

You have asked for memories of the Great YUL Blizzard of March 1971.

On March 3rd, 1971, F/O Jack Humphries and I operated CP 72, a B737-200, from Vancouver to Montreal Dorval via YYC & YWG. Some memories of the following two days are still sharp but others are a little fuzzed over by time, so please forgive any errors.

I do not recall the weather we encountered on our arrival into YUL on the early evening of March 3rd but it should be safe to assume, given what followed, that there were snowy conditions. Our return flight was to be a 07:00 departure the next day back to Vancouver via YOW, YYZ, YWG & YYC.

We were staying in the Chateau Champlain Hotel and it was not surprising that, as we left the hotel very early on the 4th and climbed into our Murray Hill limo, it was still snowing. The first realization of unusual conditions came on the ride out to Dorval. Traffic was exceptionally light. Some of the freeway had been plowed but as we turned off to the Dorval Circle, that road had not been cleared and the driver was beginning to express some concern. By this time visibility was becoming more limited as the snow became heavier. The underpass leading to Dorval Circle, which was to claim a life later that day, was still bare but the rest of the trip to the Terminal was difficult.

From the CP Operations Office with a view to the North, the "Aeroquay" gates were barely visible. We knew then that we were facing an unusual day. The timeline and some of our activities that day are a little murky now but I recall boarding a snow-covered a/c with anticipation of just a moderate delay. Surprisingly, many of our passengers were able to get to the airport and were boarded more or less on-time, but that's as close as we got to the scheduled operation.

The big problem was not so much ceiling and visibility as snow clearing. The snow was falling so fast that the plowing operations were totally ineffective. When it was realized that nothing much could be done until the snow let up, the cabin crew were asked to provide the planned breakfast to our passengers. After the meal has been served and cleared away, we were instructed to de-plane pending improvements. Jack & I spent the rest of the day wandering between our Ops office, the terminal coffee shop for lunch and the airplane. At some point, the airport was closed. Rumours told of unbelievable traffic stoppage on all roads leading to and from the airport. Consideration of crew duty day never really came up because, by that time, we knew that we were not going anywhere. It was not considered possible to get even over to the Dorval Hilton, a quarter mile away. Our crew retired to the comfortable First Class seats on our airplane to wait it out. When dinner time came, we made use of the pre-boarded meals. Later, we all slept in those same FC seats.

Apparently we slept well because, at some point during the night, the a/c was towed over and into our hangar and we were awakened in time to clean up and prepare for a departure at the scheduled time, just 24 hours late. The a/c had been serviced, the wings were clean, and our passengers were bussed over from the terminal. Runway 06R or 28, I'm not sure which, was available as were the taxiways to them. Flight planning documents were brought to the airplane and completed there. The snow was still falling but not heavy enough to be a problem if we could get away quickly. Surface and air traffic were very light and we were assured that the Controllers would be helpful. The doors were closed, we were pushed out of the hangar, started up, taxied out through the narrow-cleared channels and took-off without further incident. Jack & I had our breakfast in the cockpit on the ramp in YYZ.

Marty Vanstone