

The New York Times

“With 3,200 Flights a Day, a Few Problems”

By JEFF BAILEY

MARCH 18, 2007

Even when skies are clear and the nation’s air traffic control system is running perfectly, airlines have to contend with problems that cause delays. The 482 Boeing 737s that Southwest Airlines operates make about 3,200 flights a day. As at other airlines, something is always going wrong.

In daily internal reports, Fred Taylor Jr., senior manager of proactive customer communications at Southwest, gives a lighthearted, at times sketchy recap of the operating mayhem that is airline routine. The reports are used by others at Southwest to explain delays to customers. Excerpts from December 2006:

DEC. 5 A belt loader that conveys luggage ran into a plane in Baltimore. Flight to Hartford canceled.

DEC. 9 Salt Lake City-to-Los Angeles flight took off and then returned after “a rather large bird took the scenic route through the left engine.” Inspection found no problem. Departed again 1 hour, 15 minutes late.

DEC. 10 Las Vegas-to-Oakland flight “delayed while a customer spoke with the airport police about his ‘hot pocket.’ Apparently, this dude is a nervous traveler and somehow a book of matches in his pants caught fire by accident — which reminds me of a similar concern that I had when I caught my kid brother (2 yrs old at the time) trying to pee in a light socket.” Matches extinguished. No injury. Passenger allowed to travel on.

DEC. 11 Chicago-to-Phoenix flight diverted to Denver for medical emergency. CPR was performed and the onboard defibrillator was used.

New Orleans-to-Dallas flight lands with an “unresponsive customer.” “Not sure if we got a deep sleeper, someone with an extreme hangover, or otherwise.”

Chicago-to-Louisville flight, after takeoff, returns to Midway Airport when “another unresponsive customer” is found.

DEC. 16 Norfolk-to-Orlando flight. “Unruly customer” having difficulty following crew instructions and staying in his seat during the approach. Police met the flight “and they took the disruptive person downtown to provide him with a more thorough explanation of the do’s and don’ts while onboard a commercial aircraft.”

Los Angeles-to-Tucson flight taxied back to gate. “A customer appeared to be having a heart attack.”

Jacksonville-to-Philadelphia flight delayed. “During the boarding process, a customer had a couple of seizures.”

DEC. 18 Tampa-to-San Antonio flight diverted to Houston for electrical problems. Passengers continued on after an airplane switch.

Houston-to-Philadelphia flight diverted to New Orleans for malfunctioning oil gauge. Planes swapped. Flight continued.

El Paso-to-Dallas flight stopped in Lubbock to pick up passengers from a flight canceled for mechanical problems.

Philadelphia-to-Oklahoma City flight aborted takeoff while at about 100 miles an hour because of errant flap indication. Stopped safely, swapped planes, flight continued on.

DEC. 21 With Christmas approaching, planes are full and weather is iffy. Denver was closed and 78 Southwest flights canceled. Oklahoma City-to-Kansas City-to-Baltimore flight diverted to Wichita after a battery charger overheated, “emitting a haze that drifted into the cargo hold.” Southwest does not operate in Wichita, so a replacement plane is flown in to continue the flight.

Las Vegas-to-Albany flight arrived “with law enforcement meeting the aircraft to chat with an unruly customer.”

Los Angeles-to-Chicago flight diverted to Indianapolis to avoid heavy winds.

DEC. 22 On an Orange County-to-San Jose flight, “flaps failed to deploy on landing. Emergency declared, routine landing.”

Denver reopened. Extra planes flown in to get holiday travelers out.

In Burbank, Santa Ana winds limited takeoff weights. Six flights stop to refuel in Ontario.

Austin-to-El Paso flight “had an upset customer who was arrested” upon arrival.

DEC. 23 “On a serious note,” a Manchester-to-Baltimore flight “had a customer pass away upon arrival.”

“On a less serious note, the Burger King in the [Sacramento] airport had a grease fire causing a five-minute evacuation — no fries, chips.” (A spokeswoman for the Burger King outlet, Bryn Punt, said there was smoke but no fire.)

DEC. 24 “One woman was full of the Christmas spirit of peace and good will toward mankind, and while traveling,” Phoenix-to-El Paso, “she hit another woman. A nice way to spend Christmas Eve in the [El Paso] jail.”

DEC. 25 Chicago-to-Tampa flight “had a customer text message her mother that terrorists were on the flight. She saw two folks using their cellphones prior to push. The flight was met by the FBI in (Tampa), who sorted out everything. As far as we can tell, the flight was calm and routine.”

DEC. 26 Phoenix-to-Reno flight hit “severe turbulence on approach” to Reno and diverted to Oakland. Three hours later, flight canceled and passengers bused to Reno.

Two planes pushing back from the gates in San Diego bumped into each other. Both returned to the gates and passengers were put on other flights. “Our folks are conducting an investigation and working with the” National Transportation Safety Board.

DEC. 27 Oakland-to-San Diego flight returned after takeoff “to have the left engine inspected for a possible bird strike. The engine was given the thumbs up.” Flight left an hour late.

Los Angeles-to-Tucson flight diverted to Phoenix for a lightning strike. Swapped planes and continued on.

DEC. 30 Orlando-to-San Antonio flight returned to gate “for a suspicious liquid found in a seatback pocket (it turned out to be a small jar of sea water — probably stuck there when the customer realized it was more than 3.4 oz.) The flight was delayed while the feds examined the stuff and its location.”

DEC. 31 Los Angeles-to-San Jose flight, with a malfunctioning landing gear indicator, flew by the tower twice to get visual confirmation that the gear was down, then had passengers “in the brace position on arrival.” Only the signal was bad. “Will send a heartfelt apology for the tense moment.”