

COME FLY WITH ME

by R. Ace Avakian

with apologies to Frank Sinatra...from the song of the same name

The year is 1952 and it's Fall of the year. Earlier, I just turned 27 years of age and checked out as captain with Monarch Air Lines. Our airplane is the Douglas DC-3 and I've been flying this airplane now for 5 years having flown it prior to joining Monarch. The airplane does not have air conditioning, pressurization, radar or Public Address system. There are no provisions for meals, just hot water for coffee or chocolate.

Our trip today will be from Denver, Colorado to Albuquerque, New Mexico with stops at Colorado Springs, Pueblo, Alamosa, Monte Vista, and Durango in Colorado and Farmington, Gallup and Albuquerque in New Mexico. Due to excellent weather, the trip will be conducted under Visual Flight Rules and will be during daylight hours. Our copilot is Carl Herring - Steward is Frank Duff. We've discussed the flight and decided I would fly the first half of the trip from Denver to Durango and Carl will fly left-seat the remainder of the flight. This is the first day of a 4 day trip. We will be spending the night in Albuquerque.

For the second day, we will be flying from Albuquerque to Gallup, Farmington in New Mexico to Durango, Cortez, Grand Junction in Colorado, to Price, Provo and Salt Lake City in Utah. We will spend the night in Salt Lake City. The third day we will fly Salt Lake City to Provo, Price in Utah to Grand Junction, Cortez, Colorado to Farmington New Mexico and on to Durango, Monte Vista, Alamosa, Pueblo, Colorado Springs and Denver

The fourth day will be what we call a 'shuttle'. The trip will be from Denver to Pueblo, Canon City, Gunnison, Montrose to Grand Junction with all the same stops on our return - all in Colorado.

Taking off from runway 17 at Stapleton Field/Denver, takes us right over Lowry Field and as we climb up to 8500 feet, we can see the Black Forest in the distance. The air is relatively smooth as is usual this time of year. We see a beautiful splash of colors of all the trees as well as the snow covered mountains to the west. Our route of flight parallels U.S. Highway 85 on our way to Colorado Springs. We now see the Black Forest area just to the north of Colorado Springs and we must use caution and keep a look-out for the usual heavy glider activity at Black Forest Glider Port.

Our first radio contact is with our company advising them that we are in range and transmit our fuel on board. On our descents we must try to maintain no more than 500 feet per minute to help keep the passengers ears from blocking. This is especially important if one has a cold. Our landing at Colorado Springs is uneventful as we land on Runway 12 and taxi to the terminal on the north side of the field just to the northwest of the control tower. Elevation here is 6184 feet above sea level. We shut down our left engine, keeping the right one running. Our agents load, unload and what passengers we have, already have deplaned and any boarding have done so and we're ready to start up the left engine and be on our way.

We take off on runway 12 - a slight right turn and looking to the south, we can see smoke rising from the Colorado Fuel and Iron Works factory at Pueblo. We elect to land straight in on runway 17 at the Pueblo airport which is to the west of the city.

The fairgrounds are just across the street and over to the east of the airport. The buildings are all closed up for the coming winter season. The elevation here is 4710 feet above sea level, which is lowest airport in elevation that we will be landing at, until we fly into Utah tomorrow. Again, we stop for just a minute or so - unload, load and we're on our way.

We now are climbing on our way up to 12,500 feet just to the north of Greenhorn mountain which is 12,334 feet in elevation. Because of the clear weather, we have elected to fly over the Wet Mountains, over toward Mosca Pass before starting our descent for Alamosa in the San Luis Valley. Just to the right of our course one can see the Sand Dunes National Monument. The floor of the San Luis Valley is 7500 feet in elevation with Alamosa being 7550 feet above sea level. The mountains either side of us are above 14,000 feet with Mt. Blanca to our left being 14,391 feet above sea level. Again, we must be vigil on our descent to maintain passenger comfort. Our stop at Alamosa is routine with a 3 minute stop and we're on our way to Monte Vista which is 12 minutes scheduled flying time en route. Monte Vista is a dirt field - no paved runways and is the highest elevation airport in the United States that is served by a scheduled air line. The elevation being 7710 feet above sea level.

A quick stop and we're again on our way just to the east of the La Jara reservoir and just north of Manassa Colorado. We'll be climbing up to 13,000 feet toward La Manga Pass and over a small community of Tierra Amarillo. By the way, Manassa, Colorado is the home town of Jack Dempsey. (So...who is Jack Dempsey you ask? Never mind!)

We have crossed the Continental Divide in the vicinity of Cumbres Pass and are paralleling the Los Pinos River. We have started our gradual descent toward Durango and we always get a big kick out of calling Durango to let them know we are in range, "...over the, Lawss Penis River". :-)

We land at Durango which is our connecting point with our flights from Albuquerque, Denver and Salt Lake City.

In the Durango terminal building, the captain of the Salt Lake City flight calls out to me and introduces me to an FAA inspector who will be riding jump-seat on our flight to Albuquerque. The inspector takes me aside and informs me that he will be checking me on my knowledge of the route and the airplane and not to be apprehensive and that this is "...all routine." <I'm thinking...well, boo on you, Mister!>

Time once again to go and Carl pulls me aside and asks me to continue flying the left seat, "...because of the Fed sitting up front." To which I nod my understanding. Entering the cockpit, the Inspector asks for help, "...setting up the jump seat...as it's been a long time since I've been on the Gooney Bird." That done, he continues with, "This will be a very interesting trip for me as I've never been this way before."

After take-off, I point out the Chuska Mountain Range to the west as well as Ship Rock paralleling US Highway 666. All this time, I'm pointing out different landmarks for the benefit of the Inspector, who has his head down for the most part jotting down notes in his notebook. Meanwhile, Carl looks at me with a frown and sort of points with his chin to the Inspector. ...wondering what can he possibly be writing?

In range of Gallup, on the radio there is a Bonanza in the pattern and I recognize the voice of DB Clarke, the airport manager and advise him to go ahead and land and that I will follow by flying over the field and make left traffic for a west landing.

A quick stop here and again we're on our way. I keep pointing out various landmarks to the Inspector. After seeing him writing things down almost continuously, he gets the best of me and I say to him, "Don't you feel kind of silly writing a bunch of stuff down?"

Carl looks at me in surprise! I continue, "You are checking me on a route that I've been flying for almost 5 years and, by your own admission said, you've never been over before and...checking me on an airplane that you said has been a long time and ..that I've been flying for over five years!" He looked at me and my heart started pounding because this is really out of character for me. He puts down his note book, loosens his seat belt and stretches forward for a better view, and says, "You know? You are right! This is kind of stupid." He then throws his note book aside and almost stands up to get a better view. I point out Mt Taylor, 11,389 and state it is the highest point in New Mexico. We then fly over Acoma the "Sky City" where native Americans live on a plateau just as their ancestors did many years ago. We chit-chat about the view and the visibility.

Now we are in range of Albuquerque and the control tower advises we are, "...cleared straight in...number 5 for runway 8 following 4 F-86's." It seems we are fairly close to the runway with gear down and 3/4 flaps and I'm wondering where the traffic is when suddenly, 4 jets fly over head and one-by-one do a 360 overhead...land...and are clear of the runway...and we are still on final approach! We touch down and start our taxi back. The inspector again, asks for assistance to stow the 4th crew seat. Carl obliges and the Inspector turns out to be a true gentleman - thanking us over and over again.

After landing and at the terminal, the Inspector thanks us both again and heads down the aisle. He hesitates, stops, turns around and says, "You know...this was truly enjoyable and I thank you again ...you are truly doing a terrific job and the beauty of it all is... I can tell...you are enjoying every bit of it!"

And for you readers, we sure did enjoy it - and thank you for coming along with us on this trip. Hopefully, we'll see you again . . . perhaps at another time.

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