

Taking Wing: The Power of No

When responsibility and convenience collide.

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The couriers' taillights faded in the distance as I pulled the Piper Navajo's rear cabin door closed and silence fell anew over the darkened North Las Vegas Airport. I clambered over the cargo net restraining nearly a hundred stacked bank bags, slid into the front left seat, and quickly went through the preflight checklist and starting flows. "Master switch on, magnetos on, mixtures rich, left fuel pump on." I waited for the electric pump's characteristic whine, but no sound came forth and the fuel pressure remained at zero. Hmm. I



I checked the right side; it worked fine. I looked in vain for a popped circuit breaker, fiddled with the switch and then pounded it with my fist, probing for a loose connection. The pump remained stubbornly inert. I glanced at my watch: a quarter after 1 in the morning.

Crap.

I reluctantly fished my cellphone from my pocket and dialed "The Boss." "Ughmph, hello?" he answered groggily, confirming my worries about rousing him from a deep sleep. "Uh, hey, Sam here," I began. "I just got my load ... but the plane is broke. Left electric fuel pump is out. It worked fine on the way here." It took a few seconds for The Boss to process this information. "Well, eh ... is the right pump working?" With a sinking feeling I realized where the conversation was headed but confirmed its operative status. "All right, then. Just open the cross-feed valve and use the right pump to prime the left engine; you'll be able to get it started and take off for Burbank."

Moment of truth. This was, of course, illegal as hell, but carrying maintenance write-ups to the base isn't exactly unknown in the freight dog world. This was a bit different from a burned-out bulb, though. I hesitantly formulated an answer: "Yeah, you know, it's pretty hot out, I'm really heavy, and the MEAs along the route are all 10,000 feet or higher. If the engine-driven pump failed, I'd be screwed. I won't do it."

This pronouncement hung heavy as the line went silent. When The Boss finally spoke, the words were terse and leaden: "Fine. Stay right there. I'll be there in two hours." Click. Ouch. That didn't go so well. I retreated from the cockpit and stretched out prone atop the bank bags. I figured I'd best try to get some rest before facing the consequences of my refusal. At half past 3, my fitful slumber was abruptly terminated by the roar of a beige Navajo lurching to a halt next to mine. The Boss was out of the plane almost before the props stopped turning. He bounded up my airstair and

wordlessly started throwing bank bags onto the tarmac below; I pushed them aft from the forward cabin. When we were done, he finally spoke. "Take those to Burbank," he commanded, pointing to the scattered bags and the other plane. I was barely out of the door when he fired up my broken plane using the cross-feed technique. He roared away with a mighty blast of prop wash, leaving me to collect the bags, heave them into the replacement Navajo and wonder if this would be my last leg as a freight dog.

As it turned out, I never heard another word about the incident. I have thought about it often, though, especially during other moments of truth when I had to do the difficult and unpopular thing and say no to people who wanted me to say yes. I have since come to recognize that learning to do so is a critical step of any pilot's development, but especially professional pilots who throughout the course of their career will inevitably encounter trying situations that test their judgment and resolve.

Most pilots, career-oriented or not, are driven, goal-oriented people. It's just about required to survive the vexatious process of learning to fly. Our flight instructors tried to instill a sense of reserve and caution, but to take these lessons to heart most of us had to make our own early mistakes — minor and survivable, usually, but always memorable. Over time we came to distrust the voice in our head that says, "Go ahead. It's not as bad as you think; everything will work out fine." We learned to recognize and minimize external pressures, like work deadlines or passengers' schedule constraints.

It's different when you fly for a living, though. Now you are essentially being paid to utilize the full capability of your aircraft; your value to your employer lies in being able to say yes as often as prudence allows. You're flying nearly every day and getting more comfortable in the sky than you've ever been, and the machine is becoming an extension of yourself. Yet as you are continually encountering situations that are new to you, it is easy for self-doubt to creep in, and you are acutely aware of how precarious your situation is — both financially and in terms of career progression. You find yourself predisposed to go.

Looking back on my early career with the benefit of hindsight, there were a number of times I came to regret taking the easy road and acquiescing to requests that I knew weren't really smart. These incidents stuck in my mind a long time, and I always felt uneasy thinking back on them and how badly they could have gone. Meanwhile, I've never regretted any of the times I said no, even though they were usually more difficult and ambiguous at the time.

As a new flight instructor, I refused to sign off my first multiengine student for his commercial check ride several times though he complained bitterly to the flight school manager and tried to get me fired. The freight-dogging incident related above was one of several with that company; even at my next job with a bigger and more reputable operator, I had to make a few difficult decisions that cost him a fair amount of money and effort. As a new first officer at my first regional airline, I had a captain attempt to go below minimums on a nonprecision circling approach in the mountains of Montana. He was an old hand who knew the local terrain intimately, knew exactly where we were and wanted to go down another 200 feet to find the airport. I told him that, if he did so, he could also find himself a new FO. It was a tense couple of minutes. Afterward he apologized and bought the layover beers. These episodes were uncomfortable but valuable seasoning in preparation for my first captain upgrade on a 76-seat Embraer 175 jet. The stakes go up with an airline job: the

safety, comfort and convenience of many passengers, some serious money for your employer, and more intense scrutiny if things go wrong. At some airlines — particularly smaller regionals — the pilot support structure is minimal, and the operation can develop an aggressive "go" posture. It's pretty rare for airlines to overtly push their pilots to do anything obviously illegal, but in ambiguous situations it's often up to the captain alone to recognize potential danger and apply the brakes as needed.

Several years ago, I was preparing for a flight from Minneapolis-St. Paul to Chicago Midway Airport when a maintenance crew showed up 10 minutes before pushback to update our flight management system database. Something went wrong, and not only did the update fail but it also dumped the current database. Our minimum equipment list (MEL) allowed us to dispatch with an expired or invalid nav database; this essentially turned our fancy Embraer into an old-school, VOR-tracking Cessna 172. The weather was decent and my FO and I were familiar with the route, so I initially accepted the deferral.

Upon further investigation, however, we realized that we had also lost the FMS performance database, which is integral to many of the Embraer's features and flight modes. The MEL clearly hadn't foreseen this possibility; there were no alternative procedures to enter V-speeds, for example, or to change takeoff flap settings to satisfy the takeoff warning system. The mechanics, our dispatcher and the maintenance controller all tried to convince me of our legality, blithely suggesting that I make up alternative procedures as I go. Eventually I talked to our director of maintenance, who claimed the MEL in question covered any FMS malfunction and asked me in somber tones, "Are you refusing this airplane?" I said that I was.

The standoff lasted another 20 minutes until the chief pilot belatedly returned my earlier phone call. He confirmed my interpretation of the MEL and said I should not depart without a performance database under any circumstances. Dispatch eventually found us another airplane, and my crew and delayed passengers glumly trudged across the terminal to our new gate. As we did, I thought back to that late night years ago in North Las Vegas. The Boss, like many employers, co-workers and passengers since, was deeply inconvenienced by my insistence on doing the right thing. After the fact, though, I never heard an ill word from him or anyone else.

As unpopular as saying no can be at the time, most people recognize that it is the ultimate demonstration of a pilot's judgment, caring and responsibility. When one performs one's duty thusly, there is little room for fault — or regret.