



Hijack! — Worst Fears Realized

Vacationing airline employee experiences being taken hostage in flight and offers suggestions to deal with this dangerous situation.

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by

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I journeyed to India in 1984 to shop and see the sights. My traveling partner, Glenys Jones, was also a well-traveled airline employee. She had planned the trip 10 months in advance, so we were well-informed about the country, its culture and its political situation.

A few weeks prior to our departure, the Indian army stormed the Golden Temple of Amritsar, the Sikh holy place in the city of Amritsar, in northwest India. This worried us, but our contacts at the Indian Embassy and at the air carrier we were flying into the country advised us to proceed with our itinerary of Delhi, Agra, Jaipur and Kashmir — and so we did.

A short time after arriving at Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, the popular chief minister was sacked by Mrs. Gandhi, India's prime minister. It became apparent that the population was showing him its full support. We learned that the ousted politician was expected to arrive in the area to speak to his followers on Friday; we were scheduled to depart Thursday for our return to Delhi on our way back to Australia.

The shops in Srinagar pulled down their shutters and the streets were deserted a few days after our arrival. Roads were closed. The mood was very tense and a 24-hour town curfew was put in place.

Our itinerary aboard our rented houseboat was limited to the main body of water that formed Dahl Lake. While I was trying with little success to obtain information about the extent of the situation from our houseboat guides, the movement of army trucks around the lake towards the city's mosque the night before our departure indicated that the situation was deteriorating. Our personal safety, for the first time, became a concern.

On the day of our departure, we could not go by car to the airport because the roads were closed by the police, so we left by boat taxi about 0830 for the city. More than an hour passed before we reached the dock steps at the town's edge.

An automobile we had reserved to drive from the boat taxi to the airport was waiting across the road. However, as we moved toward the car we saw soldiers wielding three-foot batons who were pushing a terrified crowd that was running straight at us.

The crowd swarmed down the steps and boarded other boats that had been docked at the steps that were then rowed back from the shore. I felt it best to stand still, hat removed, confident the army troops would not charge a tourist who was clearly trying to get to the airport.

Although the troops did not harm us, they did not assist

us either. Eventually, we were able to share a taxi with some other tourists, abandoning the idea of driving ourselves. About an hour later we arrived at a bus terminal where, along with other frightened tourists, we boarded a bus that had an armed escort and headed for the airport.

The airport was in chaos, with long queues of people trying to get on flights out of the country. Only persons with suitcases or tickets were allowed into the building, which was swarming with soldiers — inside and out.

I finally reached the check-in counter of our airline, a major carrier based in India. When the clerk saw us, he moved down the counter and spoke to another employee while he looked at me intently. The clerk returned to tell me that we would not be on the flight we had reserved for — the next flight to Delhi — but the following one, an Airbus A300 that was to depart at 1500 hours. I took our boarding passes for Flight 405, happy to be on any flight.

I learned later that the airline staff was involved in the hijacking. We were moved onto Flight 405 because foreigners would create more international interest.

After a very long wait, and our original flight had departed, we were permitted through the security check, which was very thorough and included a body search and a metal detector screening. When the Airbus arrived, it was surrounded by armed soldiers who remained there throughout the turnaround. I watched the aircraft from the security area. I was familiar with its handling because my own company had four in its fleet. There appeared to be little or no cargo, although the turnaround seemed to take much longer than necessary.

When we boarded the flight, I observed that there were some empty seats around us. We were seated in the aft center section of the aircraft. I was one seat in from the aisle. In front of me, a turbaned Sikh kept looking all around the cabin. He did this for some time, and at one point turned his head so far around that I was staring right into his eyes.

My instincts told me there was something wrong and I became sure something was amiss when another Sikh came to him, leaned across the passenger on the aisle seat, cupped his hands and whispered into the seated Sikh's ear.

Glenys and I were anxious. We looked at each other and I said, "What could happen next?" I knew she was thinking the same thing. I remember thinking to myself, "We

could be hijacked, but I won't say it or it may happen." We gave each other a long and knowing look of apprehension.

Glenys said, "We could be hijacked."

The aircraft took off at about 1600, and our worst fears were realized about 10 minutes later. Nine men positioned evenly around the cabin stood up together, each holding a weapon, and began yelling words we did not understand.

They seemed berserk, and began running up and down the aisles as if they were possessed. Glenys and I clasped hands. We were absolutely terrified. These were madmen and the sounds of violence began. We could hear people being beaten, and then came the frightening noise of gunshots from the forward cabin.

I whispered "head down, eyes straight ahead" because in my terror, I felt the need to not draw attention to myself. I remember that even moving my eyes felt as if it was a violent movement. I complained to myself, "Why do I have red hair? It will make them notice me." So I never met their eyes with my own as they ran in the aisles, screaming the same word over and over, and shoving people. The cabin crew was quickly pushed into empty seats throughout the aircraft.

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My heart was thumping. My emotions were running wild. It was a hopeless situation — what could we do up in the air with these armed extremists?

They all carried a kirpan, a very vicious knife, or a gun. An army colonel, who I had noticed in uniform before departure, was beaten and moved forward. The hijackers also took a passenger's walking stick, then beat him savagely with it. We could not see who else was beaten, but we heard the awful noise.

This period was the most terrifying. The terrorists seemed out of control and liable to do anything.

Later, a hijacker spoke to us on the public address system. He ordered us not to talk, to keep our seat belts fastened, and to do as we were told. He said we would not be hurt and all they wanted was international attention for their cause.

We were told to put all our cabin baggage into the aisle. The bags were then collected and thrown into the empty rear galley. They also demanded radios from the passengers.

Things began to quiet as the hijackers began to get organized. They told us that we were going to pray for half an hour. They said “Cover your heads,” and a hijacker picked up a headrest cover and shoved it on the head of a passenger. We took our cue, grabbed our headrest covers and placed them on our heads.

The prayers commenced — chanting in Hindi. A flight attendant was taken from her seat and given the microphone to lead the chanting. I did not know whether to mouth some words or not, scared that if I did I would be in trouble, and also scared that I would be punished if I did not. I decided to sit quietly.

When the chanting was finished, a flight crew member was helped from the cockpit by a hijacker and he was seated in front of me. His head was loosely bandaged and his shirt was splattered with blood. He appeared to have a stab wound in his lower back. He was conscious, but appeared very weak. He was a dreadful color. I thought, because of the gunshots I heard earlier, “Who is flying this thing?”

The cabin became calmer, and although we could not see past the forward bulkhead into executive class, the apparent leaders were positioned there.

I noticed, by watching the sun, that we were circling. I estimated that we circled for more than two hours. I wondered where we were, and hoped that it was not India, because it was my belief that the anti-Sikh feeling would not be in our best interests.

After three hours in the air, I also began to worry about fuel. Having watched the loading, and based upon the time it takes to fuel my company’s aircraft for equivalent flights, I estimated that the airplane was getting low on fuel.

Then one of the hijackers helped the injured crew member move to the forward cabin of the two-class aircraft. A short time later, we began a descent. There was no announcement that we were about to land, so I signaled to Glenys to watch me, and I got into the emergency landing position.

As we descended, I contemplated what might happen. Would we land on an airport? Would we crash-land? Would this be the end of my life? My whole body felt as if it were on fire. I was petrified with all the possibilities.

We landed normally and came to a stop. The window shades had been closed before landing, so we could not

see outside and had no idea where we were.

The cabin was warm and silent, and Glenys whispered to me, “How long was Entebbe?” I shook my head — I knew that hijacking had lasted several days and I just could not bear the thought of such an experience.

The cabin was uncomfortable and so were my clothes, which were not made of a natural fabric and, which did not “breathe” well. We were becoming very thirsty. A hijacker brought some water that tasted warm and terrible. Glenys said we should not drink it because it could be “off,” but I told her it was better than becoming dehydrated. After all, when could we expect more? This was to have been a short domestic flight where only tea and coffee were usually served.

Later a box of cherries which had belonged to a passenger was found, and a hijacker went to a few passengers and gave them some.

Children and infants were all very quiet throughout the ordeal. I thought they seemed to know to do this instinctively. They had been given the little bit of milk from the galley, but mothers told us that it had gone bad in the heat, so the children had all become sick with diarrhea.

It was just prior to 2000 hours when we discovered we were in Lahore. We heard the hijackers demands — none of which

I felt had any hope of being met — and that appeared to be bad news for us.

I removed the airline magazine from the seat pocket and opened it to the map with the routes the airline flew. I was unsure of whether or not Lahore was in India. When I found that the airline flew there, I assumed it must be in India. Believing we were in India, I felt sure that there would be some sort of violent confrontation. This was an emotional blow and I again studied the emergency exit and tried to determine whether I could open it.

As night wore on, the mood in the cabin would alternate from silence to agitation as discussions were held by the hijack leaders and the guards at the exits. Two hijackers were positioned at our emergency exit, and remained there throughout the ordeal. During these discussions — that were not understandable to the passengers — most of us would observe what was happening. Sometimes things appeared more tense than others, made evident by their expressions and gestures. These were times when I felt they had set deadlines and were angry when their demands were not met.

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The night grew worse for all of us. The heat and thirst were nearly unbearable. I could not get comfortable. Every now and then the air would stop flowing through the ducts and everybody would raise their eyes, anxious for the air to start flowing again.

At 0500 the hijacker at our exit turned on his radio. He had been doing this hourly, but normally the broadcast was not in English. This time, however, he tuned in the BBC world news. We were the number one news item. I thought to myself, "I don't think I want to hear this," but of course I listened in despair.

About 0800, an announcement was made that we would be leaving the aircraft for breakfast. We would be going twelve at a time beginning at 0900 in the following order: Sikhs, Moslems, Indian nationals and Europeans. I remember thinking that if Glenys did not know what the hijackers thought of us prior to this, she surely would now.

The heat was becoming worse, and I did not know how much longer I could stand the discomfort. I was so desperate for a drink of water that I kept thinking of my kitchen sink back home — if I survived I was going to run straight to it when I got home and drink and drink and drink. I was a smoker during the hijack, but I never ever felt the need for a cigarette.

The hour of 0900 passed, and breakfast was no closer. I had prepared for the time when they opened the aircraft doors for breakfast. This would be an opportunity for would-be rescuers. If there were gunshots, I had whispered to Glenys to lie still on the floor and not lift her head. Around 1100 there was a shift in mood as the leaders rushed back and forth whispering to one another. Their expressions indicated that things were bad. I wondered if soldiers were coming to storm the aircraft.

Then an announcement was made to us. It was the only time there had not been one in English, so we did not understand it. The silence seemed to deepen and the mood became graver. I turned to the man beside me and asked what was said, but he just shook his head, his eyes cast downward. I told him, "I must know. Please tell me."

He finally answered: "You have 10 minutes to live. Pray to your God."

It was a dramatic turn of events. I took a few seconds to comprehend it. There was a chance of dying and I spent a couple of minutes in deep thought. It was an extraordinary experience. For a few moments I felt a great peace

and contentment — a feeling that remains vivid and unique in my mind today.

Glenys had a similar experience. She then turned to me and said: "Cremate me, don't bury me."

I replied, "The same for me."

My senses then became very alert as my thoughts turned to how to survive what was ahead — a storming by troops, with explosions or bullets.

The hijackers were very nervous. The leaders were moving in the cabin and kept looking through the emergency exit windows. There was a lot of discussion among them.

One of the leaders stood at our exit row and his eyes focused on a passenger in the seat behind Glenys. He spoke to the passenger in Hindi in a tone and manner that convinced me that they knew each other. Again, I believed a passenger was playing a role in this affair, and I wondered if there were others. Suddenly, our situation seemed even more hopeless.

I was prepared for a violent turn of events. My feet were positioned well under my seat so that I could slip down to the floor as quickly as possible. I told Glenys, "If the shooting starts, hit the deck, don't move and keep your head down." There were turbaned Sikhs all around us and I was sure that any shooting would be directed at them.

The person seated behind Glenys, whom the hijacker had addressed a few minutes earlier, was now moving in his seat and his hands were placed on the top of our seats as he wriggled to obtain a good view of what was happening in the cabin.

I was absolutely terrified by this man and I could not stop thinking that when the violence started — and I was sure it was imminent — he would reach across the seat and slash my throat with his kirpan. Glenys was upset by him too. I did not want to die by the knife. "Let me be shot instead," I thought.

At this point, there was someone laid out on the floor in the forward cabin. A flight attendant, the same one who had lead the chanting, was sent to get oxygen. I assumed that someone was having a heart attack or that it was the injured flight crew member.

The cabin was so uncomfortable because of the heat and lack of fresh air that I felt passengers were near panic.

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Then a passenger, a turbaned Sikh seated opposite Glenys, began to hyperventilate or have a heart attack. Oxygen was eventually brought to him and he was moved to two vacant seats.

All the passengers seemed very alert, as we had been in the initial takeover. Then the leaders walked down the cabin aisles talking and smiling to the guards. Then came the announcement: “We have got our demands and you will be released.”

People started clapping — we did too because we thought we should. “We are not out yet, so let’s be extra careful,” I thought.

Then to my surprise, passengers began to get out of their seats and proceeded to the rear galley to retrieve their cabin baggage. The hijackers appeared to have relinquished control, so we jumped up and retrieved our possessions.

Then we all stood quietly and calmly waiting for the doors to open. I felt sure that they would put stairs to the rear door, but after about 10 minutes there was an announcement that we should disembark through the forward stairs. We began to move forward. It was a very slow disembarkation. Everyone was calm and showed little emotion.

The hijackers moved between the rows of seats and stood there as we disembarked. I became upset as I moved towards the cockpit because I felt sure that the person who had been given oxygen would be the injured crew member, and I was sure that he had died.

As we came to executive class I was very apprehensive and expected to see a body. But there was no body and I saw three crew members sitting in the cockpit. One of them was the injured crew member, who I realized was the flight engineer. I was so relieved I nearly cried.

When we finally stepped off the aircraft onto the stairs, Glenys’ first words were “Air and water. I will never take them for granted again.”

I saw the Pakistan International Airline identification on the boarding stairs and realized that we were in Pakistan, not India.

The tarmac was filled with security, army and medical personnel. Everybody was calm almost to the point of being nonchalant. Couples were not kissing or embracing, and I thought that was unusual.

While on the tarmac, I saw the aircraft captain and I went to him and introduced myself. He was standing among the passengers with some of the crew. He told me that Lahore tower had first refused a clearance to land and had blocked the runway. He said when he reported that he had only 10 minutes of fuel remaining and had no choice but to land the aircraft, the runway was cleared and the tower allowed him to land for humanitarian reasons. The captain also said that the aircraft fuel tanks were “bone dry.”

We boarded buses that took us to the main terminal building, where two temporary security screening areas were set up.

Medical staff and other personnel in the lounge tended to requests. Lunch boxes were distributed to each passenger. Press had been admitted into the lounge (mostly asking questions about what the passengers thought of the Pakistan government). Some embassy staff members were also present. As there were none from Australia, we were approached by British Embassy staff who arranged messages back to Australia. They told us that they had expected the hijacking to last about two to three days, but an excellent negotiating team secured our release approximately 21 hours after our departure from Kashmir.

They also told us about some of the deadlines that the hijackers had set, and these coincided with hijackers agitation. After about two hours in the lounge, we were told there would be an indefinite delay while another aircraft was readied to take us to Delhi.

This experience led to many discussions with police, airline security and training personnel, and I have formed some opinions about how air crews can prepare for such a situation.

There are two types of hijackers — the mentally unstable and the religious or political fanatic. Skills can be taught on how to best handle both of these types and crews should receive this information when initial training and refresher courses are conducted. Although it is important that crews not draw attention to themselves, there are techniques that they can use to help them survive the ordeal better. They should be prepared to handle other problems too.

Crews will probably go into shock. Females may start to menstruate because of the extreme stress. Hostages probably will be deprived of food and drink and suffer in the heat and stuffiness of the cabin. Negotiators may play a

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role in this discomfort to secure the release of hostages because they know that heat and lack of refreshment can wear the hijackers down, too.

Cabin attendants should be alert to “passive” hijackers — individuals who are participants in the crime, but maintain a low profile. This awareness can help security forces capture hijackers who might otherwise escape by blending into the hostages.

When the ordeal is ended, fluids and other comforts should be provided as soon as possible. Most airlines provide debriefing sessions to all hostages to minimize trauma. Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) counseling should be a part of all airline response plans and the right of every employee (March/April 1992 *Cabin Crew Safety*).

In my case, no professional assistance was offered. I returned to work after two days of rest. Although I suffered no long-term psychological problems, it took time

before I could observe someone wearing a turban without fear.

About the Author

Jo Smith is a passenger services training officer with Australian Airlines who is stationed at Gold Coast Airport, Queensland. She also is relieving duty airport manager and passenger service supervisor. Smith joined the company in 1977 when it was known as Trans Australian Airlines.

Smith's experience includes various ground passenger service positions including passenger service supervisor and relieving duty manager at Melbourne Airport, where she was a passenger liaison officer at the time of the hijacking described in the accompanying article.

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CABIN CREW SAFETY

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