

STORM IN THE COCKPIT

OPSGROUP





BY OPSGROUP (AND EVERYONE WHO TOLD US THEIR STORY)

Conflicts in the cockpit happen, probably more often than we care to admit. We aren't talking fisticuffs and fights, but we are talking those frosty, sullen, sulky breaks in CRM

This is a book about those moments, in those flights, where pilots - people - haven't managed to get on so well with the human stuffed in that locked door box next to them.

Because let's face it, the cockpit can be a weird place to work within, and like they say, you ain't going to get on with everything.

So these are three stories about times when we didn't all get along, and hopefully you can read them and be reminded of moments where you've felt the same.

Or maybe you haven't but one day, if you do come across a similar situation, it might help you work out how to deal with it - with the human next to you - a little better.

Failing that, you can print this off and have it ready to throw into the lap of *that co-pilot* who you just can't bear to fly with and it can occupy them for the flight so you don't have to deal with them.

TELL US YOUR TALE. We'll add it to this, or another mini book.

Don't worry, we'll take your name out. Send it to team@ops.group





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CHAPTER ONE - THE ESCALATOR TO HELL

They say the Captain sets the tone for the flight and they ain't wrong. I have had ones that set a relaxed, comfortable, friendly tone with jokes and coffee for all the crew. I have had ones that set a strict but professional tone, with a firm handshake and commanding briefing. I have had ones that terrify the cabin crew with tales of hijackings and bomb threats (in an attempt to "encourage" attention to detail during security checks), and I have had ones that set a grumpy, would rather not be at work sort of an atmosphere.

On this particular flight, when I walked into the briefing room, the tone was instantly one of **"you're an FO - how many ways are you going to try and kill me on this flight?!"** It was not going to go well.

The moment I entered the briefing room and shook the Captain's hand the challenging began. *"So, how long have you been with the airline?", "When did last fly?" "When was your last sim?" "How was your last landing?" "What is the weather doing? Can you land in a crosswind? You know what, I'll take the first sector and we will review for the way back tomorrow"...*

I was unaware of this at the time, but it turns out the Captain had just returned to the line following some additional sim training because on his last flight **the First Officer had done a heavy landing, and there were questions raised about why the Captain had not intervened** to prevent it. So off to the sim they had both been, and the rather punitive company culture popped a Captain out the other side with a new attitude of *"All FOs will try to kill you, your job is to stop them"* instilled in him.

To me, unaware of this, **all I saw was a Captain with serious micromanaging issues**, who was challenging me at every turn.

So, off we go, but not before a briefing which is a direct list of things he wanted me to do, rather than an interactive 'sharing of mental models'. **Apparently I was the threat and he told me exactly how he would manage me.** The flight was a barrage of orders *"do this, do that, have you done this yet?!"* while I sat there growing increasingly irate at the constant doubting of my skills and abilities.

I should mention that this is the one thing I don't handle well - having my skills, experience and knowledge called into question without reason.

The first sector over, I spend the layover feeling irritated and grumpy, not looking forward to the return flight, and sure enough, the Captain's attitude is unchanged. He reads the briefing pack at me, telling me what he has decided for the fuel, telling me that he will let me fly the sector. *Telling me...*

I spot a Notam he has missed and smugly highlight it, and later during the taxi **I revel in correcting him on the taxi route, pointing out every thing he misses or mistakes.** He has taken the attitude that I don't know what I'm doing, without giving me any chance to prove him otherwise, so I will do the same, pointing out every error, slip and possible mistake in **a game of oneupmanship** that he started without reason the day before.

The more he micromanages, the more defensive I become. The more he asserts his command, the more I assert myself...

Six hours later, and in a flightdeck sparking with tension, we approach our destination and a sigh of relief slips out. Too soon as it turns out because we are told to hold, a lengthy delay ahead during peak period. And now the Captain has an excellent opportunity to begin lecturing me once again on how to fly. He informs me (again) about how to configure, what he expects me to do, reminding me repeatedly on how to flare, how to not do a heavy landing...

And **something clicks.** This guy has had something happen, recently, and he is worried about it. He doesn't want it to happen again, and **he hasn't seen anything from me to suggest I am thinking about how not to.**

I figure there are three ways this can go. One - keep quiet, accept he has an issue, and let him puppet me down the approach. It probably won't end well. Two - challenge him, assert myself, tell him to stop it because I know what I am doing and I am tired of being questioned, and **if he can't then he can take control.** That probably won't end well either. Or three - **show him rather than tell him that I am competent,** that I am thinking about what he has said, that I am aware of the challenges, and here is how we will deal with them together as a team. *Showing not telling* would help de-escalate this, rebuild the CRM, get us working together...

I go for option one, and with the Captain **pattering and puppeting me** all the way down I get behind the aircraft, we both get behind the weather. He calls flare early, trying to avoid my not flaring, I react to him and neither of us reacts to the aircraft or the tailwind, and we float all the way to the end of the touchdown zone, the Captain making distracting calls, me trying to fly the aircraft via him, **neither of us really flying the aircraft at all.**

Option 3, the de-escalation, the understanding what was going on for him, the not letting my own ego get in the way of building better CRM, and him working with his FO instead of against them - that was something both of us only thought of later.



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CHAPTER TWO - CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES

It was an early morning, cold and snowy, when the Captain turned up to fly. His First Officer - an experienced pilot but one who had been **downgraded from his command because of a company merger**. Office politics - always best avoided - he thought to himself, but sadly they tend to make their way into the flightdeck now matter how hard you try to prevent them from doing so. Hopefully today would be different, and he'd try his best to be supportive given the tough break this fellow had had.

With the pre-flight set up under way, the First Officer says he is heading out for the walk-around, and **dons a dark jacket and hat**, braced for the cold air. The Captain nods and continues with his prep, calling the de-icing guys while he remembers, because they often take a fair old while to show.

Today though, it comes fast in the form of **a big, lime green truck, flashing lights and droning engine**. Pretty obvious it has arrived. The Captain sees it driving around but thinks nothing more of it...

Until the First Officer bursts back into the flightdeck.

"Why did you call it when you knew I was doing the walk around?!" He demands, dripping with fluid from the top of his dark hat to the bottom of his dark coat. "They sprayed me! I'm drenched!"

"I just called it, I don't know when it will show up, but you know, **it's a huge green truck so didn't you see it?**" The Captain replies, without thinking, or possibly while trying to swallow down a laugh.

'This guy - he's wearing dark clothes. Why didn't he put a yellow jacket on? Well, he's yellow now... or straw coloured anyway.' He thinks.

The First Officer continues to complain, voice raised, steaming with fluid and rage, and the Captain continues to wonder how he managed to miss the big green truck aiming for him.

'I guess that's my perspective', he thinks. *'And his is that he's wet!'*

The frost outside might have been cleared, but the flightdeck stays chilly. The First officer is positively dripping with sullen anger (and de-icing fluid) and barely responds except for the most necessary of standard calls, and even then he has a tone of outrage and sulky anger.

They are halfway through the taxi and the Captain, out of attempts to get his First Officer (and CRM) back on track thinks 'you know what, this isn't going to end well'. With a fairly long flight ahead of them he decides this needs to end now. He calls ATC.

“We have a minor issue here,” he says. “We need to run a procedure. OK if we hold position?”

With ATC's approval they stop, park brake on, and he turns to the FO.

“OK, what's going on? Because **I don't think this isn't really about us is it?** I'm sorry you got wet, but I think there is something else bothering you? Are you ok?”

He pauses, watching the FO's reaction. He is still surly.

“Look, **this is how accidents start.** We can't operate like this because I need to know you're here with me. If you aren't feeling ok with it then don't worry, we can head back to the gate, you can call sick - we'll say food poisoning - and you can jump off, no issue, no repercussions. But if you want to talk about this, then let's do it now, clear the air and then go fly?”

There is a long pause, a mixture of expressions cross the FO's face, and finally, a small smile breaks out.

“They really soaked me,” he says sheepishly. “Look, I'm sorry, you're right, I have a bunch of stuff going on at home and I guess this was something to vent through. I'm ok though. You're right. I'm good to fly.”

And so they continue, the flight goes smoothly, they talk, and the conflict - which could have been escalated, or avoided, offloaded or fought back - was resolved into something that was stronger, better CRM and a more human understanding of the fact we're all human and sometimes act like it.



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CHAPTER THREE - CHIP ON THE SHOULDER

It had been a typical day playing ‘standby roulette,’ and I had just lost. A phone call later and I was hurriedly packing my bags and headed for the airport.

It was an unusual duty – I was being sent to a base overseas to operate a night flight to a remote island in the South Pacific. **It was a region I had never flown in before.**

First stop on arrival was a temporary security pass – I’d never be able to get airside without one. It took the form of a bright yellow sticker with the words ‘escort required’ emblazoned across the front. I may have well been holding up a large neon sign that said ‘from outta town.’

As I walked into the crew room, it was the first thing the Captain saw. There was no hello, no niceties, just a roll of the eyes. “Great,” he said, **“another one of you guys. Why do they keep sending you over?”** His attention returned to his iPad.

Awkwardly, I sat down. I had heard about this guy. He was notorious for being hard on FO’s – ironic as he was a brand new captain himself, with a propensity for walking through terminals with his chest all puffed up. It was going to be a long night.

After fifteen minutes of silence staring at the flight plan, he seemed ready to talk. “What sector do you want to do?” he asked.

I replied, “I’ve never flown this route before, do you mind doing the first leg?”

It didn’t go down well. He scoffed and mumbled something under his breath about the ‘*same old shit*,’ and wandered off to talk to one of the flight attendants.

When he returned a minute later, he announced I would be flying the sector.

“What fuel do you want?” He asked.

I answered, “It’s remote up there. How about twenty minutes of holding, and then fuel for our alternate?” I suggested a figure. He pulled a face.

“What is it with FO’s and their ‘mom and the kids’ fuel policy?” He asked sarcastically. Feeling the hair on the back of my neck begin to prickle, and irritation building, I replied

“Well, what would you suggest then?”

“No, no” he stammered, “your sector, your call. Just order it, but don’t tell ops it was me.” **Swallowing hard, my irritation had just become anger. I had done nothing to this guy.**

Next came the cabin crew briefing. There was no introduction as I stood awkwardly in front of a sea of strange faces. I didn’t even have their names – thank goodness for name tags.

As he proceeded to ramble his way through a briefing, he came to security.

“Be mindful about people you don’t know, like this guy,” he said looking at me. “He could be anyone.” Laughing obnoxiously, he slapped me hard on the back and told me not to take any offence.

Too late – I was triggered. I had only spent twenty minutes with this guy, and we hadn’t even made it to the aircraft yet. I’d had enough.

As the cabin crew left the room, I put my flight bag down and looked at him.

“Paul, are we going to have a problem here? Because I feel like you have had something against me from the minute I walked in. If you don’t want to fly with me, tell me now. Because the way things are going, **I’m not comfortable getting in the flight deck with you.**”

I tried to sound measured, but I was angry and my voice was quavering.

He looked taken aback, and his puffed-up chest temporarily deflated. “I’m just giving you a hard time,” he said unapologetically. “They send us FOs from out of base all the time, and you often don’t know what you’re doing.”

I responded “well, I can’t speak for everyone else. But I’m here now, and I will do my best. **But you need to back off.**”

“Fair enough,” was his response followed by mutterings under his breath about FOs and thin skins.

He kept his promise, and eased off. But the atmosphere was frosty for the full nine-hour duty. **Periodically he asked me obscure questions that I could tell were designed to try and re-enforce the chip on his shoulder** that all FOs were useless.

It was only the knowledge I’d not see him again on the roster for a long time that kept me going. I spent more time staring out the window than on any other flight. Thank goodness nothing went seriously wrong that night, because **I’m not sure how we could have worked together if things got stressful.**

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Do you have a story to tell? We like ones that are squishy and human and filled with questions about our squishy human sides that we don't have the answers to.

Send it to team@dangerrr.club

