

THE BRAVER DECISION

It's almost part of our DNA to be drawn to heroic skill under fire, especially when lives are saved. So how should organisations respond to a reckless decision to fly that has a great outcome? And how do we respond to a robust decision not to fly, even though that means money will be lost? Or worse, lives?

In the late afternoon of mid-January 1982, a United States Park Police helicopter crew rescued five people from the icy water of Washington DC's Potomac River. They were survivors of an Air Florida 737-200 flight that had ended at the 14th St Bridge, only 30 seconds after departing Reagan National Airport.

The Maryland State Police (MSP) helicopter service – one aircraft of which was just 10 NM away at Andrews Air Force Base – refused to fly. They were especially trained and equipped for rescue, so why the refusal? Well, that day, visibility was zero, the temperature was -4 degrees Celsius and cloud was down to 200 ft. It was snowing.

The US Park Police (USP) helicopter crew were hailed as heroes and eventually received the Department of Interior Valour medal, the Coast Guard Silver Lifesaving Medal, the Carnegie Hero Medal and the HAI Crew of the Year award.

Silence greeted the MSP pilot's decision not to go.

Bruce Webb, Director of Aviation Education at Airbus Helicopters (North America) wants that to change.

"Lives being saved is always something to be celebrated. I don't doubt that in any emergency situation, each team involved does what it thinks is right.

"But the right call is not always the easy call, and sometimes choosing to fly can have unwelcome consequences."

Zero praise

In this specific incident, there were myriad factors in play: the terrible conditions, 10,000 gallons of jet fuel in the river – which is why the rotors didn't ice up – and several people lining the shores. The rescue was performed

without incident, but in Bruce Webb's experience, the outcome – and the opinions about it – could have been so different.

"In this case, because the outcome was such a success, the rescuers were lauded as heroes who made a life-saving decision. If you have an accident in challenging circumstances, many people tend to place blame on the pilot for making a bad decision.

"But what we don't see as often are teams being acknowledged for making a difficult decision *not* to go. I would've liked the MSP crew to have heard, 'We know it was a tough decision, so thank you for doing the responsible thing and not risking more lives'.

"It takes a lot of internal fortitude, an understanding that you can't endanger other people, and real maturity to make such a decision. And yet, most times we don't acknowledge it, let alone praise it."

Jason Frost-Evans, pilot and CAA investigator, agrees, saying there's also subtle pressure on commercial pilots to fly, even if their employer never says anything out loud about what's at stake.

"Your scenic flights bring in revenue, you get to build your hours, the passengers get to see a glacier, the bus driver gets their finder's fee. If you decline the flight, the potential passengers carry on down the road and the opportunity for all those gains is lost. So perhaps you fly – against your better (weather) judgement. You don't have any difficulty, so next time you're less concerned. Eventually flying in poor conditions becomes expected and 'normal'."



So Jason says a tough decision to not fly, or to divert, or to return – the result of a solid assessment of the risk involved – should have some overt response.

“Say thanks,” he says. “Don’t just let it slide.”

The outcome versus the decision

Jason likens a good outcome from a poor decision to winning the lottery.

“We don’t see lotteries as a great investment, because the outcome is down to luck rather than skill. If you win, no-one says, ‘That was a sound investment!’ They say, ‘Man, you’re so lucky!’ Because it was against the odds.”

“And of course, buying a lottery ticket,” Jason adds, “which is highly likely to be unsuccessful but you’re happy to risk it, is just a loss of five dollars. Attempting a flight in unsatisfactory conditions, could well endanger lives.”

Countering the pressure to fly

Matt Harris, CAA’s chief advisor on human factors, says saving someone’s life is a powerful motivator to choose to fly. “Pilots have told researchers they would take more risks than they were usually comfortable with, ‘When you think you’re in search and rescue mode, when you think that you’re going to save somebody, you’ll push things’.”

Matt says that rescue mode can also influence a pilot’s assessment of their own hazards such as fatigue, or personal mimimas.

Organisational psychologist and ex-RNZAF squadron leader, Keith McGregor, says for these reasons, a go/no-go decision shouldn’t be down solely to the pilot.

“While the ultimate decision does rest with the pilot, these decisions cannot be divorced from the culture of their organisation.

“The organisation should have already discussed how they’ll deal with such a situation if and when it occurs and have clear policies to guide decisions. While the pilot makes the call to not fly or abandon a flight, it must be the organisation that takes responsibility for that decision.”

Keith says a ‘mission controller’ would maintain a less emotional evaluation of the proposed rescue and help the pilot to make a go/no-go decision, a decision to abandon it, or have the authority themselves to call the mission off.

“It’s a similar situation to police pursuits in New Zealand. A ‘pursuit controller’ is now in constant contact with the police driver but removed from the heat of the chase.

// The right call is not always the easy call, and sometimes choosing to fly can have unwelcome consequences. //

They help the driver to decide to abandon the chase or they themselves can directly call off the pursuit.”

Jason Frost-Evans says it’s also important that senior pilots don’t respond to a no-go decision by a less experienced pilot with, ‘Hey great decision – now I’ll give it a go instead’.

“That just tells the junior pilot they lack the necessary experience. Senior pilots should be modelling and supporting good decisions. If the weather’s too poor to fly, it’s too poor to fly.”

Jason says using a risk analysis tool, such as the FRAT (www.aeronauticalsafety.com > Downloads > EHEST – Pre-Flight Risk Management Checklist), can also help with making an objective go/no-go decision.

“We’re not so good, as humans, in adding up all the little risks – conditions marginal, a little bit of fatigue, the aircraft a little bit not airworthy – so something external like the FRAT can make clear that all these little risks actually add up to high risk.”

How to respond to the poor decision-great outcome flight

As for the USP pilot in 1982, it might seem churlish to berate him for his decision – he did save five lives after all – but does that mean there’s no response at all?

Jason says it *is* hard to know how to respond appropriately.

“But I think it’s fitting to question the thinking behind the decision to fly. Would they have flown to assist one person with a cardiac event or a broken arm, given the same weather conditions?

“If not, how is the risk acceptable for five people – or 50?

“Ask yourself that if this flight resulted in an accident, ‘could I justify my decision to the person’s family?’” ≡

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Bruce Webb, Airbus Helicopters (North America)