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For Everyone Concerned with the Safety of Flight

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Flight Attendant's View of Cabin Safety

A flight attendant supervisor reflects on past experience to provide an insight into opportunities for improvement from the working cabin crew's perspective.

—
by

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Exposure is not only a good teacher, it is a good analyst of past inadequacies and an advisor of better ways to do things in the future. Having been involved with cabin safety for 15 years, I will call upon that experience to trace the progression of flight attendant awareness of issues and involvement in safety, particularly in my country of Australia.

I have decided to approach the subject by looking back over the fifteen years that I have been involved with cabin safety. In doing so I will trace the progression of Flight attendants' awareness of issues and involvement in Australian safety.

Flight attendants the world over now take a very active role in cabin safety, but I can recall a time when they were not expected to have a view of cabin safety.

I commenced flying in 1968 and underwent the basic training which was given in those days. It was the end of an era in our company, Ansett Airlines, for such aircraft as the Viscount, Electra and the DC-3. Our jet aircraft then were the Boeing 727-100 and the DC9-30.

An Unpopular Subject

During those early years I do not recall much discussion of cabin safety issues, and like most other hostesses I was blissfully unaware of some not-so-safe conditions which existed at that time on older aircraft.

An example of this would be cabin crew seating positions. We did not have the regulations governing the crew seats that we have today. The Electra cabin was operated by four hostesses. Three sat in a cupboard, on a bench seat, often alongside their overnight bags. The third sat in a sideward facing seat a few feet away from the others. There was a curtain which could be pulled across the front of the bench seat — a common practice then was to pull the curtain across during take off and landing so that you were out of sight of passengers, and could relax with your feet on the wall opposite.

Crew Seating Considerations

When we operated the Boeing 727 to New Guinea, an upgraded inflight service existed which required that three rows of seats at the rear of the aircraft be removed and an auxiliary galley be fitted. Attached to the floor mounts was a seat for an extra hostess who was also required for the service. That seat was set low on metal legs which were attached to floor brackets. It was a very small seat, not much width and the backrest only reached about eight inches above the waist. The seat had a lap strap.

We operated only one aircraft that had hostess seats outfitted with shoulder harnesses then — most had lap straps only. Most seats were without head padding and many were located in galleys opposite urns containing hot liquids, and cupboards which had skimpy latching systems. Fold-down tables were located above host-

esses' heads in some instances. This was a very untidy environment.

Cabin baggage control was virtually non-existent. Overhead lockers were yet to come — we had open hat racks. Bags were frequently piled high around passengers legs or in cupboards which had no doors or sideways restraints of any kind. On one aircraft these open cupboards were directly in the path of two major door exits.

Evacuation provision on the older aircraft was by way of a non-inflatable chute which was only attached to the door when the need arose, and this was achieved by attaching colored chute buckles to equivalent colored hooks on the door frame.

I commenced flying in a uniform which did include a wool suit, but it wasn't long before we were into the drip dry, non-crushable but highly inflammable fabrics of the early seventies.

Again on the New Guinea flights, we changed out of our normal uniform once on board the aircraft and donned a psychedelic culotte outfit which had yards of flowing fabric with a nylon lining — our shoes were gold colored slippers.

I remember one particular day when our aircraft had a problem with the extension of the landing gear. During the time that the flight crew was attending to the problem, it occurred to us cabin attendants that we were not wearing the most sensible attire for an aircraft evacuation should it become necessary. So, we all changed back into our regular uniforms. Unfortunately, this was a mini skirt, but at least we would be able to move without flammable materials flapping around our legs.

Worrying About Worry

In emergency training school, there was no discussion about accidents that had occurred elsewhere and we were certainly not shown any photographs of burned or broken airplanes. It was thought that this would worry us unnecessarily.

This was a time when it was thought by some that flight attendants should not be any more involved in cabin safety than to learn standard procedures.

But we were uneasy about many things we could see around us. We could see that those passenger bags were a potential problem and we were worried by sitting in galleys which seemed so insecure to us. Without really knowing what to do about it, flight attendants would voice their unease about that skimpy extra seat on the Boeing 727 — and we wondered what happened to our comments to the company about the culotte uniform fol-

lowing the incident I have described.

It was difficult at that time to be taken seriously when questioning a procedure or to know where to turn in order to learn more about what really happened out there when faced with an emergency. Eventually, the way in which we initially developed a greater understanding of cabin safety issues was through our flight attendant association.

Stepping Out

When our association left the umbrella of the pilot's federation and became autonomous in the early seventies, we set up our own safety group with the other group's assistance. Until then, any safety issues were generally handled on our behalf by the pilots.

So it was that the association began to take the initiative on behalf of its members as it sought to enter what was predominantly and traditionally a pilot or engineering area.

I know that many people are still uncomfortable with the thought of association or union involvement in safety. But for the flight attendants in this country, it is a fact that it was through the air crew association that we finally began to be taken seriously — as a group of people who have something valid to say about the environment in which they worked.

In 1975, we heard of a flight attendant union in the United States that had begun a flight attendant safety training course, and members of our safety committee attended the first of many training courses in that country.

Shortly afterwards we became involved in an international cabin crew association and soon found that we shared similar concerns the world over.

The seventies proved an interesting and exciting, if somewhat frustrating, period for those of us on safety committees — a time in which we listened, learned and worked hard to establish our credibility in the safety field.

Our foray into this area was somewhat like opening Pandora's Box. I doubt that any of us knew what we were letting ourselves in for, but once started there was no stopping; there was too much to be done. Gradually, we found acceptance and received invaluable assistance from many people within the airlines and the Civil Aviation Department.

The success of flight attendant involvement in cabin safety and acceptance by the safety community is more obvious today, and flight attendants and former flight

attendants can be seen in a variety of cabin safety positions throughout the industry.

Many airlines have established positions within their safety structure such as my own, as flight attendant safety supervisor, or as cabin safety managers. Former flight attendants hold specialist positions with aircraft manufacturers, government aviation departments and organizations such as the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). The transportation safety specialist for the NTSB is a former flight attendant, and flight attendants also take their place in human factor groups during NTSB aircraft accident investigations.

In many companies, flight attendants have more input into new aircraft galley and safety equipment at either company or union levels, and company and company/union safety committees are in operation.

More to be Done

This is all a far cry from those early days, but I would be foolish to suggest that all is plain sailing — there is still so much work to be done in many areas.

Many problems surface continually and still do not provide us with an immediate solution.

Passenger education is one example. We all recognize the need to get the message across to passengers that they need to understand the environment in which they are travelling, and arm themselves with basic information which will help them in an emergency situation. But finding the most effective way of getting the message across is proving difficult. Consideration is given to the method — by flight attendant demonstration, video, or use of the audio system in the case of passengers who can't see. Content — what exactly should we tell them, and should we include pre-landing briefings? How do we convince passengers that they need to know these things? Education of children in school has been suggested, as has the use of the media by way of community service announcements. Until we can upgrade this area of cabin safety we will continue to have injuries or loss of life.

While on the subject of passengers, cabin baggage has been an enormously contentious issue which up to now has been the longest running agenda item in my safety career. After 15 years we finally have established very stringent cabin baggage regulations in this country, and in others, such as Canada. These regulations allow control of the amount of cabin baggage on board but by no means make the problem go away. As long as people fly, they will try to carry too much baggage, but at least we now have the means for establishing control of cabin items and regulations which enable safe stowage once on

board the aircraft. Sadly, such restrictions are not universal, so the problem still exists in many airlines.

Cabin-cockpit communication has been discussed at virtually every safety seminar which I have attended during the past eight years or so. It still is an area which requires much work, particularly by the application of communication skills.

I believe that company training and procedures must be such that both groups can gain an understanding of each other and a respect for each others duties and responsibilities on the aircraft.

Cabin crew training is of vital importance to the outcome of any aircraft emergency. Many airlines around the world train to the basic requirements laid down by their government regulatory authority, while others provide much more in standards of equipment, lecture time and content. Flight attendant training requirements continue to grow as cabin safety advances, and it is vital that airlines recognize the need to allocate time and resources for the quality training of cabin crews.

I have often been struck by the fact that the four airlines in this country offer differing emergency training and procedures. Surely there should be one good, sound, basic procedure which could be adapted to aircraft types. Perhaps we should get together and develop an Australian standard of method and procedure in our approach to emergency situations. If one airline has a more effective method of fighting a cabin fire, or a better procedure for handling a hijack situation, then the rest of us should know about it.

Securing the Children

One more topic which is of great interest to me is infant restraint. Or I should say, the lack of infant restraint. I am referring to the tiny infant who cannot sit alone in a standard aircraft seat.

Older children can now be restrained in car seats which have been approved for use on board aircraft by various government authorities. These seats give effective restraint to a child but are by no means mandatory equipment. In most cases the parents provide the seat and pay an amount of money for its use on a passenger seat. The tiny infant can still be held on the lap but expert opinion, in both the automotive and aviation world, will tell you that it is nearly impossible to restrain a child in this manner.

Some airlines use a baby belt. This is a belt which is passed through the adult belt and loops around the baby. I have heard serious reservations about their effectiveness, but I understand that no tests have ever been carried

out on such a belt — they seem to be used on a “better than nothing” basis, which does not seem to me a very sound safety practice. We need to come up with a safe restraint for infants and have its use on board aircraft mandated. Until a regulation exists requiring this, it would seem that the airlines will not take the initiative, for economic reasons. Yet the automotive industry in this country went “all out” with regulations requiring use of infant restraints, and this has been accepted by the public. Meanwhile, thousands of tiny human beings are being carried in our aircraft unrestrained. Surely it must be a “basic principle” that all persons should be provided with restraint on an aircraft.

Other aspects of cabin safety which concern me, such as water survival, or the safety of disabled passengers in an emergency, also deserve more attention.

On the other hand, I feel the many positive aspects deserve recognition. These include the upgrading of, and continued research into evacuation and fire and smoke protection, the advent of fire blocking materials, automatic extinguisher systems for lavatory waste bins and cargo compartments, and smoke detectors. Other positive considerations include floor proximity lighting and the current investigations into the provision of smoke

hoods for crew use, and perhaps at a later stage, for passengers.

People Caring for People

As a crew member it would be remiss of me not to mention the remarkable work which has been done in caring for crew members who have survived accidents and hijacking situations. Again, this was predominantly an air crew union initiative which has seen the emergence of employee assistance programs, and many airline companies now recognize the need to ensure the psychological and physical well being of crew members who survive these situations.

We have come a long way in the past fifteen years and there is still so much more to be done in the area of cabin safety. As a flight attendant I am proud that today flight attendants around the world are right there alongside other aviation groups who are attempting to rectify deficiencies and work toward a safer aircraft cabin environment for passengers and crew members. ♦

[Adapted from a presentation to the Flight Safety Foundation's 41st Annual International Air Safety Seminar in Sydney, Australia, December 1988 — Ed.]

Oxygen Mask Demonstration With a Twist

While traveling around the various parts of the world, the Flight Safety Foundation (FSF) technical staff often observes safety practices which it believes to be an improved version of standard methods. One particular instance occurred recently involving the oxygen mask demonstration, which we would like to pass on to FSF members. Many member airlines probably use the same demonstration; however, Malasian Airlines crews have added a helpful tip.

The general part describing the mask and how to don it was consistent with all airline safety briefings except Malasian's masks have a short cord attached representing the “on-off” valve cord. The crew includes the phrase, “Make sure the small cord is hanging free,” and they show this cord to the passengers.

This is a very simple, effective way of demonstrating the necessity of turning the oxygen flow on to the mask. ♦

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