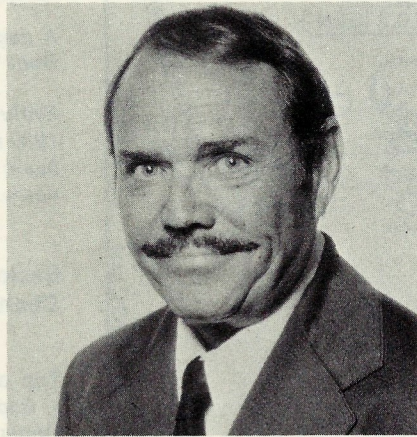


# THURMAN

BY CAPTAIN EMMETT SPINKS



Captain Spinks is married, broke, has three grown children and is a real easy going guy. He attended Texas Christian University, is an accomplished musician, was an Air Force fighter pilot, drilled three oil wells (all dry) and was once in the recording business. His favorite topics for humor on the airplane are wives, kids and peanut butter. He says: "Everyone can identify with these, especially the peanut butter. Anyone that can't identify with peanut butter just can't be one of the good guys."





There have been so many rumors about what happened to me down in South America before I started flying for Frontier Airlines that even though it is rather embarrassing to me, I decided to tell the facts of the story. You must remember that this all happened a number of years ago and some of the facts are a bit hazy, but this is the truth as near as I can recall it.

I had drifted down to South America after the big war and got a job as co-pilot with Faucett Airlines, flying the old DC-3's. As everybody knows, there are very few trains and highways in South America, so practically everything down there, at least at that time, went by air. Every village that could scrape out a dirt strip had a chance of getting some sort of air service. Because of this, countless natives who had never seen or heard of the automobile were quite familiar with airplanes.

Our facilities were rather primitive, but we did get a job of sorts done. For instance, all our planes had bucket seats along the sides of the cabin with the passengers — if we had any — facing each other. In the middle of the cabin was our cargo compartment and I can truthfully say that we carried just about everything. We might have some drilling equipment for some big oil company lashed down and then maybe a big crate of chickens, some pigs, a few sacks of feed and just most anything you might imagine. We weren't very fancy but like I said, we were kinda' proud of the job we were doing.

Well, everything was going along rather smoothly until I got assigned to fly that trip with old Captain McNasty, and got in that hassle with a dumb gorilla named Thurman. Captain McNasty wasn't the captain's real name but that was what we called him behind his back, and with good reason. He had a narrow forehead, thick bushy eyebrows, thick bushy hair, a heavy beard, little squinty eyes, and big ham-hock arms that hung almost to his knees. He smoked foul smelling cigars, belched a lot, and growled out veiled threats to anyone unlucky enough to cross his path. It was rumored about that his wife had run off with a buggywhip salesman from Goatneck, Texas, and if this was true, I felt mighty happy for his wife. I'll bet old Goatneck, Texas, looked mighty fine to Mrs. McNasty.

On this particular day when everything went sour — at least for me — I got out to the operations shack bright and early and ready to take the tiger by the tail. You will note here that I said take the tiger by the tail. I sure as heck didn't plan on getting cozy with a gorilla.

Well sir, I did all the things a good first officer (we called 'em co-pilots in those days) was supposed to do and then started checking the load manifest. We had the usual odd assortment of pigs and chickens and stuff and didn't have any passengers unless you count Thurman. They had a big steel cage loaded in the back end of the cabin and inside was a gorilla named

Thurman. That was what the placard on the side of the cage said.

After all the different things we had hauled, I didn't think too much about hauling a gorilla but if I hadda' been able to read the stars I sure woulda' gone on sick leave. In fact, I probably woulda' just followed Mrs. McNasty right on up to Goatneck, Texas, and retired right then and there.

We got on the airplane and old Captain McNasty growled a few remarks about idiot co-pilots, belched a few times, fired up a cigar, and we were off. The weather wasn't anything to write home to Mom about and right here maybe I should tell you how cockpit crews did their jobs in those days. You either had to scream at each other to be heard or you used hand signals which is what just about everybody did. For instance, if you wanted to start the number two engine, you would hold up two fingers, point them at the number two engine, and wave them round and round. Wheels up was thumbs up and wheels down was thumbs down; half flaps was two fingers sticking up and so forth.

We got off the ground and almost immediately busted into some pretty heavy thunderstorms. (We didn't have radar in those days either.) We were in some pretty heavy turbulence and old McNasty started giving me the old hand signals for wheels down, more power, carburetor heat and so on. This went on for thirty minutes or so when I glanced out of the corner of my eye and saw that crazy gorilla standing there in the companionway. I suppose the turbulence must have sprung his door.

He was just standing there hanging by one arm and then he saw old McNasty giving all those hand signals. Well, old Thurman's eyes lighted up and he started imitating old McNasty. Old McNasty was so busy flying, smoking, and belching that he didn't see Thurman standing there. Well sir, old Thurman was acting like he had just passed through the golden gates of gorilla heaven. If old McNasty gave a

thumbs down signal, old Thurman gave a thumbs down signal. Whatever old McNasty did, old Thurman did right back. At first, I was pretty terrified and then I got tickled but I didn't dare smile or else old McNasty woulda' skinned me alive.

Old McNasty finally got into some smooth air and looked around and saw Thurman. This time the air really turned blue. He was a chompin' and a cussin' idiot co-pilots and belchin' and sometimes doing all three at once. If I hadn't been so terrified I probably woulda' stood up and yelled "Bravo". Old McNasty was really in mid-season form.

He finally calmed down enough to tell me to get that ding dong gorilla back into his ding dong cage. Like I said, I was pretty terrified of old Thurman, but I was a lot more terrified of old McNasty. I figured if I had a choice I would rather take my chances with that dumb gorilla. At that time I didn't know a great deal about gorillas (as a matter of fact, I still don't) but I figured the best way to get old Thurman back to his cage was maybe take him by the arm like you would do if you were showing a lady to her seat in the theatre. Well, I tried that but old Thurman just didn't want to leave that cockpit. He was eyeballing all the instruments and practicing his hand signals, so I squeezed his arm a little harder. Thurman just stood his ground. Finally, old McNasty let out a scream that could be heard all the way to LaPaz, which incidentally, was our next stop. I blinked my eyes, and old Thurman blinked his and this time we headed back toward his cage with me still holding onto his arm real polite like.

When we got to the back of the cabin, his cage door was swinging back and forth so I grabbed it to hold it open so Thurman could get back into his cage. Well, right then was when it happened. We hit some king sized turbulence and when it had smoothed out again, I had been thrown into Thurman's cage with the door slamming and locking behind me. It had also thrown old Thurman back at the rear of the cabin and right flat on his back, I don't have to tell you that we were both mighty stunned. I just lay there unbelieving while old Thurman made a fast recovery. He got to his feet, sorta brushed himself off, and headed right smartly for the cockpit. I recovered enough to scream "Thurman, don't leave me! Come back Thurman!"

It sounds like something you might see in a movie but we didn't have anyone else on board and I guess I just went momen-

tarily grapefruit. I have already told you about the noise but I went ahead and screamed a coupla' more times and this time the screams ended in sobs. Even if old Captain McNasty could have heard me, which he couldn't, he couldn't leave the cockpit because he had to stay and fly.

Well, like I said, the last I saw of Old Thurman, he was disappearing towards the cockpit. I couldn't be sure but it looked to me like he might have had a sly grin on his face as he passed by.

We finally landed at La Paz, and they called a locksmith and got me out of the cage. I know this will tax your credulity but two days later, I received a telegram saying I was no longer a pilot with Faucett Airlines.

It didn't take too long to figure out what had happened. Old McNasty and Thurman hit it right off and old McNasty even quit belching so much. The long and short of it was that I was fired and Thurman was hired.

I drifted on back to the good old US of A and sent out a bunch of applications. I was just real lucky to get hired by Frontier Airlines which is a mighty fancy airline by anybody's standards.

That's the facts of what happened and that's almost the end of the story except a coupla' months ago I got a letter from an old buddy down in South America. He tells me that old Thurman has just checked out as captain and is trying to get his girl friend on as a stewardess.

*(Editor's note: Captain Spinks swears what you have just read is a true story. We have our doubts, knowing Captain Spinks, but just to make sure we sent a copy down to South America and asked Thurman to verify it. Unfortunately, Thurman never answered our letter so for the time being, we have to classify it as fiction. Of course, Thurman may have been too busy flying all his trips, so, you never know . . .)*

