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Firsthand:

A PROBE OF COMMERCIAL AVIATION SECURITY?

By Robert Hayden

"Sir! You must take your seat. You cannot be standing in the aisle during takeoff." These words were shouted over the intercom on Northwest Airlines flight 720 from Minneapolis to Boston on June 2, 2007, and the most bizarre air trip I had ever taken began.

My wife, Katy, an official in a national ice skating group, and I had spent the previous three days at an ice skating conference in Minneapolis. Now we were headed home to Boston.

We anticipated an uneventful two-hour return flight. Within a few minutes the plane finished its long taxi to our takeoff runway. I listened to the final revving of its engines and prepared to takeoff.

But now the flight attendant's message caused me to look quickly to my right. I expected to see an embarrassed passenger rushing back to take a seat after a last-second bathroom trip.

What I saw instead was a small, nervous man who was pacing back and forth in the aisle. I noticed that he was sweating. He was small, casually dressed, and he was staring intently at the passengers as he passed by their seats.

I didn't like the way events were unfolding, and I cursed myself for not paying more attention to the appearance of the passengers as we boarded the plane.

Our seats were in the middle of the plane on the left-hand side. My wife was seated at a window. She was reading a book. I was in the middle. A teenage boy was in the aisle seat. He looked down when the man walked by our seats.

Suddenly, three flight attendants converged on the man and physically shepherded him toward a seat at the front of the plane. One of the flight attendants was a male.

Although the man allowed himself

to be moved forward slowly, he gave ground grudgingly. He waved his arms and raised his voice as he got closer to the seat. I strained to hear what he was saying. It was impossible to make anything out. I wondered if he was speaking a different language.

I saw the three flight attendants bend over him. They nudged him into a chair and adjusted his seatbelt. Moments later the plane was airborne.

As soon as we were in the air, a second man began to yell and scream. This person was seated next to the first man. He suddenly threw himself onto his back on the floor. He kicked his legs and waved his arms.

I told the teenager seated next to me that we should swap seats so that I could respond quicker, from the aisle, if there was an emergency.

A woman sitting in front of us started to sob out loud. Several people somewhere behind us started to cry. I heard someone ask, "Are we going to die?"

The mood on the plane had become very tense. The three flight attendants were kneeling over the man on the floor. They were either trying to help him, or get him back in his seat. He continued to yell and shake. The other man had left his seat and was walking up and down the aisle. He was still sweating, and glaring at us as he passed.

I decided that at some point on this flight I had to be ready to help out. I looked around the plane to see who might help me if needed. The man on

I noticed that one passenger was very aware of me. He was seated on the right side of the plane near the back. He followed me carefully with his eyes. As I passed him I saw that he was reading from what looked like a religious book. He was mumbling, and writing in a notebook.



The tension on the plane was very high. Some passengers were crying, some were trying to change their seats. The woman seated in front of my wife turned and asked me if we were going to die.

the aisle to my right was about my age, and gave off an air of confidence. I noticed that he never looked down or away when the first man passed by our seats.

I realized that, like everyone else, I had been staring at the commotion at the front of the plane for the last several minutes.

I got out of my seat and slowly walked to the back of the plane studying every face as I went past. I was looking for anything out of the ordinary.

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When I reached the rear of the plane, I

turned and headed back to my seat. I saw that the man who was watching me had left his seat and was walking towards me. When I was about 20 feet from him, he turned and went back to his seat

I wondered if he was with the other two. I noted where he was sitting, and I motioned to one of the female flight attendants to come to my seat. I told her that I was a retired Boston police officer and that I would be available to help if she needed it. She thanked me and told me she would tell the Captain.

The man who had been glaring at us opened an overhead bin, took a suitcase out and threw it on the floor. The noise startled nearby passengers, and a few women started to cry. Then he got down on his hands and knees and opened it .

It was impossible to determine whether the suitcase was his or someone else's.

When he was through looking in it he put it back in the bin and started to walk up and down the aisle again.

Next he entered the rear men's lavatory and stayed in it for a very long time. When he exited, he went back to his seat. He faced backwards on his knees and stared at the people behind him.

I motioned to the male steward and suggested that he go into the men's lavatory and search it thoroughly. I couldn't suggest what to look for, but thought that someone on the ground could have left something in there to be used against us while we were in the air.

The steward searched the lavatory, and told me he found nothing.

The tension on the plane was very high. Some passengers were crying, some were trying to change their seats. The woman seated in front of my wife turned and asked me if we were going to die. She needed reassurance. I told her that we were going to be fine. I told her not to worry.

I had not taken my eyes off of these two people for nearly two hours. I was starting to get tired. I was anxious to bring the event to a conclusion.

About this time the pilot announced that we were on a final landing approach for Boston. He said we would touch down in about 20 minutes.

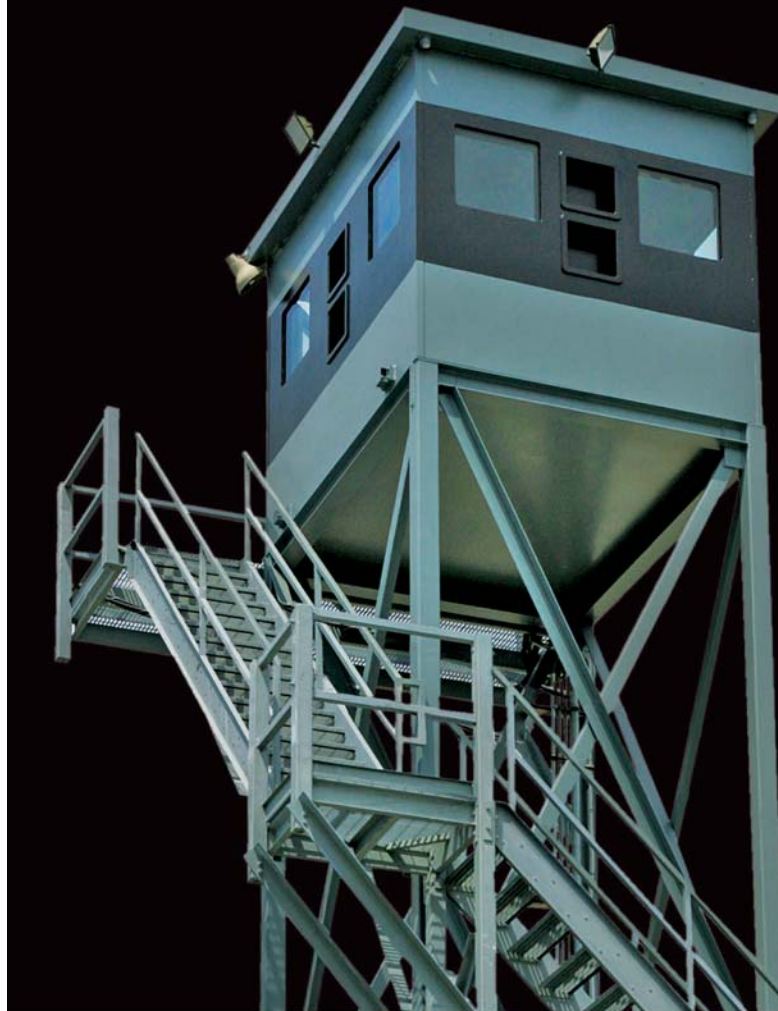
As if on cue, both men bolted from their seats. One lay on his back on the floor and started shaking. The other started pacing back and forth in the aisle again.

I asked the man sitting next to me if he was up to helping me if it was necessary to subdue the two men. He calmly replied, "Sure." I asked him what his background was. He said, "I'm a retired United States Marine captain."

"I started feeling much better about our landing."

Finally one of the female flight attendants waved to me. She had plastic handcuffs in her hand.

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193

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The Marine and I ran to the front of the plane and cornered both men. He put one of them in a seat and belted him in. I did the same with the other.

We sat next to them as the plane landed. Some of the people on the plane applauded.

The Massachusetts state police boarded the plane and removed both men. As we prepared to leave the plane, a female passenger asked me if I heard what one of the men had yelled. I said no.

She said one of them had shouted, "Today your lives will change forever." I did not hear this myself, and no one else on the plane mentioned this to me.

The next day I went to the state police station at Logan Airport to find out what happened to the two men. I ended up being disappointed when I found out.

According to the state police official at the airport, in order for an arrest to have been made, the airline personnel on the plane would have had to have requested it.

In this case no such request was made.

One of the men was transported to Mass. General Hospital for a possible mental health issue. The other man was apparently released.

I do not know what caused these people to behave the way they did. I am not sure whether they were testing our reactions for future reference, or if they were just crazy.

I hope that political correctness and fear of lawsuits will never be in conflict with our safety. Thanks go to the Marine, whose name I never got for helping me on flight 720. •

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Hayden was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1942. He served as Deputy Superintendent for the Boston Police Department, the Chief of Police in Lawrence Massachusetts, Undersecretary of Public Safety Commission of Massachusetts, and Assistant General Manager, Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority. He is married to wife, Katy and the proud father of four; grandfather of seven.

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