

Virgin Atlantic Becomes Air Force One

John Wells the producer of “West Wing” contacted Virgin Atlantic to “borrow” a Boeing 747 for an episode it was taping in January in Washington, DC showing “the president” Martin Sheen boarding Air Force One. The request came a day before the show needed the aircraft, which was incredibly short notice. At first glance there was not much to be gained by such an inconvenience as the Virgin Atlantic aircraft would not be seen in the aired version of the episode – it would be transformed into Air Force One when broadcast.

While there were certainly many reasons to no to such a request, Sharon was able to negotiate a “win-win” deal to allow “West Wing” to “borrow” the aircraft they wanted between flights in Washington, DC, to shoot a portion of the show. Sharon had to convince internal executives, airport authorities and gateway operations staff that it was worth the risk to allow the show to tape with less than 24-hour notice and a full flight to board the following evening. Sharon turned it around to “West Wing.” Instead of “giving the plane” to the show for taping, she convinced them to pay a substantial revenue generating fee for filming the plane.

The entire arrangement was created in under 24 hours and was completed with a legal contract. The show’s crew was limited to four hours to create the shot and was off the plane in time for the aircraft to be prepped for takeoff again. A press release was also issued denoting the Virgin Atlantic’s new fame... a story that played well with Sir Richard Branson’s bid to run a domestic airline in the U.S. The Virgin Atlantic staff in the DC gateway also received a big thrill by being part of a major TV show – it turned out to be an employee morale boost as well!