

HOLD POSITION!

by **Captain Conor Nolan**

It was mid-afternoon at a busy northern European hub airport. The crew of a departing aircraft were sitting waiting, with engines running, for permission to commence taxiing to the departure runway. The airport is considered a complex one for ground movements and multiple aircraft were manoeuvring from the ramp area out onto the taxi-way system for departure, with lots of R/T chatter. Concerned at the delay in receiving taxi clearance, and already thinking about the knock-on effect of any delays to on-time-performance for the return leg, a degree of frustration began to build in the cockpit.

The aircraft entered the traffic flow and reached a point on the route where they would normally expect a handover to Tower frequency. On this occasion they were told to hold position, switch to Tower and monitor the frequency. They did so, and listened as other aircraft were given priority in the line up sequence. The crew felt that they were being disadvantaged and denied their proper place in the queue, based on their estimation of who had called in what order, and the length of time they had been already waiting.

As they waited in the queue, the Commander repeatedly tried to engage the Tower Controller in debate. The Commander requested an explanation as to the logic behind the sequencing of aircraft, asserting that it was inappropriate. The Tower Controller tried to avoid getting involved in the debate, concentrating instead on managing the traffic flow, issuing line-up, take-off and landing clearances to the numerous aircraft in the traffic pattern. The failure to engage in a discussion with the outbound crew only served to increase the levels of frustration, now reaching a point where it was becoming a threat of distraction. The crew felt they had lost their place in the departure sequence despite ATC assurances to the contrary. The Tower Controller pointedly avoided answering the repeated transmissions, until such time as he could no longer avoid engaging with the affected crew, with instructions to line up. By this time the level of frustration had reached a point where inappropriate



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words were said by the pilot to the Controller, immediately prior to lining up and departing.

Unknown to that crew, who took off and switched frequency to the Area Controller, they had left behind a very distracted and quite upset Tower Controller, whose concentration had been badly affected by the turn of events. As the next landing aircraft approached the runway rapid exit taxi-way, he shifted his attention to the next aircraft in turn at the holding point. Failing to notice that in fact the arriving aircraft had missed the turn-off, he cleared the next departing aircraft to line up and take-off....

Thankfully, the other pilots in the holding bays were sufficiently aware of what had occurred just moments earlier, and there was a collective call to ensure that the departing aircraft did not commence take-off. On this occasion visibility was good, in daylight, and the majority of other operators were locals accustomed to the local dialect and controllers. They were well tuned to recognise that the exchange



was inappropriate and poised to intervene when they saw the Controller's error. On another day, in poor weather, with visiting pilots waiting in the holding bays, the outcome might have been different.

The Tower Controller was relieved by an associate and the rest is history. Reports were filed, investigations conducted and in the spirit of Just Culture, the outcome was that lessons were learned by all involved and these were shared to help others benefit from this experience. This story serves to illustrate how critical the attention and concentration of all involved in runway

operations is to preventing runway incursions. No matter how frustrating a ground delay may be, it is never acceptable to challenge the Controller over the airwaves. File a report, call them on the phone later, and by all means seek an explanation (or let your Company follow it up), but when in the cockpit or at the console, always make sure to stick to the task at hand, namely maintain R/T discipline and situational awareness in the ground environment. And for Controllers, you may know why the sequence must be so, but spare a thought for the pressures pilots are under to maintain OTP, and if you can help by explaining in a quiet moment, it might go a long way to helping everyone keep the wheels turning. 🛫

