

Dilemma: Right vs. Right

Dilemma: The Dying Passenger

Mike Nolan knew there was a problem even before the flight attendant knocked on the cockpit door. After 18 years of piloting 747s and their smaller kin across the country and around the world, Nolan had developed a keen sense of the atmosphere aboard his planes. This flight — a December trip from Detroit to Seattle — had been a struggle from the start.

First, there had been the late departure from the Detroit gate — a delay caused by a flat tire on the food-service van a few miles from the gate. The van's driver had been further slowed by the onset of a snowstorm, whose first flurries had begun falling less than an hour before. Compounding the slow start was the packed and cramped cabin to Nolan's back, a precursor to the coming holiday crunch. The flight crew was new, too — each with plenty of experience, but not yet used to one another as a routine team on this westbound route. These things — more disruptive and disjointed than truly troubling — had nevertheless put Nolan on alert.

So when the knock came on the cockpit door, Nolan wasn't entirely unprepared. At the door was Maggie Cho, a flight attendant Mike had worked with a few times before, though not on this route. Maggie, Nolan knew, was new to the route and relatively new to the job, but had the bearings and the brains to stay calm in a crisis — qualifications that made her a good person to have in the cabin. Tonight, Mike soon realized, she was badly needed.

Maggie wasted no time in telling Nolan and the rest of the cockpit crew that there was trouble in the back: A passenger had suffered a severe heart attack and needed immediate medical attention. While a doctor aboard the plane had been able to help, a hospital was needed quickly — or the patient would likely die.

Nolan knew his options were few and his time short. The scheduled flight path had led Nolan's plane slightly south in a bid to slip the grip of a growing snowstorm over the northern plains. That tactic, however, had failed. The storm, pushed and pulled by competing air-pressure systems, had spread more widely than forecast, covering America's middle states with a wide swath of snow, sleet, and strong winds. And Nolan's night flight, now 20 minutes from Denver, was in the middle of the mess.

Transferring control to his copilot, Mike took to the radio, calling the Denver tower to seek clearance for an emergency landing. From the other end of the radio, Nolan heard a pained response: Permission denied. The Denver controller explained that weather conditions were worsening, making a landing unadvisable and unsafe for Nolan's crew and passengers. With extreme regret, the Denver tower told Nolan to provide what medical care he could — but to continue his flight as prescribed.

Mike, Maggie, and the rest of the cockpit crew looked at each other, pained expressions on their faces. After talking quietly for a few minutes, Mike concretized their options: They could follow Denver's orders and stay aloft, or they could demand a landing for a medical evacuation.

The weather WAS a problem, Mike admitted, but not one he wasn't ready to meet. Nolan felt sure he could land the plane — a confidence borne of 27 years'

experience at the controls of military and civilian aircraft. But he wasn't prepared to risk the lives of his crew and passengers — breaking the conservative standards of airline safety regulations — without their full and informed consent.

At Mike's request, Maggie returned to the cabin for a status check. In less than three minutes, she was back with bad news: The patient's condition was worsening. News of the crisis, she said, had spread remarkably slowly, running through only a small portion of the passenger cabin. The rest of the flight crew, however, had been told of the emergency and had — with only one fleeting hold out — signaled their wish to land the plane immediately.

Now, the choice was Nolan's.

Analysis

With only a few minutes in which to make a decision, Nolan began to reason through his dilemma. It was right, on the one hand, to land the plane in a bid to save the life of the man in need. If the flight continued, bypassing Denver, Nolan knew the passenger would likely die. On the other hand, Nolan knew it was right to obey the commands from the Denver tower, protecting his crew and remaining passengers from danger, and his employer from liability.

Without the luxury of time, Nolan was torn between conflicting rights — whether to sacrifice the needs of the individual for those of the community, whether to honor airline regulations and principled codes or pursue mercy in a life-or-death race for Denver. Whatever choice he made, Nolan knew there would likely be a losing side whose fate would fall short of what had been earned.

Note: This and other dilemmas on this site come to you without their real-life resolutions. We encourage you to think for yourself about how you might resolve them, since the nature of each dilemma is highly individualistic. In sharing these dilemmas, we do not endorse them in any way, but rather offer them for your consideration.