

Native leaders complain about discomfort, landings on Wien

NOME—Nearly every week, Thomas Johnson, a Nome businessman and community leader and Treasurer of the Bering Straits Native Corporation, makes a round trip between Nome and the Arctic Slope via Anchorage on a Wien Boeing 737.

"If this strike goes on, I am

not going to do it any more," Johnson complains. "I'll just quit my job, but I don't want to put up with it any more."

Johnson explained that, on his last return trip to Nome via Anchorage, he was met at the airport by his wife and a friend. He said the airplane touched down past the midpoint of the runway, and that the airplane used the balance of the runway with engines on full reverse to stop. To top it off, he said, he later found out that the Wien Boeing jet landed with a substantial tailwind.

An airport official in Nome, who declined to be identified, said that the Wien airplane has landed "at least once" with a tailwind "somewhere around 30 knots." The same official said that he has "several times" punched an emergency alarm summoning fire trucks to the airfield because the B-737 touched down so far down the runway that he felt certain an accident would occur.

"Those airplanes are just darned uncomfortable too," Johnson added. Pressurization on flights he has been on has caused much discomfort.

Tom Richards, Sr., a striking Wien Captain of 31 years and the first Eskimo ever certified to fly jet aircraft, explained the reason for much of the discomfort.

"On B-737 flights, we routinely assign the flight engineer or second officer to check weather and winds at altitude in order to calculate the flight profile in order to provide for passenger comfort and fuel economy. With only two pilots in the cockpit, these crews now rely on a flight computer to do these calculations, and it is just not the same."

The Tundra Times had first hand observation of such a situation on November 14 and 15 when a staffer traveled to Kodiak. Anchorage to Kodiak is considered a short flight, so that when the second officer uses his human experience in calculating flight altitude and profile, the airplane does not fly above 24,000 or 25,000 feet so that rapid changes in pressurization and rapid ascent and descent do not cause passenger discomfort.

On these respective flights, the Tundra Times staffer noticed that the airplane climbed to 31,000 feet and 33,000 feet altitude respectively. Frank Peterson, president of the Kodiak Area Native Association, was a passenger on one of those flights and complained, "It sure presents a hardship on the ears."

Captain Richards explains, "These replacement pilots must be using the flight computer to come up with those altitudes. A human being does not make it so hard on himself nor on others. The flight computer plans the trips like a rocket trajectory. The airplane climbs for half the trip and descends rapidly for the other half, just like a rocket. When we plan our flights, we are climbing for a third of the flight, in level flight for another third, and in descent for a third. It's easier on the passengers."

Other than safety issues, passenger comfort is another consideration in the question of whether or not the Flight Engineer should be aboard Wien's Boeing 737's. If the Wien pilot strike isn't resolved soon, Thomas Johnson may quit his job and Wien may be short one more commuter passenger.