

IS FSS GETTING BETTER?

Lockheed-Martin's acquisition of the FAA's Automated Flight Service Stations was anything but flawless. Are we better off today?

by Bob Miller

Rewind the calendar back to February 2005, when Lockheed-Martin (LM) officials sitting in the offices of AOPA convinced Phil Boyer that, for the first time in history, a live FSS briefer will answer pilots' phone calls within 20 seconds, will acknowledge radio calls within five seconds, and will receive and file flight plans within three minutes.

"It's guaranteed," said LM. "It's in the contract."

Converting the FAA's 58 individual FSS into an efficiently-operating, privately owned enterprise turned into a fiasco. But LM seems to be—finally—getting it sorted out.

FS21 Today

Fast-forward to today. The good news is that the new system, referred to as Flight Service for the 21st Century (FS21), appears, arguably, to be work-

ing. The bad news is that it took several years to make it happen. During the process, we pilots were left with long delays in reaching flight service, dropped calls, poor-quality briefings,

One pilot said, "Losing the old AFSS system, was like having a cheating spouse. I'll never take him back."

and lost flight plans. Nearly half of us, according to a recently conducted survey of pilots, abandoned the use of flight service altogether and now do our flight planning and filing ourselves online. One positive note is that we can't identify any flight fatalities linked to problems associated with this changeover.

Money, pure and simple, was the motive for the change. Back in 2001, the government's General Accounting Office (GAO) and the Inspector

General (IG) released several reports critical of the then-current FSS system, claiming escalating costs totaling over \$550 million annually, or approximately \$15 per pilot briefing. The old system was also unreliable, riddled with inefficiencies, subject to frequent breakdowns and desperately in need of modernization.

After more studies, privatization was deemed the answer and LM won the bid to takeover, consolidate, and operate the nation's automated flight service station (AFSS) program for the next 10 years. The contract went into effect on October 4, 2005, but operational changes did not occur until January 2007.

On February 22, 2007, at 1 a.m. EST, the Washington, D.C., facility, the first of three planned hubs, went live. In a press release, LM announced that a "flawless transfer had resulted from an integrated group effort by two Lockheed-Martin units, Business Process Services and Transportation Systems and Solutions, and the FAA as equipment, communications, and personnel all came together to achieve this milestone."

Within 30 days, the entire system suffered a virtual melt-down. Anyone depending on the nation's nearly 70-year-old AFSS to provide critical flight-safety information was left in the dark. Some pilots had access to a computer (and the skills to use it) and relied on DUAT or DUATS. Others turned to local ra-



Left: At Oshkosh this past summer, Lockheed set up a remote briefing center near the aircraft camping area. It was like old times, when you could get a walk-up briefing. What were the briefers using for data? ADDS, WeatherTap and several other of our favorite sites we use to brief ourselves. But you got to hear "VFR not recommended" in person. Ironically, this may become the future of FS21, where you and the briefer look at the same weather screens via online conferencing. Someday. Maybe.

dio, TV, or newspapers for preflight weather information.

Like the great stock-market crash of 1929, the effects of this failed transition sent shockwaves throughout the entire aviation community. Years, rather than months, were required to restore the system back to some semblance of normalcy.

Some Pilots Won't Forgive

IFR and my own website (www.overtheairwaves.com) each ran a survey earlier this year to see where pilots were with using flight service. A total of over 1100 pilots responded with opinions across the board. In a nutshell, most pilots either felt fine about the new system or hated it. Common was the complaint that local knowledge was a thing of the past. A slight majority of pilots felt that the wait times were shorter than before the changeover. About the same majority felt that the overall quality of their briefings was lower.

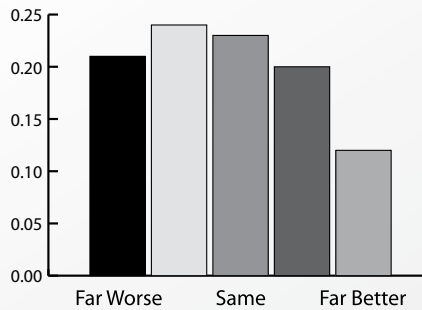
One pilot opined that "Lockheed-Martin brought the FSS to its knees and then it took them nearly three years to return it to its former status. I gave up on them and found alternate sources for my briefings." A flight instructor said, "I am appalled and embarrassed time and time again when I am working with a student and have to expose him to what is clearly the weakest link in aviation in this country. Overall, I would classify the current FSS situation as not only bad but inept. I believe it is in a flat-out crisis!"

Other pilots see things differently, however. "During the changeover, the service was terrible. However, it now appears they have worked out most, if not all, of the bugs," says a survey respondent. "I can usually get a briefer without holding. Briefings are complete and professional." Another said, "Despite what seems like a broad-based dissatisfaction, I have nothing but praise for the current system. Access is quick and accurate, and the specialists are helpful in unraveling tricky weather situations, including thunderstorm timing and movement, icing, tops,

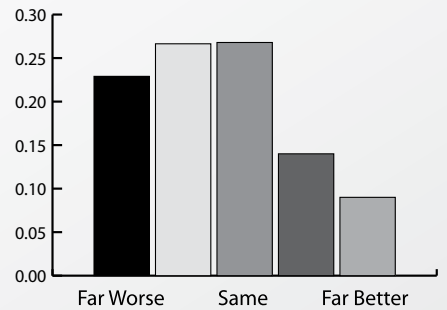
PILOTS DISAGREE ABOUT HOW BAD IT IS

The data from our online survey showed no consensus on any questions. Note the nearly even distribution on perceptions of how easy it was to reach a briefer or the quality of the briefing. Interestingly, a slight majority (27 percent) even said briefings today were just as good (or poor) as they always were.

Ease of reaching a briefer today vs. before



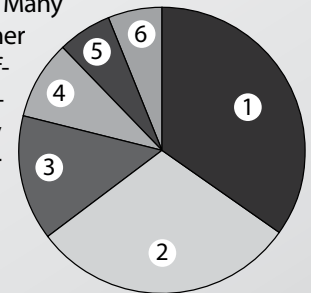
Quality of Briefing today vs. before



A more telling statistic might be the breakdown of what respondents reported as troubling with the current FSS system. The largest beef (35 percent) was the lack of local knowledge exhibited by LM's briefers. Without this local knowledge, people in unique locations, such as mountainous areas or around the Great Lakes, are not receiving the information they need to make reliable go/no-go decisions.

Nearly as problematic (30 percent) were complaints that the overall quality of their briefings was lower than in the pre-changeover days. Many feel that briefers are simply reading METAR/TAFs rather than helping to interpret the weather. Some say briefers take too long for what should be simple, straightforward briefings. Many LM/FSS briefers, say survey respondents, simply have no clue as to what weather flying is all about.

Next in order of troubling issues were lost flight plans (14 percent), difficulty in getting through to a briefer on the ground (nine percent) and problems reaching FSS/Flight Watch from their aircraft (six percent). The remaining six percent of identified issues including the poor automated-telephone voice-recognition system and even the pilot's inability to understand the briefer's accent!



1. Lack of local knowledge
2. Poor quality briefings
3. Lost flight plans
4. Can't get FSS via phone
5. Can't get FSS in the air
6. Other

Making it Better

Since LM feels everything is ultimately your fault, here's what LM suggests you can do to make your FSS experience better.:

1. Avoid peak times by calling for a briefing and filing flight plans the evening before a planned flight.
2. Bypass the automated-telephone voice-recognition system by using two and three-digit codes to identify the location you are calling from. Go to www.afss.com/news/pilot_tips.asp to print out these codes. Or just say "any" when asked where you're calling from.
3. Create your own Pilot Profile the next time you call a LM AFSS specialist.
4. Log on to www.afss.com/news/pilot_tips.asp for updates on the system.
5. File complaints through the FSS website at <http://www.afss.com/>.

Note that some of these suggestions kind of defeat the customized system LM created in the first place. Gotta love progress. —BM

FAA DOING ITS OWN FSS SURVEY

It seems the FAA is conducting a satisfaction survey to get feedback about flight services that are provided to pilots, and they're using a private survey service to do it. The FAA says it will use the survey results to improve service and "to continuously advance the safety and security of civil aviation."



Unfortunately, the survey is invitation-only, so you can't give them a piece of your mind unless you're lucky enough to get an email invitation to do so. We contacted the FAA and the survey company to find out more, but hadn't heard back by the time of this printing. If we find out more, we'll print it in a future issue of *IFR*.

The survey takes about 10 minutes to complete, the FAA says. Questions touch on the quality of service from Flight Service Stations, how quickly calls are answered, and the usefulness of weather information. A space is provided for additional comments.

etc. I give them thumbs up." Here's another comment: "The new Pilot Profile capabilities are fantastic and long overdue! I like the new FSS. I didn't a year ago, though. I think they're getting through the growing pains nicely."

Perhaps more telling, though, is that better than 50 percent of the respondents said their FSS experience had caused them to switch to DUATS or other online sources for pre-flight information and to file flight plans. One respondent quipped, "When we lost the old AFSS system, it was like having a cheating spouse. I'll never take him back!"

LM Thinks All Is Fine

We asked LM's FS21 transition chief, Ron Petro if they thought things were better off for pilots today. This happened at a visit to the Washington, D.C., hub, where we spent time meeting with program managers and FSS briefers, and touring the facility.

From Petro's perspective, the transition is going along swimmingly, but not without a fair amount of challenges along the way. "Nobody within LM believed our initial transition schedule to be overly ambitious," says Petro. "However, we quickly discovered that moving literally hundreds of people around

the country would take far longer than expected. Equally daunting, we hadn't anticipated the challenge of assimilating hundreds of former FAA employees with new recruits and bringing them all up to speed on our new equipment and software system within the given timeframe."

Petro noted that another surprise was that many FAA briefers weren't willing to relocate. "To them, early retirement options looked a whole lot better than uprooting the family to a new location. And many of those who did make the move lacked local-area knowledge to quickly bring them up to speed."

Other problems LM underestimated were re-routing over 1800 separate 1-800 WX-BRIEF telephone lines and training over 1000 FSS specialists in a couple months.

Nonetheless, Petro proudly claims that the new system is handling over 90,000 calls a week—just 15 percent below the pre-transition level. "Our dropped- or abandoned-call rate is now down to about one percent, which is well within the fed's acceptable performance level," says Petro.

"Is this as good as it going to get," we asked?

"Of course not," says Petro. "We can always get better, but we've come

a very long way to making people happy!"

Pilot's Perception

Having visited the Washington, D.C., hub and spending time with Ron Petro and his staff, it is apparent to this writer that LM is on top of any unresolved issues and is working diligently to see them resolved. In fact, when I complained that I had to wait too long for a briefing just a few days earlier, Petro quickly looked up my cellphone number and the date of my call. He found it and saw that I waited exactly 43 seconds for a briefer.

"Got a bit of a patience problem there, don't ya Bob?" he chided me with a smile.

Given the stated goal of improving the system, however, we find it curious that LM recently offered its more senior and experienced FSS briefers incentives for early retirement, despite the fact that nearly one-third of our survey complaints were issues of poor quality of briefing issues. But Flight Service is now a business that must serve its shareholders as well as pilots.

Real-World FS21

What else can pilots do to enhance content and quality of our pre-flight briefing? We can become weather-savvy pilots adroit in using our computers to access the myriad online weather and flight-planning sites, including DUAT and DUATS. We can learn to quickly identify NOTAMs, TFRs, and other weather advisories on our own. We can talk to local pilots to better understand our own local weather phenomena before the expertise is lost. Armed with this information, we can call Flight Service when we need to and use what they have to offer as knowledgeable consumers of weather information.

Because, like it or not, we are all now customers of FS21.

Bob Miller is an IFR contributing editor, online at www.overtheairwaves.com.