

TO GO, OR NOT TO GO?

Trade-off decisions are subject to pressures, including commercial considerations. And not everyone may agree with your decision, either at the time or with the benefit of hindsight. In this experience report, **Captain Paul Reuter** describes one such decision: to depart, or cancel a flight.

London City Airport, December 23rd

All over Europe, weather disruptions due to snow have made a mess of the days' schedules for many airlines. Snow had closed, at any one point, one or several runways of most major airports. In London, meanwhile, the weather has been quite good, with no precipitation and just a little wind.

While we had to deal with quite some disruptions on the previous rotation, the general mood in the crew is good. The co-pilot, while a very competent person, was known for being quite rigid and inflexible in situations that upset the planned order of things.

We managed to operate to LCY with a couple of hours of delay, but with many flights cancelled and passengers stranded, things were quite a mess.

Having arrived late, we might leave dangerously close to the airport's curfew, with an outbound slot that gives us only 10 minutes to spare.

As some of our airline's flights have been cancelled throughout the day, we are hopelessly overbooked.

While the wind would favour a westerly departure, coming roughly from the north-west, this would limit our passenger load quite dramatically due to obstacles in that departure sector. So we opt for a departure to the east, albeit with a limiting tailwind, at full take-off power, in order to take the maximum of passengers back home, on this day before Christmas Eve.

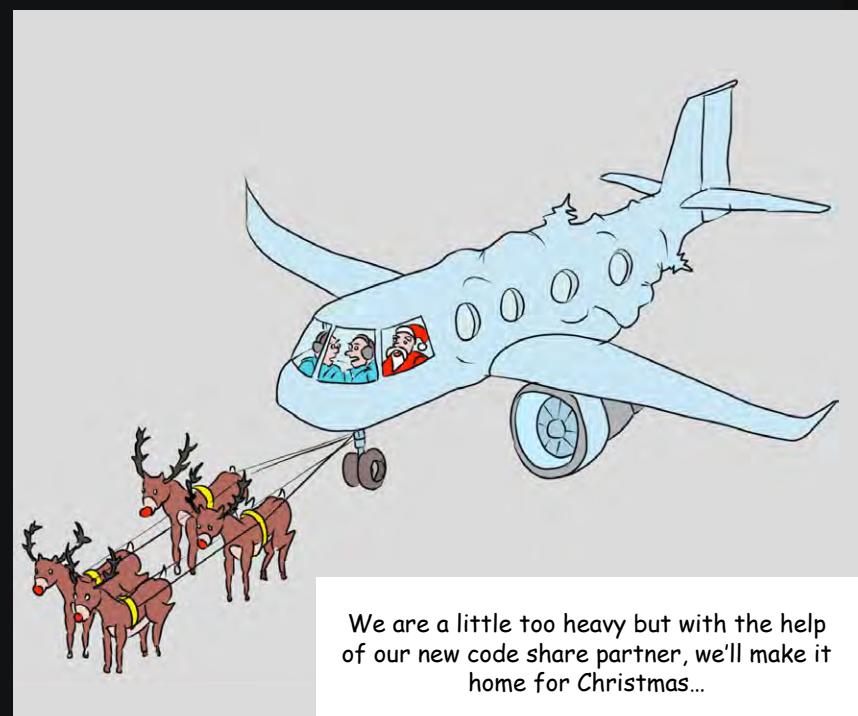
With our departure time approaching (and with it the curfew that would potentially strand the passengers, ourselves and the aircraft), we are constantly updating our performance calculations as the wind shifted in our favour, in order to take a maximum number of passengers.

Finally starting the engines with fewer than 10 minutes to spare on the curfew, we taxi out, all the while keeping an eye on the shifting winds. At the

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holding point, we do a last performance calculation on the EFB, using the wind given to the previous departing aircraft: we are just at the maximum tailwind limit for our weight.

I am acutely aware that, while we are next to depart, the wind is picking up and shifting unfavourably. I also know that my crew mate might not look favourably on accepting a take-off clearance if the wind is even a little out of limits. We line up, get take-off clearance, along with a wind reading that is at least a knot or two over our tailwind limit. Without further ado, I call, "Take off, your controls" and set take-off power.



I sense my co-pilot is not happy, but now is not the time for an argument. Take-off roll and climb-out is uneventful as is the climb to cruising level, though the atmosphere has chilled somewhat in the cockpit. I broach the subject during cruise and indeed, my crew mate is not happy at all, firmly stating his belief that we were out of limits to start the take-off roll.

My line of thought was quite straight forward: Yes, reported tailwinds might have been a knot or two out of limits but, with the buffers built into performance calculations, we were safe.

Not taking off, recalculating and asking for a runway change, close to curfew, would have meant that the flight would have been cancelled as we would have had to disembark quite a number of passengers in order to be able to use the opposite runway. All 70+ occupants of our aircraft would have had to arrange for hotels. The aircraft would have stayed in LCY, disrupting the next day's (Christmas Eve) schedule.

I knew that no matter what my decision, my company would not have questioned me cancelling the flight at that moment, and no pressure would have come my way. My decision and the pressure I felt, I put on myself, because as captain, as long as I believe my actions to be safe, I will do my utmost

to complete my mission and bring the aircraft and passengers home. Also, this being the day before Christmas Eve and having many people on board visiting family, grandchildren and friends for the holidays played a role in my decision to go. Having assured myself that there was no safety risk involved, I was absolutely willing to shoulder that decision and I debriefed the flight with the safety office the next day.

This event illustrates, I believe, the many decisions that pilots – and probably also controllers – need to take routinely. Such decisions fall into a grey area where the implications may well be questioned later.

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I know that my decision that day is open to being questioned by some. In the same position, some might have done the same thing, while others might have simply cancelled the flight. In hindsight, while I still stand behind my decision to go, I would do a number of things differently, chief among those being more proactive in discussing our options and stating my intent and the reason for it earlier.



Paul Reuter is a Captain Boeing 737NG for Luxair, and President of the European Pilot Peer Support Initiative. He is a former president of Luxembourg's Airline Pilot Association, former Technical Director of the European Cockpit Association, and former Chairman of ECA's Safety Strategy Task Force. Paul is an IFALPA Accredited Accident Investigator.

