

Front 'Office' Of Frontier Sunliner Is Busy, Interesting Place To Ride

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SILVER CITY, NM ENTERPRISE

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Last Friday, as guest of Frontier Airlines during the inaugural airport ceremonies, I achieved the ambition of almost a lifetime by being invited to ride on the flight deck of an airliner, this one the Sunliner "Silver City," with Capt. Wayne Aspinall and Copilot Warren Heckman, on one of the many sightseeing flights made over this area.

Up front behind the mysterious door, beyond which passengers seldom see, I found two very friendly young men who introduced themselves and invited me to sit in the "drop seat" which is just back of those occupied by the pilots. Perched nearly 16 feet above the ground in the 12-ton liner I had a good view of the crowds around the administration building and of the long smooth airfield before us.

Capt. Wayne Aspinall, a ruddy-faced young man of 28 years, is the son of U. S. Representative Aspinall of Colorado. He has 6,300 hours of flying time accumulated over 12 years recorded in his log and is nearing his million miles of flight.

First Officer Warren Heckman, co-pilot of the "Silver City," is 30 years of age and has logged 7,000 hours in 13 years and looks back at one million miles of flying.

Calling for permission to leave the loading gate and receiving it from the administration building, Capt Aspinall gently gunned the two whispering Pratt & Whitney 1500 h.p. engines, braked the right wheel and we taxied slowly around and out to the runway. On the way down the long strip I was invited to ask any questions I wished. Somewhat awed by its multiple levers. I scarcely knew where to begin. About that time we reached the end of the strip and, as the big ship was swung around, Capt. Aspinall said, "We like your airport a lot. It's one of the best we've seen, but you made one mistake. Your boundary lights are too close together."

I raised from my seat to peer over the nose. The lights at the spot, at the exact end of the runway, are set in two clusters of three each. Regulations demand the pilot to use every inch of runway. In order to turn and avail himself of that space, the captain had to exert every precaution to swing the tail, which he could not see, around to takeoff position without damage to plane or the cone-shielded lights. I promised to suggest a change.

I remained very quiet as the two pilots began their exchange of "checking off." This consists of the chief pilot reeling off the numerous things which he has checked to his co-pilot. The latter repeats them rapidly as confirmation. No chance is taken to make sure everything is in order. The starboard engine, which I could not see, roared. The pilot snapped one switch and then the other. There was no interruption in the smooth thunder. "We are checking the magnetos," he said. Each engine has dual ignition or in other words is fired by two magnetos at a time. The check was to assure the pilot that both were working on each engine and that if one failed the big radial power plant would continue operation.

With the check made the brakes were held firm and both engines gunned to high speed to roll down the runway.

Busy with some notes, I never noticed when we became airborne and the next thing I knew we were looking down at the rugged terrain just beyond the airstrip. At this point you never saw two busier men. Both had hands on the quadrant. With both engines developing a manifold pressure of 30 inches (atmosphere) and turning up identical revolutions, the combined power of the two 1,500 horsepower engines were pouring everything they had into the two great propellers as the most crucial moment of flight, the takeoff, was in progress. We were making 120 m.p.h.

At a given point the ship leveled off and both pilots slid earphones ahead and relaxed. The Sunliner was on her own and cruising at about 1,000 feet. I took an offered cigarette, pulled a little ashtray from the wall and began asking my questions. I found the "Silver City" would take off at 40 m.p.h. but 50 gave an extra 10 m.p.h. that might prove very helpful in an emergency. She could climb at 500 h.p. from each engine but that too was minimum and we had horsepower to spare. I remarked about the rate of climb. Capt. Aspinall explained the use of the huge flap that runs underneath the trailing edge of the wing. Warren Heckman reached down between the seat and pulled a lever up. The flap began to bite into the slipstream and the ship went into a steady climb sending the rate-of-climb indicator steadily upward. The speed, 120 m.p.h., never changed. The effect is to change the airfoil, or wing contour, giving it more lift with the same power, a sort of a low gear.

At this point I turned to the role of informer and explained things to the pilots, who apparently hadn't been informed about landmarks. We wheeled slowly around Silver City and I pointed out various buildings and markings. As we neared Whiskey Creek I pointed out my own home. I never found out what 24 passengers thought as Capt. Aspinall banked the Sunliner sharply

I explained Fort Bayard, which they thought was an army post, as a VA Hospital and not the base of the uniformed airforce boys whom they had seen at the airfield. We roared straight toward the Kneeling Nun. That was explained and we wheeled over the big pit at Santa Rita. At this point I ventured to remark that the pilots must have had a hard day. Takeoffs and landings require a lot of painstaking work. Capt. Aspinell laughed and said, "We had more fun than we've had in a long time."

At intervals whistles and buzzers sound in the pilot's compartment. They indicate various things, not all of which did I have time to ask the explanation of. I spoke about the crowded condition of the flight compartment and asked if it wouldn't be a little difficult for the pilots to make a quick exit. They pointed to a hatch cover overhead which a flick of a lever will send sailing away making a fair sized escape hatch.

Flashing lights on the instrument panel took my attention. One set is for the radar altimeter, a device which records altitude. At 2000 feet it flashes yellow, at 1,000 green and at 500 feet, red. This is very handy in flying at night or when ground contact is lost. However Frontier doesn't depend on that device to assure safe flying. There are many more including ground assists of directional radio beam on regular airlines.

Hurley's beautiful football field doesn't look big enough for a ping pong game from 500 feet up. It's strange how so little height can change the looks of things on the ground. We flew over the great tailings dump of the Hurley smelter in which my pilots expressed great interest. Another lever at my feet was pulled up. The big ship shuddered a little as the landing gear swung out of the wings and into landing position.

As we had left Santa Rita I asked about the feel of the controls on the big ship. My experience has all been with Piper Cubs. I was invited to grasp the wheel, The controls are firm, making over-control difficult. Pilot Aspinall laughed and said, "When Heckman and I fly a light plane we go down the runway flapping the tail back and forth. It's hard not to over-control a light plane after handling this one."

Another whistle cut in. That one was for landing. I could imagine the pretty stewardess checking safety belts. We swung into the wind and approached the runway. Once the Sunliner gently fishtailed from the effect of a stubborn little thermal current that the pilots say insists on hanging at the east end of the strip. I never saw a more gentle landing. The pilots braked the ship down, calling off their "check".

Outside I waved at the pilot above and noticed that the chief pilot had become the co-pilot and so on. Another load of passengers were pouring into the ship. I knew they would have a nice safe ride. The two young men up front with every device known for safe flying at their disposal and thousands of hours and miles in their log books, all without accident, would take care of that. The Sunliner "Silver City" barked loudly from her stacks and rolled out on the runway. I went home but I never got the Studebaker up to flying speed. Just a lowering gas gauge.