



CASCADE

comes of age

By Jan W. Steenblik

Cascade Airways has weathered a stormy economy, severe Washington winters, volcanic eruptions, and an occasional ornery passenger to flourish in the Pacific Northwest.

Taxiing out from the Cascade Airways (CAZ) ramp at SEATAC, the 18-passenger Embraer EMB-110 Bandeirante twin turboprop seems dwarfed by the 350-ton heavies lumbering off to shores an ocean away. Across the ramp, a Northwest Airlines B-747 looms huge against the distant hulk of glaciated Mount Rainier, jewel of the rugged mountain range for which Cascade was named. Like their pilot brethren in the jumbo, however, Cascade Flight 205's crew, Captains Bob Estes and John Schachle, are full-fledged ALPA members. But when Cascade's pilots joined ALPA in August 1981, most other ALPA members outside the northwestern United States asked, "Who're they?"

Cascade Airways is a survivor, a resilient airline that has grown in 12 years—while half a dozen competitors failed—from a two-airplane commuter with a single route to a large regional carrier whose 80 active pilots and 18 aircraft serve 17 cities in five northwestern states.

Cascade's pilots are survivors, too. Like pilot groups everywhere, they've helped build their company, hanging in

during the lean years, waiting to get their fair share when the company at last stands steady on its feet. An airline rarely grows at a steady rate; more often than not, it takes two steps forward, one back.

Today, for example, is the Monday before Thanksgiving 1981. The load factor is on the black side of break-even. SEATAC and Flight 205's destination airports, Tri-Cities (Richland/Pasco/Kennewick) and Walla Walla in southeastern Washington, are VFR. Cascade is gearing up for Part 121 operations, and Schachle hopes to move up to the big iron soon. But the August air traffic controllers' walkout has hurt the airline, and six pilots hired on July 29 were furloughed almost immediately. The retrenchment bumped Estes back to first officer status by one seniority number, but today he is flying from the left seat.

Estes taxis into position on Runway 16L and holds to avoid wake turbulence from a departing heavy. Schachle reminds the passengers to fasten their seat belts, refrain from smoking, read the card, note the exits and the fire extinguishers, and not to hesitate to call

on the crew if they can do anything to make their trip more pleasant or comfortable. Cleared for takeoff, the Bandeirante accelerates quickly, the penetrating whine of the turboprops drowning out the easy-listening AM station. Estes banks left, southeast over the mountains, and climbs through thin, dissipating stratus. Level at 11,000 feet and 175 knots indicated, Schachle turns off the weather radar.

The elderly gentleman in 1C leans toward the cockpit and yells, "Okay to smoke, Captain? Okay to smoke?" The "no smoking" sign stays on. The passenger contents himself with the view: spectacular snow-dusted peaks, steeply sloped stands of fir and spruce, sinuous rivers, and serpentine logging roads. The snow-capped Cascades gradually give way to gullied, arid foothills and the neat green circles of irrigated farmland.

Estes touches down with studied finesse at Tri-Cities, uses less than half the 7,700 feet available, and taxis in for a 10-minute turnaround; both pilots remain in the cockpit. During the brief respite from the turboprops' whine, the passenger in 1C tells his neighbor,

"Sure am glad to be going home—been in the hospital 11 months. Got me a new leg," he says, slapping his unfeeling thigh.

Between Pasco and Walla Walla, the land rolls and folds in short, gullied hills, contoured in miniature. The delicately hued waves of green, gray, and brown, rising and falling through midafternoon shadows, yield wheat, onions, peas, and other produce, part of the agricultural, mining, and lumber bounty that earned eastern Washington the sobriquet "the Inland Empire." Estes flies the short hop to Walla Walla by hand at 3,500 feet and logs 20 minutes block time. The passenger in 1C, reunited only with his crutches, wobbles unsteadily but with native grit across the ramp, home.

Walla Walla is also home to Cascade's largest pilot group. The airline's corporate headquarters is in Spokane, but its largest pilot domicile and principal maintenance base are in Walla Walla, and most of the fleet comes home to roost here every night. Cascade is the sole provider of the "commuter service to all major Northwest air terminals" so proudly proclaimed by the simple sign over chain link Gate 2.

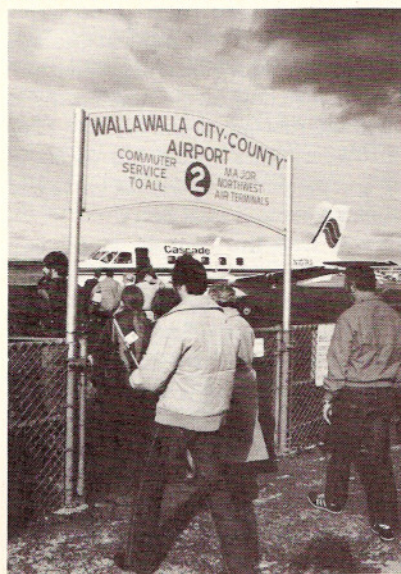
Over a cup of coffee in the little terminal restaurant, Estes articulates a combination of pride and frustration. "There's an excellent future here," says Estes, despite the recent closing of the Pocatello, Idaho, domicile, where he had been local executive council chairman. "There's less money here than in the majors, but we do more flying, and I enjoy the flying." Son of Western Air Lines Capt. Robert Bowman, he says he "was brought up in an airplane," flew gliders as a teenager, earned his private license in high school, served a brief hitch in the Air National Guard, and built time instructing and flying charters in the Seattle area. After flying DC-3s and CV-240s ("charters, cargo, bug spraying—you name it, we did it") for six years, he joined Cascade in 1977 with 7,000 hours of flight time, "most of it in round engines." Despite his enjoyment of flying, however, Estes, like other Cascade pilots gathered at tables and booths nearby, is frustrated that



LEFT: F/O Rich Herrmann checks a 15-passenger EMB-110 Bandeirante at SEA-TAC, one of several major Northwest air terminals served by Cascade. BELOW: Capt. Steve Schmokel and F/O Herrmann enroute to Seattle, approaching the snow-capped mountains for which Cascade was named. BOTTOM: A thriving agricultural center in southeast Washington, Walla Walla has a population of 25,000, including Cascade's largest pilot group.



PHOTOS: JAN STEENBLIK

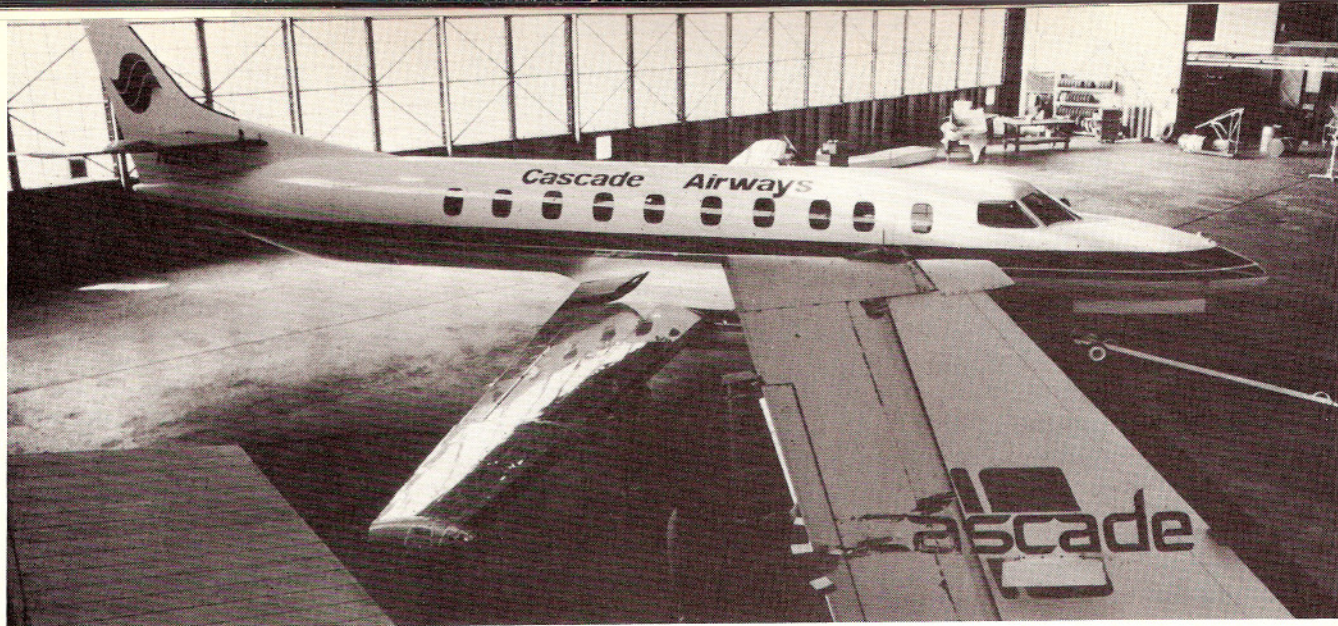


contract negotiations between the pilots and Cascade management are stalled in Spokane.

Also stalled is the schedule for pilot checkrides in the company's new aircraft. There is palpable excitement among the Cascade pilots, for out on the ramp, resplendent in new paint, is the first of three Swearingen Metro III 19-passenger turboprops that Cascade

plans to fly on its routes into Montana and Idaho. Beside it sits the big British Aerospace BAe 748 demonstrator; a 48-passenger turboprop, it is by far the heaviest equipment on the field. Cascade's first of four BAe 748s is due any day from the paint shop in Santa Barbara. Though their operational ceiling is much higher, Cascade will not fly the new airplanes above Flight Level 250, because it has opted not to equip them with quick-don passenger emergency oxygen masks. The BAe 748s, however, will lift Cascade to the fast track of Part 121 operations.

Cascade's flight operations department had scheduled Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) checkrides in the new airplanes for today, but a battle between Congress and the White House over the federal budget has resulted in suspension of many federal services, grounding local FAA inspector Delmar "Del" Randalls. In the Cascade pilots' lounge, Capt. Pete Hilmo, seniority No. 3, shrugs off the postponement. He has waited more than 12 years—almost a third of his life—for this checkride, and he can wait a little longer.



JAN STEENBLIK

Former commuter pilot Mark M. Chestnutt started Cascade Airways in 1969 with two shiny new 15-passenger Beech 99 turboprop twins; Cascade's first scheduled flight departed Seattle's Boeing Field for Spokane via Tri-Cities on June 9. The airline's four employees worked directly from the ramp, not having a gate to call their own. Eleven days later, the airline lost two pilots and one of the 99s in an accident near Pasco. Chestnutt replaced the crashed airplane the next month, but could not fill enough seats after the crash to survive financially on scheduled passenger service. So Cascade hauled freight—bulldozer parts to Seattle, *Wall Street Journals* to Spokane—and flew charters on weekends.

In October, Chestnutt acquired a partner, businessman Neil Buchanan; the airline subsequently operated under the name Air Pacific until Easter 1970. After a falling out with Buchanan, Chestnutt took his two airplanes back to Spokane and resurrected Cascade. Buchanan stayed in Seattle and started another Beech 99 operation, West Pacific Airlines, that survived only nine months.

"In the commuter business, you keep two or three different uniforms in the closet," jokes Hilmo. "When one commuter goes broke, you pull out a different uniform and go to work for somebody else. There are groups of pilots at Cascade from several different outfits—one from Chicago Commuter, another from Golden Pacific, in California, which went broke about the same time. I came up here from Golden West; I was on furlough and just happened to be up here."

"In 1971," says Capt. Ron Berry, "if you were qualified in the Beech 99 and

had a black uniform with silver stripes, you were pretty much assured a job with Cascade."

Similarly, when a commuter airline failed, another commuter would pick up the defunct airline's airplanes and, as Berry recalls, "whatever paint job was on it was how we initiated it into service. At some later date we'd change the paint scheme to match our other airplanes." Cascade's colorful early menagerie at one time included the two Beech 99s with purple fuselages and orange tails from the brief Air Pacific operation; before these distinctive airplanes acquired the modest Cascade colors (white with blue and green trim), Cascade also flew an ex-West Pacific 99 with a red fuselage and black tail. "The Northwest crews would kid us about our 'purple people eaters' as we taxied out at Spokane," says Berry.

It was with the "purple people eaters" that Cascade resumed scheduled passenger service between Boeing Field and Spokane in May 1970, shortly after the Chestnutt-Buchanan rift, attracting what Hilmo calls "the bus crowd" with a one-way fare of \$13.99. "We did pretty well," says Berry. "We ran full quite often, and we were able to keep our heads above water."

During this period, Cascade served up not only cheap transportation but free brew on Friday evening "happy hour" flights. "After we'd reach our enroute altitude, 10,000 or 11,000 feet, we'd slide a cooler of Cascade beer down the aisle," Hilmo recalls.

The "happy hour" flights didn't last, but Cascade did. From 1970 on, strikes on Northwest and Hughes Airwest boosted Cascade's business. So did Airwest's decision to pull out of Pullman, Walla Walla, and Wenatchee; Cas-

cade promptly added those cities to its system. In May 1974, Cascade moved its Seattle operation from Boeing Field to SEATAC, gaining a substantial boost in business travel. "Things really took off at that point," says Berry. A 1970-76 night mail run from Spokane to Portland helped keep the cash flowing.

In July 1974, the Cascade pilots voted 23-1 to join the Teamsters. "We only saw them at contract time," says Bob Estes, and in 1981 the pilot group, now grown to 105 strong, voted to join ALPA instead. According to Cascade's master executive council chairman, Capt. Jim James, "100 percent" of the airline's pilots are members of the Association. Echoing similar comments from other Cascade pilots, Estes says they were particularly impressed by ALPA's superior support and benefits. "Historically, we've had good labor relations with the company," says Capt. Bob "Raz" Rasmussen, chairman of Cascade's Local Executive Council 63 (Walla Walla).

Rasmussen, who logged thousands of hours in Part 135 operations in the southwestern United States before coming to Cascade, also has high praise for Cascade's maintenance operation and conservative safety policies. He also possesses a cautious respect for the weather Cascade often operates in. "The Northwest is noted for in-flight icing, especially on the western slopes of the Cascades and abeam the Bitterroot Range in our southern system," notes Rasmussen. "They brought the Concorde over here to fly Victor 4 [Yakima-SEATAC] to test its anti-icing and deicing systems."

When Mount St. Helens exploded in May 1980, several of Cascade's airports were inundated with volcanic ash.



JAN STEENBLIK



BRITISH AEROSPACE

Yakima, Moses Lake, and Spokane were most devastated by the eruption; Yakima closed for a week (see "Operation Volcano," *Air Line Pilot*, August 1980). "It probably took us a good two weeks to recover," says Capt. Tim Komberec, director of flight operations.

Komberec adds that Spokane, Portland, and Seattle, all Cascade cities, are top-ranked among U.S. cities for frequency of foggy days. During the 1980-81 winter, two full days passed when Pocatello, Idaho, was the only Cascade city not fogged in.

Rasmussen points out that one advantage of Cascade's modest scale is that the station agent can first broom snow from, and then deice, a departing aircraft just moments before takeoff. There are advantages to being small, but there are disadvantages as well. John Schachle complains that his feet stay cold in the Bandeirantes even when he wears two pairs of socks. Many of Cascade's pilots wear yellow foam earplugs to protect their hearing and improve communications within their noisy cockpits. Hilmo recalls being temporarily blinded by a passenger's flashbulb during a night ap-

proach in a Beech 99. Bob DeBoer won't soon forget the burly passenger who walked into the cockpit and slugged him because the airline wouldn't transport his dog to Wenatchee. DeBoer spent the next 90 days on medical leave.

Pete Hilmo squints out the window. Outside, a Beech 99 is discharging passengers; the Metro and the 748 sit waiting. Twelve years after start-up, the ubiquitous Beeches remain the backbone of the fleet. Cascade would like to sell or lease its 10 Beech 99s and 3 Brazilian-made Bandeirantes, but the transition to the bigger airplanes must be made gradually. "We're slow and steady," concludes Hilmo. "We're not the kind of airline that's going to be flying 747s in a couple of years."

Weather, logistics, and national politics notwithstanding, Cascade's senior pilots eventually got their checkrides in the new equipment. Three days before Christmas, the pilots' negotiating committee reached a tentative contract settlement with the company. The airline put all three

OPPOSITE: Cascade added three 19-passenger Swearingen Metro IIIs to its mountain routes into Idaho and Montana this winter. ABOVE LEFT: Long-nosed Beech 99s, Cascade's first airplanes and still the workhorses of the airline's all-turboprop fleet, share the hangar at Walla Walla with Bandeirantes. BELOW LEFT: Putting two 48-passenger British Aerospace BAe 748s into service brought Cascade into the ranks of Part 121 carriers. Cascade expects to take delivery of two more BAe 748s later this year.

Metro IIIs on the line by February 1, adding Missoula, Mont., to its system. On January 27, Capt. Bob DeBoer and check pilot Capt. Jerry Starr inaugurated Cascade's Part 121 service with a BAe 748 flight from Walla Walla to Seattle via Tri-Cities; full-schedule operation of the airline's first two BAe 748s between Seattle and other Cascade cities began February 1.

Later that month, however, Cascade grounded its Metros for a week until a temporary fix could be found to correct apparent inadequacies of the airplanes' prop deicing system. A permanent fix is expected soon, but the airline was forced to drop its service to Missoula and Butte, Mont., temporarily. Cascade furloughed 19 pilots on March 17, "partly because of the Metro problems, partly because of the economic situation," according to Captain Komberec, who said he expected to recall the furloughees over the next few months. Two steps forward, one back.

Cascade is scheduled to receive its third and fourth BAe 748 in August and September. Pilot, management, and passenger enthusiasm for the new airplanes is keen. The Inland Empire has gained seats, speed, and creature comforts, and Cascade's senior pilots got an office with a door and a place to stow their new caps.

A veteran line pilot, especially one who has bumped along in the lower altitudes in little airplanes for many seasons, knows that richly symbolic headgear bespeaks years of apprenticeship, sacrifice, and achievement; continued professionalism; and sobering responsibility. No less does the new symbol Cascade's pilots have added to their lapels, the pin bearing the name of ALPA. □