

Delays on the Tarmac

Continental Airlines flight 2816 left Houston, Texas at 9:23 P.M. on a Friday evening bound for Minneapolis/St. Paul. Due to thunderstorms in that area, the plane was diverted to the Rochester, Minnesota, airport, 90 miles southeast of the original destination. It landed there at 12:28 A.M. Saturday, and was kept on the ground, 50 yards from the terminal building, for nearly six hours before the passengers were allowed to get off the plane and go inside the terminal at 6:30 that morning (*USA Today*, August 11, 2009, p. 3A).

The aircraft was a small jet with 50 seats. It was crowded with 49 passengers and two babies who had to be held because there were not enough seats. As might be expected, conditions rapidly deteriorated. The babies and younger children cried, the toilet overflowed, the air became stagnant and smelly, and the adults grew first concerned, then frustrated and finally outraged—all without result. One passenger, a professor at a law school in St. Paul, described his reaction: "You're numb throughout the experience, and you almost don't know what's happening to you" (*Ibid.*, p. 3A).

A spokeswoman for Express Jet, which operated the airplane under contract for Continental, later explained that due to the very late arrival, the airport did not have enough people on duty to allow the passengers to deplane safely and get to the nearby building. The airport manager, however, disputed that. He said that the personnel at Rochester were experienced at handling diverted flights and that an adequate staff was present to readily transfer the passengers.

The spokeswoman for Express Jet also said that the passengers were encouraged to get off the plane and go into the airport as soon as government security personnel reported for duty at 6:00 A.M. But the airport manager also disputed that statement. He explained that the government security officials had actually arrived at 4:30 A.M., but that their arrival time was irrelevant. The passengers, he continued, could have been kept within the protected area of the terminal, where restrooms, vending machines, and comfortable seats were readily available, so that further security processing would not have been needed.

A spokeswoman for Continental Airlines, which had contracted for the Express Jet flight, later explained that her airline had a policy to let passengers off flights after a three-hour delay, and that what had happened was unacceptable. Continental, she continued, would offer all passengers a refund for their tickets and a certificate for future flights.

Delays on airport tarmacs, with the passengers confined to their planes, are not all that unusual. The *USA Today* news story that serves as the basis for this case claimed that over the nine-month period from October 2008 to June 2009, there had been 686 delays of three to four hours, 156 of four to six hours, and 13 of more than six hours—for a total of 855 delays.