



Tribune/Barry Kough

Cascade pilot Bob DeBoer (left) of Clarkston and co-pilot Mark Buckingham of Lewiston put their Beechcraft 99 into a bank approaching the Moscow-Pullman airport.

A flight with Cascade

Towers not crucial to commuter airline's operation

By Michael Blumfield
of the Tribune

The two engines of the Beechcraft 99A roared as Cascade Flight 521 taxied across the Lewiston airport runways.

"Seattle Center, this is Cascade 521 at Lewiston requesting permission for take-off," the pilot said into his radio mike.

"Cascade 521, you're cleared for take-off," the voice in Seattle replied. The center keeps tracks of aircraft throughout the northwest.

Minutes later, the flight was off for Pullman and Spokane, an early morning sun greeting us to our right.

Photographer Barry Kough and I were heading north to see what it's like to fly without the help of a Lewiston tower. We also found out how Cascade, the country's 13th largest commuter airline, is holding out during the air traffic controllers strike.

The pilots, Bob DeBoer and Mark Buckingham, guided the plane into Pullman. A quick check with a com-

pany worker let them know what the wind direction and speed was. The employee report is all Cascade pilots ever use at Pullman, which doesn't have a tower.

We pick up one passenger, Kough and I are the only others on board. After notifying others listening to the radio that we're taking off, Buckingham heads down the runway and pulls the nose up. Next stop, Spokane.

It was my first flight with Cascade, though I've flown in big jets before. And despite the noise of the props, I found the experience invigorating. You never get too high to lose track of the ground you're covering — it's real flying.

Though Cascade, like most small commuter airlines, is the subject of sarcasm about its airworthiness, DeBoer and Buckingham were totally professional, in control. They've got Tom Wolfe's "right stuff."

And there's reason for it. DeBoer, who has been with the company since it began 12 years ago, has 20 years flying experience; Buckingham has 17.

So do they think Lewiston needs a

4A Cascade will cut 20 daily flights and lay off up to 50 employees as a result of the strike.

tower? Not really. "It's nice to have, another ace in the hole for us," DeBoer said. But all it really does is get traffic in and out of the airport smoothly and does not make flying particularly safer, DeBoer said.

Flying into Spokane in the early morning, a tower seemed about as important there as in Lewiston. After asking to land, the pilots got a quick response: "Cascade 521, you're clear for landing. Wind speed at Oh-Three-Oh (the airport's compass angle) at 8 knots."

The pilots put the plane down without a problem. But taking off later that day with a full plane was another story. DeBoer told the tower each time he crossed a runway, making sure he wasn't about to be stomped on by a DC-10 or something. He was quickly given permission for take-off, but told a DC-9 had just done so before him.

The importance is that the bigger plane creates enough air turbulence to disrupt the Beechcraft if it follows directly in the wake. If a DC-10 had taken off before him, DeBoer would be required by Federal Aviation Administration regulations to wait three minutes before taking off.

With the tower's warning in mind, DeBoer flew above the DC-9's trail. He spit out a hodgepodge of numbers and vectors, letting the tower know he was following the flight plan.

Since the plane had sat in the hot sun for three hours, the pilot wanted to climb from 7,000 feet to 9,000 where the air was cooler. He checked in with Seattle Center, which had taken over control from the Spokane tower a few minutes after take-off. After a pause of about a minute, Seattle OK'd DeBoer's request.

Shortly before landing again at Pullman, DeBoer asked Seattle Center to stop tracking him since he'd be touching down. Permission was quick-

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ly granted

After taking off for Lewiston, the pilot contacted the Lewiston tower, relaying their position. When they reached the top of the Lewiston Hill, they let the tower know it, asking for clearance to land. It was given for runway 29. Between flights, we visited Cascade's Spokane headquarters. The vice president and general manager, Stephen A. Gural, met us at the airport.

He drove us back to the office in his old Ford pickup. The offices are a former U.S. Air Force headquarters, "solid as a tank," Gural said, and a steal at \$400 monthly rental.

The headquarters, like the company itself, is hardly pretentious. Cardboard boxes serve as files, the company's in-house carpenter made the conference tables, and the chairs around it are spartan. No corporate frills here.

What is present is the latest in computer technology. Terminals hook in with Braniff's main computer for flight information and reservations. Accounting is done with an in-house computer. And the staff is young and cheerful.

Also present, seemingly, is a spirit of frankness. "Our gross revenue is down about 30 percent because of the strike," Gural says. "We expect to lose about \$400,000 a month over the next six to eight months." That's how long he expects the strike to last.

Because of the strike, some eight to 10 pilots will be laid off as well as 30 to 40 other employees, Gural said.

Already flights are being canceled and consolidated. But things



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Though passengers are starting to fly Cascade again, their absence during the strike has forced the company to lay off about 10 percent of its employees.

could be worse, he says.

If Cascade were in a position like the now-defunct Gem State Airlines was during its operation, the strike would have knocked the company out of business, Gural said. Gem State, like a dozen other commuter lines that have tried to make it in the northwest during Cascade's existence, grew too quickly. Many firms sunk their money into plush offices and Cadillacs for executives, items that Gural says do not help flight operations.

Cascade has grown slowly, but now is expanding into Montana

where other airlines have pulled out. It is buying new pressurized airplanes — seven Fairchild Metro IIIs and four 48-passenger British Aerospace HS-748s — to replace its fleet and double its seating capacity. It's in a position to absorb some of the strike's shock.

So what does a young executive like Gural say about the strike? "Both sides have backed themselves into a corner," he said, describing the negotiation process they had gone through as "illogical." He also believes controllers are adequately paid and have an obligation not to strike.

And again the question, is it safe up there? Again the answer (from Gural) is yes, because the working controllers are "so conscientious." Cascade's flight directors report retired controllers are coming to work, giving relief for those who have worked up to 60 hours a week.

DeBoers thinks the fired controllers won't be rehired. "I think they were quite overstaffed," he said. "Reagan won't back down now. Things are going too good."

Indeed, for Cascade things improved slightly in mid-week. Gross revenue was only down by 20 percent, as more people returned

to flying.

And after spending some time around Cascade personnel, that makes sense. Everything proceeded smoothly, no one sounded panicky over the radio, and there were no delays.

Maybe I'd feel differently if I had spent a day listening to the horror stories of striking air controllers. But I have to believe the Cascade people are being truthful — it is still safe to fly, strike or no. And it is also easy to believe the company will weather the strike, though its long-term effects remain unknown.

Cascade plans to cut flights, work force

SPOKANE — Cascade Airlines will cut about 20 flights from its daily schedule beginning Monday, followed by a 12 percent reduction in personnel caused by the air traffic controllers strike.

Cascade general manager Steve Gural said Thursday night the company will lay off 30 to 40 employees out of its 350 workers during the next few weeks, including all of its recently hired crop of eight new pilots.

Gural said there may be "one or two" layoffs and possibly one less flight at Lewiston.

Most of the recently hired class of junior pilots will be receiving pink slips in the next few days. Only the Seattle station will not receive any personnel and few flight cutbacks, Gural said. Cascade has about 175 flights a day.

"It's really just because of the PATCO (Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization) strike and how it affects the confidence of the public for air travel," Gural said. "We're in the same position as a lot of other airlines."

Gural said flight time will be reduced by 12 percent starting Monday, with eight pilots receiving furlough notices during the next week. "They're all junior officers, pretty much the last class that was just hired," Gural said.

Boardings are down about 20 percent since the air controllers strike began. "The loads seem to be slowly strengthening so we feel that between three and four months we should have most of the people back on again," he said.

Gural said the layoffs will be based on seniority and some workers will have to move to other stations in order to keep their jobs.