

My First Trip as an Airline Captain

I wrote this the day after my first trip in command of a US Airways Shuttle Boeing 727-200 on January 13, 1999. I was based at New York LaGuardia Airport, having spent the previous 10 years or so as a First Officer (Co-pilot) based at Washington National. I had to move to the less senior New York base to upgrade. In the airline business the seat you fly is strictly based on your position on the airline pilot seniority list. At the ripe old age of 57 I had finally made the grade:

This turned out to run a little long, but I'm here in the Garden Hotel in NYC with the day off, nothing to do, it's snowing outside, 5 of the 9 channels have the Clinton Impeachment trial on, the Dating Game is on three others, and it's snowing on the Weather channel, too. If you're short on time, briefly, I flew around in command yesterday, didn't damage anything, or accomplish very much either. If you have nothing better to do, here are the details:

Background: The checkout process for a captain on the US Airways Shuttle requires the first 25 hours to be in the company of a Check Captain, who occupies the right seat and is actually designated as the pilot-in-command, even though I fly the aircraft from the captain's (left) seat. Somewhere toward the end of that 25 hours, a representative from the FAA rides the observer's seat in the cockpit for two legs to make the final FAA approval. That took place on Tuesday and I won the Fed's blessing, however I was still about an hour short of the required 25 hours.

Wednesday, January 13, 1999

We left New York's LaGuardia Field at 3 p.m. bound for Boston. It was a largely uneventful flight until we got to Providence, RI, where we ended up having to enter a holding pattern for about a half hour due to "high traffic volume" in the Boston area. Finally got cleared in and landed in light snow. Got to the gate with well over the extra hour I needed. Having fulfilled all the requirements, I became the designated captain for the return trip to LGA, Flight 6101. The check captain occupied the right seat. He said, "You're the Captain now, and I'll be giving you your first Line Check on the way back to New York." I said something like, "Does it never end???:" He said, "Don't worry, you've already passed."

We pushed back from the gate at Boston about 6 minutes late, due to our late arrival and the required de-ice procedure because of the continued light snow. Taxi out to runway 9 in light snow was uneventful, as was the takeoff and flight to LaGuardia. A landing was made on Runway 31 with a healthy crosswind from the right, and I rolled it on. Taxied to the gate and shut it down, completing my first flight as an airline captain. Then the fun began!

The check captain gathered up his gear, and a real First Officer, Don Breeger, replaced him for the next round-trip to Boston. Don, a senior FO, who'll be in the next Captain class, turned out to be excellent help.

I climbed the stairs to Shuttle Dispatch and conferred with Lorraine and Mike as to the plan for Flight 6094. The forecast for BOS was light snow and reduced visibilities, but not quite down to the somewhat higher minimums I will be required to observe until I have 100 hours in

command. I decided on 28,500 # for a fuel load, due to a fairly heavy passenger load, and toted the paperwork back to the plane.

We had a minor loading problem, somebody had a cat in a carrier that wouldn't fit under the seat. I graciously allowed them to put the cat (in carrier) in the cockpit. I figured Lynn wouldn't want me to put it down below in the dark, cold, noisy baggage compartment.

About 5 minutes before departure time, Ground Control announced that light freezing rain had begun. Careful inspection did reveal a tiny drop or two of precipitation on the windscreen, and I wrestled with whether or not to call for de-ice (with no real visible need for it), knowing that it would take them a while to get the process ginned up. Still, the rules require de-ice if there is frozen precipitation. Finally said, "screw it, I want de-ice." As we sat there waiting for them to get the truck started and ready, I heard the Shuttle DC flight and a number of other folks around the airport ask for de-ice too. Felt better. About 20 minutes later, after they'd sprayed the DC flight, they got to us and gave us a shot of anti-icing fluid over the wings and tail. Still no real precipitation evident. As we taxied out, they changed the departure runway, and since I hadn't made the turn to join the line for the old runway, we ended up being #1 for departure on the new one. About the time they cleared us for takeoff, we started to get a few drops of freezing rain.

Takeoff and departure was uneventful. When they switched us to Boston Center, they told us to maintain a reduced speed and expect about twenty minutes holding at Providence. I couple minutes later they said it would be more like 40 minutes, due to snow removal on the runway at Boston. By the time we got to the holding pattern they were talking almost an hour delay. They said the runway was going to be open in about a half hour, but there were a bunch of airplanes ahead of us.

After I dutifully reported our plight to the passengers, a flight attendant came forward with a note. It turned out to be from a passenger. She said her brother-in-law was a controller with Boston Center and if he knew she was on board maybe he could get us in. I figured, what could it hurt? Don asked the controller if he knew "Kevin" The guy said, "That's me!" We said "Judy" was on board and wanted to get to Boston. He said he'd love to help, but the runway was still closed. Did allow as how she was his EX-sister-in-law and that he should have married her instead of her sister.

About every 10 minutes they kept moving the runway opening estimate back about 10 minutes. My co-pilot dug into his bag and came up with a piece of paper. It was a copy of a chart that showed we'd need to leave holding with about 14,000# to get back to LGA. Had I seen the chart before? I allowed as how I had, since I was the fella who originated it a number of years ago. With the weather at LGA going downhill and the circuitous route I figured they'd send us back on, I figured we'd need to leave holding with not less than 16,000# to be semi-comfortable. I communicated this info to Dispatch and they agreed.

When we got down to 18,000#, the runway was still closed, there were 5 or 6 below us in our stack, several already having diverted to alternates, and several other stacks nearby of indeterminate depth and priority. I decided it was pointless to keep holding, dispatch agreed, so I asked my First Officer to communicate this info to ATC. The reply was that there were "ground holds" to LGA and they were doing something to the runways there and he would get back to us in a few minutes, because the BOS runway might be about to open up. I checked with Dispatch and they said they didn't see anything going on at LGA but would check. Came

back they were still landing but there was light freezing rain. ATC was strangely silent, I guess he was trying to come up with a plan to get Judy to Boston. By now were at 16,000# and change. I picked up the mic and in my normal tactful way said I didn't figure ground holds applied to aircraft in flight and I WANTED TO GO to LGA. Old Kevin came right back with a clearance to the normal shuttle route back to LGA. He said to give Judy his love and sent us over to the next controller.

As we descended into the NY area we started to pick up some rain, but the outside temperature gauge was well above freezing so no accumulation. By the time we got down to 3000' it was at freezing and we were picking up some ice on the corners of the windshield and on the wipers.

Note: Below is a Google Earth shot of LaGuardia. Runway 4 and Runway 31 are marked. Shea Stadium is long gone, being demolished to make way for a new Mets stadium but it would have been just off the lower right corner. You can see why going off the end is not a good idea.



They vectored us for an ILS approach to Runway 4 with a wind right down it at 17 or so. By the time we got down to 2000' we could see the runway. About then they closed Rwy 4 for some reason, and asked if we could circle to Rwy 31? They said the braking action was reported good on 31. I said OK, since I had the Long Island Expressway and the airport in sight. (We have a visual approach we regularly use called the "Expressway Approach" and I was in position to follow that familiar route to the runway). As I'm circling around Shea Stadium thinking: "add 5 knots for structural icing, a few more for the gusty crosswind, but not TOO much because the runway may be coated with ice...shit THIS is why they're payin' me the big bucks."

Another roll-on (should be, no friction), braking was good, got it slowed down and turned off well before the end. A two hour and something round-robin to New York. We landed with a bit over 10,000#, which is just about as little as I like. (and about what my chart said it would be, by the way)

We deplaned the passengers, telling them that there might yet be another flight to BOS. At least the cat had no complaints. As Judy went by, we relayed Kevin's regards. She agreed he should have married her. Hope someday they get together.

Eventually, I made my way down the jetway stairs, coated in ice, and looked at the airplane. A lot of ice covering the nose, but since I didn't have my skates, I decided to forego looking at the rest of it. I slip-slid my way to the terminal building and went up to Dispatch. They said I "did good", since there were a couple of BOS based crews still there, they decided to let us go home. I don't know if anybody actually made it to Boston that night or not.

Before I left, somebody found a pair of scissors, and gathered the various stranded crewmembers who happened to be nearby. They proceeded to execute the time-honored tradition of cutting my shirt-tail off (the whole back panel of the shirt actually). You will now find it tacked to the wall outside the LGA crew lounge, where Shuttle folks will sign it over the course of the next week or so and eventually I will add it to my collection of memorabilia. Prominent on the back, below my name and the flight number is the note that it only took 25 years, 8 months, and 14 days to accomplish the deed.

I've got all day today off to recover. Tomorrow I have the 7 a.m. to Boston. We'll see if I can actually make it up there and back...at least once. They're still talking freezing rain early, before it changes to rain.

And that's the way it was.

Cap'n Dan

P.S. As I recall I made it to Boston the next day. And many days thereafter. I still have that shirttail somewhere.



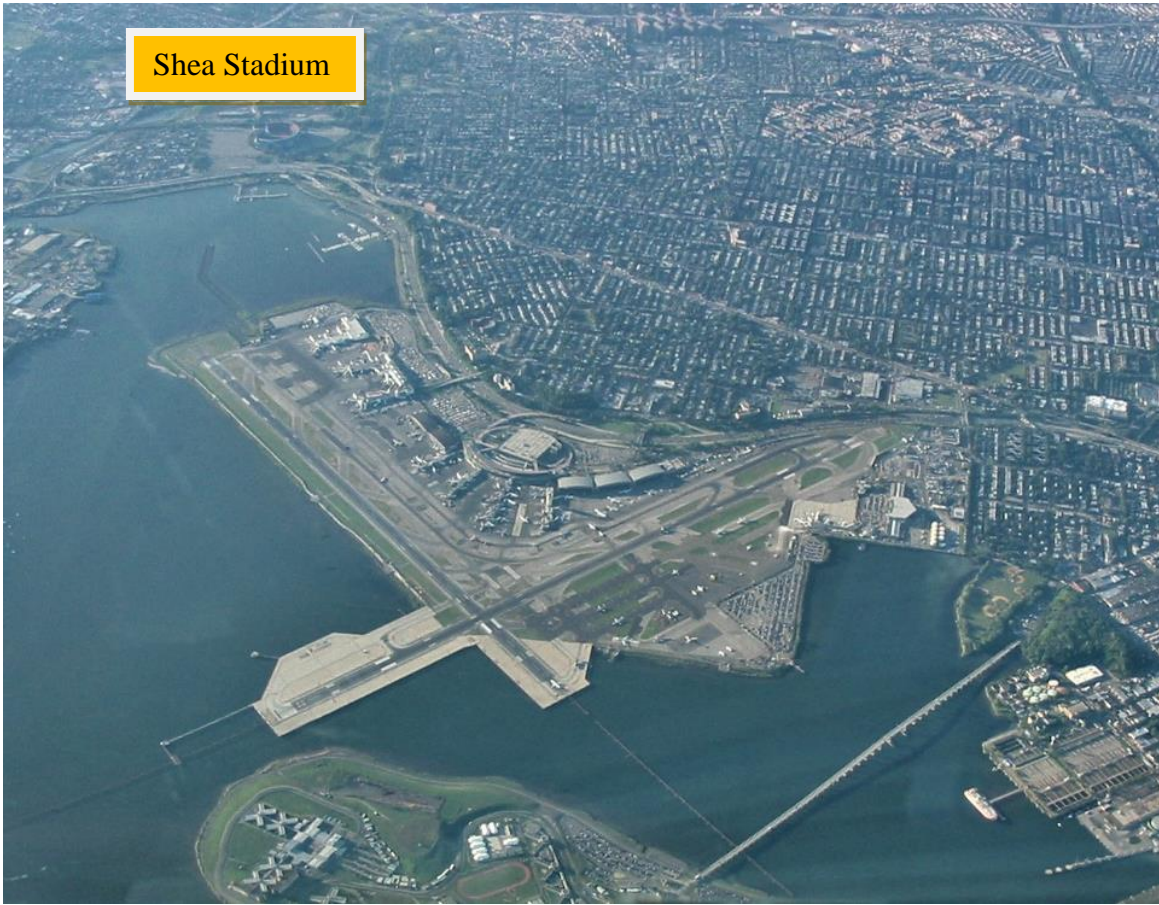
Pictures



US Airways Shuttle Boeing 727-200



Approach to LaGuardia Runway 4



LaGuardia, around 2001. Shea is still there.



Boston Runway 27 approach. (27 is the other end of 9)