



The WordchipperSM

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Thanks to the pilots!

Frustrations for air travelers have multiplied over the years: casino-type reservation-making; do-it-yourself ticketing and, now, baggage self-checking; crowded aircraft because the number of flights has been reduced (pack 'em in—hey, they do it with sardines; why not people?); the humiliating, un-American-like TSA security hassles; and then, after all that and more, airline passengers are at the mercy of not only Mother Nature but something else nearly every airline passenger on the planet has experienced: “a mechanical problem.”

But as we're sitting there in the back of the plane, fuming about airline maintenance, there are some other people who are equally frustrated—if not more so—by the delay. These are the two professionals up front: the pilot and co-pilot. The air crew wants to depart just as badly as you and I do. After all, they want to get going so they can do it all over again tomorrow.

What an airline pilot feels during these delays was brought home to me recently in an email from a friend of mine who happens to be a Captain for a major airline. He's based out of Chicago and lives in rural Illinois. As I read his words, I get a sense of just part of what these guys go through:

Went to Miami (MIA) yesterday. Almost had to call a friend of mine so I could get invited to his house for Thanksgiving. Got to MIA and our APU wouldn't start (that's the thing we use to start the engines with, and provides power and air while sitting at the gate). So we call for an external air cart to start the engines. Then we began our taxi out, and the left reverser goes out on us. Back to the gate with some really pissed-off holiday travelers. They work on that for an hour. Get a message from dispatch that my co-pilot is about to time out on duty time for the day, and if we don't get off the ground in an hour, we're stuck in Miami for the night (I don't tell that to the passengers though, hold that in case I need to cheer them up with some good news).

They can't get the reverser fixed and just write it off, so we blast off for home (Wordchipper note: Safety rules do allow a passenger jet to fly with only one operative “thrust reverser” as these devices help reduce braking action by only 20 percent). In Chicago, a blizzard is raging, and I'll get to do my first landing on a snowy runway with one reverser out and a planeload of really hacked-off passengers, many of whom are going to be sleeping in the terminal as they missed their connections at O'Hare. I was supposed to have done the turnaround at MIA in only 45 minutes, but then all hell broke loose and had my hands full.

Landing went well, then I spent the next four hours driving home in a blizzard. Saw two absolutely spectacular car wipe-outs into the ditch: One guy went all the way down the right-side ditch, somehow got it back onto the highway, did two more 360s, then buried it into the middle of the highway ditch. Thought for sure I was going to T-bone him as he did his 360s across both lanes of the highway. Got home at 1:00 A.M. Am now getting ready to ride the Johnnie (John Deere) and blow out the driveway so I can drive some more—back into the storm—on my way to the in-laws' in Green Bay, Wis., for turkey.

Reading the Captain's scenario reminded me (and it's so easy to forget) that aircrews, both up front and in the back, hate delays just as much as we do as passengers, if not more so. Pilots did finally get a small break recently by winning a change in TSA rules that should have happened a long time ago: They can now go through screening without being subjected to those radiation-rich scanners or time-consuming “full-body pat-downs.” After all, they have at their command the most lethal weapon of all: the aircraft; far more dangerous than any penknife they might be carrying.

No matter what happens, I show appreciation to the pilots on my way off an aircraft. After all, for however long the flight took, they had my life in their hands and they got me to where I was going without bodily injury (or worse). For that, I say thanks, whether it's Thanksgiving or not.