

Where were you?

Message from home

Grim news greets a New York-bound airline crew

BY BRIAN SCHIFF

Air traffic control provided the first clue that something was amiss that fateful morning. About an hour into our flight from St. Louis to New York's La Guardia Airport, the controller asked an unusual question: "Have you heard from your company?"

"No," I replied, looking over at my first officer in the MD-80.

One young man was on his way to New York for his wedding—his fiancée was at work at the World Trade Center.

"You better call," suggested the disembodied voice. "Everyone else to New York is turning around."

We tried to call but couldn't reach dispatch on the usual company frequencies. We soon received a text message on the printer with a different frequency to call. Once we established contact, dispatch asked if everything was OK, throwing in a code word alerting us to a hijacking. I asked the flight attendant how things looked in the back. She reported nothing unusual.

While we were sorting things out and nearing Cleveland, ATC gave us a vector to the south. I later found out that we were passing very close to the United flight that would eventually plummet into the ground southeast of Pittsburgh.

Dispatch kept us updated on the situation as they understood it on the

ground. Meanwhile, ATC declared a national emergency and said that any noncompliance with controller directions would constitute an attack on the United States—fighters would be scrambled.

I chose not to tell the passengers the entire horror story but instead only said there was a problem in the air traf-

fic control system and that the New York airports were closed. ATC wanted us to land at Indianapolis, but they were saturated, so we managed to return to St. Louis.

With all the cell phones back there, I knew the passengers would find out the truth as soon as we landed. With probably half of the 120 passengers from New York, I could only imagine how devastating the news would be. So once we landed I immediately got on the PA system and told the passengers the entire situation, as I knew it. We had a two-hour ramp hold waiting for a gate, but I reminded them that whatever our problems were sitting in the airplane, they paled compared to those facing real peril. As the skies emptied, a potpourri of aircraft piled up on the ramp—full of passengers and

waiting for gates. ATC eventually began lining up airplanes on the now-closed

runways. One runway was left open for the National Guard fighters. We watched as missiles were loaded under their wings—an eerie sight indeed.

To keep the passengers informed, I turned on an AM radio and piped it into the PA system.

Trying to calm some of the passengers, I went into the cabin to talk with them. One young man told me he was on his way to New York to finish planning his wedding, set for 10 days later. His fiancée was at work in the World Trade Center.

One Korean passenger spoke no English, so he didn't have a clue as to what was happening. No one on board spoke Korean, but another passenger said one of his employees did. He called the employee on his cell phone and handed it to the Korean man. Burned into my mind as clearly as the horrifying video of the collapsing towers is the wrenching reaction on his face as he came to understand what had happened that terrible day.

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