellyfish and other invertebrates of the sea, authors who attempt to capture a specimen and impale it between book covers usually end up either stung or digested. In the case of Mr. Burnham, the 58,000 man (and woman) branch of the Department of Transportation known as the Federal Aviation Administration seems to have digested him.

Although billed as "The FAA Story," Mr. Burnham's effort is primarily a highly simplified, selective—and, one is tempted to say, self-censored—account of what the FAA does in the field of air traffic control. There are chapters on the FAA's efforts to combat skyjacking and on its maintenance inspection service, but most of the book is devoted to interviews with traffic controllers and descriptions of their work, as well as to the companion efforts of the FAA's shrinking flight service system. Mr. Burnham is a pilot, and his book is directed primarily to other pilots like himself who are curious about those "feds" who police the airways as well as direct the traffic.

In Mr. Burnham's book all the good guys are the FAA controllers and other staffers and all the bad guys are those private pilots, as well as a few commercial ones, who through personal blunders or equipment failures get into trouble and have to be rescued by the dedicated band of FAA traffic controllers who are always ready to lend a helping hand when a pilot loses his cool. Frequent dramatic reports of pilot "saves" are used to liven up almost every chapter—and the FAA is always the hero.

Scripts (even tapes in some cases) of these true-to-life dramas are furnished by the FAA public affairs office to all who ask for them. Usually they come complete with dramatic excerpts from the always available tower and other facility recordings (big brother is *always* listening!), and they make interesting reading, since the

natural drama shines through the stilted verbiage and the by-the-book responses of the controllers. They all reflect to the credit of the dedicated men and women who serve on the FAA's firing line. There are other kinds of tapes, too, but do not try to get the FAA to supply them.

Controllers make goofs; sometimes through the fault of the individual, sometimes because of the ponderous and almost unmanageable system that the FAA has patched together over the years. These stories only come out in the public hearings of the National Transportation Safety Board. Such was vividly the case of TWA Flight 514, which hit a mountain on approach to Washington, D.C., in bad weather. There was pilot error, but there was also serious controller error. The FAA later was forced to caution controllers that they should be alert to a possible collision with the ground, as well as with other traffic, on the part of aircraft they were advising. Mr. Burnham glosses over this accident in his book by noting only that the FAA restated "in new language what most airmen had understood all along; that it is the responsibility of the pilot to make the final decision as to when it is safe to begin an approach based on his precise knowledge of his position with relation to the terrain and obstructions."

Mr. Burnham gives even less attention to such other major FAA goofs as the DC-10 cargo door accidents and the agency's less than adequate sponsorship of a United States program to build a supersonic aircraft. Other weaknesses of the agency are passed over lightly or totally ignored. All in all, it is an interesting book, but not "The FAA Story."

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