

Aviation: United pilot arrested at LHR

United Airlines flight 949 from London Heathrow to O'Hare in Chicago was cancelled when police breathalysed the pilot and, allegedly, found him to be over the prescribed limit for alcohol.

Whilst some media have identified the pilot as Erwin Vermont Washington age 51, of Lakewood Colorado, United say "We are not confirming any details about the pilot."

However, the airline does say that one of its three daily B767-300 flights from LHR to ORD was cancelled on 10th November and that the matter remains subject to a police investigation. It would not confirm or deny that the pilot remains in London pending a hearing on 20th November.

However, United told ChiefOfficers.Net "The pilot has been removed from service, and United is cooperating fully with the investigation."

Asked about reports that the police action resulted from a tip-off by United staff, the airline said "This is a police investigation so they must answer."

Whilst sensationalist headlines have played up the event, many using the word "drunk," the reality may be far from that: the prescribed alcohol limit for "performing an aviation function" is approx one quarter of that for driving a car in the UK. In fact, at just 9mg/100ml of blood, it's close to zero tolerance. No information has been released as to his actual levels.

In the usual course of events, circumstances such as this would be referred to the FAA, which recently imposed indefinite suspension on twoNorthWest pilots for being too "distracted" to land.

A spokesman for United told ChiefOfficers' Net "Safety is our highest priority and the pilot has been removed from service while we are cooperating with authorities and conducting a full investigation. United's alcohol policy is among the strictest in the industry and we have no tolerance for violation of this well-established policy."

That's the same as the statement United issued in October 2008 when a first officer on a United flight from LHR to SFO was, according to reports at the time, " arrested after a tip-off by ground staff.

In May, an American Airlines pilot, due to fly to O'Hare, was arrested at Heathrow in similar circumstances, again allegedly after ground staff reported him.

None of these cases approach that of John Cronly-Dillon, an Australian pilot working for Emirates. Arrested at Heathrow as he wobbled and made inane comments as his bags were checked, customs officers smelled drink on his breath. He stumbled as he took off his shoes to pass through scanning. Cronly-Dillon lost his job, his home in Dubai and in December 2006, was sentenced to four months in jail, bringing a career of 25 years "unblemished service to a stupid and ignominious end," according to the HH Usha Khan, sentencing him. Emirates said it was the first time in 21 years that the company's zero tolerance approach to alcohol in its flight crew had resulted in such an incident. The company conducts random breath tests. Even so, Cronly-Dillon, who admitted to knowing he was over the limit, said he would have flown the plane. In fact, he was more than seven times over the limit. That incident, however, is something of a low spot in an industry that employs millions around the world.