

I learned about flying from that //

# STAYING STAUNCH IN THE STORM

This co-pilot's story from way back has as much relevance today as it did then: someone willing to make themselves unpopular with their workmates in the pursuit of safety, and saving their lives in the process.



**B**ack in the day, New Zealand international crew included a flight engineer. Their preflight duties included checking the required amount of fuel and oil was aboard the aircraft for the proposed flight.

The engines' oil tanks were replenished via oil filler caps on top of each cowl, which the flight engineer was responsible for checking were closed.

The American tanker drivers soon became irritated at our flight engineers' insistence on checking the oil caps themselves.

The Americans scoffed at our explanation that New Zealand procedures stipulated the engineer must personally check these items.

"We handle more than 20 airlines here," the Los Angeles tanker driver informed our engineer one night, when the engineer had made him return with a ladder to check the oil filler caps.

"They all trust us to do the job properly," said the tanker driver. "Why can't you?"

The matter became more controversial when our insistence on double checking led to a departure delay, something scheduled airlines try to avoid like the plague.

The situation boiled along and finally came to a head one dark and stormy night when we were about to depart on an eight-hour flight out of LA to Tahiti.

I was co-pilot.

Things had gone wrong from the beginning.

The flight plan weather information was delayed, which meant our navigator didn't come up with the final fuel figure until 15 minutes before departure time. The caterers had short-changed us so we had to order 30 more economy meals. A few other problems piled in until a delay looked inevitable.

But seven minutes before departure time, the last passengers had fastened their seat belts and our quite junior flight engineer, Bob, was checking the refueller's figures in the fuelling logbook. The chief steward came forward to let us know the passengers were all aboard, and he was waiting for the tanker driver to leave the aircraft before closing the last door.

The captain and I had completed the pre-starting checks up to fuel.

"Any likelihood of an on-time departure?" the captain asked Bob.

"I hope so, I've just got to go outside and check the oil caps," he replied. Outside, the driving rain made me glad I wasn't Bob.

"No need, I've already checked 'em," the American refueller assured him. "They're all fine."

"I'd better go out and check..." Bob wavered, knowing his actions would cause a late departure.

I tentatively suggested we take the refueller's word on this occasion. Air traffic control had issued our start clearance and we were all set for a scheduled departure.

"Yeah...OK then," Bob replied. "My checks are done. Ready for the 'before starting checks'?"

"Fuel selectors?" I called.

"Main tanks selected."

"Cross feeds."

"Normal."

"Fuel quantities?"

"Ninety four thousand pounds total, oil quantities ..."  
Bob faltered mid-sentence.

"Continue checks," the captain prompted. We still had five minutes to go and our chances of an on-time departure looked good.

### **Bob makes himself unpopular**

"Captain, I'm going outside to check those oil caps."  
Bob's announcement suddenly destroyed any chance of an on-time departure.

I looked angrily across at the captain but he seemed unconcerned. It took five minutes to get the boarding steps wheeled back to the front passenger door, and another 10 to find a step ladder to enable Bob to check the oil filler caps.

He returned to the cockpit 20 minutes later, tight-lipped and soaked to the skin. Air traffic control had cancelled our clearance and advised us there would be a further 30-minute delay before we could start.

"You've made us miss our slot time," I accused him.

"UTA are departing ahead of us and we'll arrive in Tahiti late, half an hour behind them."

"Better than not arriving at all," Bob snapped back angrily.

"Whaddya mean by that?" I demanded. First he'd delayed us, now he was using sarcasm??

He slid his seat forward to the take-off position between our pilots' seats.

"If I hadn't gone outside and checked those oil filler caps, we'd have run out of oil in about two hours.

"The refuellers hadn't replaced the oil filler caps," he continued. "They'd left them hanging by their chains – all four of them."

I was chagrined. Suddenly the desire to achieve an on-time departure didn't seem as important as staying alive.

What would have happened if Bob hadn't ignored me? What if he hadn't followed his professional instincts and insisted on going outside into the pouring rain to double-check the filler caps?

Venturi action would have siphoned the vital lubricating oil out of the engine oil tanks during flight, until one, then a second, and finally all four engines would have failed. Our passenger airliner would have mysteriously disappeared into one of the deepest areas of the Pacific Ocean.

### **What did I learn from Bob?**

I was too interested in an on-time departure, and tried to persuade Bob to skip some of his checks. Fortunately he refused to be bullied into abbreviating his check.

I learned this from Bob:

- Be consistent and always follow operating procedures fully.
- Never delegate tasks to unknown, unqualified personnel.
- Never try to persuade other crew members to deviate from standard operating procedures.
- Never allow others to persuade you to shortcut SOPs. 

