

## **Full Ground Stop**

### **Tina Drzal and 9/11**

September 11<sup>th</sup> was already personally a day of dread. It was the day my Father died and every year I felt like I relived the whole awful day. I was in Montreal to host a conference for Star Alliance airline partners. My husband Don and I had flown in Friday to make the conference a weekend get-away. It was, simply, a perfect weekend. He flew home on Monday to pick up our kids from his parents.

It was such a beautiful Tuesday morning in Montreal. My colleague, Neil King, and I were waiting outside our hotel for Patty White, a friend from Air Canada. She had offered to pick us up and drive us to Air Canada's headquarters for our meetings that day. We got into Patty's car and told us "there was an incident in the U.S." (Any type of accident like a crash in the airline industry is usually referred to as an "incident.") She said it appeared a plane had crashed into a building in New York on purpose but she wasn't sure which one or what the damage was. I remember chills on my neck... how awful. I remember questions. Like everyone else when we first heard the news there were questions. Lots of questions.

As we walked into the Air Canada building, the television was showing a live feed from midtown and we could see the smoke pouring from the North Tower. Then, the second plane (we would find out later it was United Flight #175) dissolved into the South Tower. I was in a room full of people but what I most remember was how silent it was. I felt sick, and was sure I was going to throw-up or pass out. As the shock and horror sunk in I could hear people beginning to sob. Patty grabbed my hand. "Oh no, I'm so sorry... I'm so, so sorry."

We got upstairs into a conference room. There was another TV and we saw the twin towers, both on fire. Then the word came down. FULL GROUND STOP IMMEDIATELY FOR ALL NORTH AMERICAN FLIGHTS. That was when my own tears started.

Those first few hours were surreal. Of course, I had to call Don, who was relieved to hear from me. (He later told me he really didn't think I was on either of the planes, but he was aware how airline employees are notorious for finding flights even in the midst of a crisis.) We were on the phone when the twin towers collapsed. "What do you mean they collapsed? What does that mean? They got everybody out, right?" Don was silent... he just let me cry.

Dozens of flights, diverted from their intended U.S. destinations, were now landing in Montreal. I had never seen so many airplane tails before. All planes landed had to be searched and the nightmare of processing all those passengers had begun. I went into

OCD mode. (I don't say that lightly. I have been diagnosed.) It's not always a bad thing, because on 9/11 I needed to be hyper-focused. I had to control what I had the power control. I was the co-host of this meeting and there were over twenty people, in Montreal, because of me. I became the mother hen, arranging for places for them to stay. (Funny how hospitality is at my core.) Thank goodness I had a company credit card.

Thank God, also, for the great people of Air Canada because decent hotels had quickly been booked. So whatever we needed, they told us, just ask. Some offered places to stay, along with dinner at their homes, extra clothes, and washing machines. I soon had found all my United co-workers a place to stay. All these years later, I still get choked up thinking about that day, one of the most touching I had in the industry.

Now I just wanted to be home with Don, Ryan, Melissa, and Noah. Some people thought I should wait because they assumed after authorities had searched all the planes, the ground stop would be lifted. We were all flying on airline business which gave us priority boarding over employees. But I just knew there was no way any of us were getting on airplane for days.

I tried calling to rent a car but, as you might expect, the phones were jammed. Again, my OCD took over. I grabbed my purse and said to another Chicago colleague, "Neil, come with me. We're walking to Hertz." We got one of the last cars available, for pickup the next day. We walked back to the hotel. The conference was, of course, postponed.

During the drive home I had time to reflect. Over the years, I had flown a lot for the company. On three of those flights there were "incidents." Nothing tragic, just scary situations which can make even the most experienced flier feel incredibly helpless. As my plane dipped and bounced I would reflect on losing my Dad when he was so young and think about my kids. What if something were to happen to me? Dying in a plane crash became a real fear of mine.

In January, 1989 United flight #811 was on its way from Honolulu to Auckland, New Zealand, when a cargo door on the 747 failed, resulting in explosive decompression. Nine passengers were killed. Later that same year, in July, the rear engine on the DC-10 of United flight #232 suffered a catastrophic failure which rendered flight controls useless. The pilot was instructed to head for Sioux City, but crashed short of the runway. Though 112 souls were lost, 184 survived, thanks to the brilliant handling by the crew of their severely crippled plane.

In those days, when an incident occurred, Cargo became one of the command centers, handling locking down the passenger manifests and the disposition of HR – human remains. I will never, ever forget flight #232. I had called my Mom after the incident to

tell her I was staying to help with phones. Mom was pretty shaken up. She had heard from a friend whose husband was on that flight. All the lines were jammed with phone calls, as you can imagine, but she knew I worked at United and was hoping my Mom could help her find out if he was okay. I will never forget watching his name be written on the whiteboard as an identified HR. (I'm no longer an employee so they can't fire me for breaking one of their cardinal rules but I called my Mom so she could break the news to her friend. That poor woman. It was heartbreaking.)

I stayed at United for a while, even taking a promotion to work in Inventory Management – the hated department which oversells airplane seats. What I soon realized was my heart was no longer in the job. I kept thinking about something I said to Don in Montreal, a few days before 9/11. We were having another fantastic meal (the city is still foodie heaven) and I said to him “if I had to do another career, I would absolutely go to culinary school.” Don – who loved taking advantage of my United Airlines perk which got us First Class seats – said “okay, but are you ready fly coach again?” We both laughed, knowing I wasn't.

Three days later came the gut punch and the world changed. After 9/11 United laid off a number of people, and our department was left with only two people. My remaining colleague had a medical condition which prevented him from traveling so guess who ended up in China just in time to be one of the first Americans to contract SARS? I was able to return home in time for my daughter's first day of kindergarten, but was so sick my husband had to take off work to drive her. I watched from the back seat as he walked her to the door of school. Then, and only then, would I have Don drive me to the hospital. Laying in that hospital bed I had way too much time to think...

...about the people I knew on those flights...

...about my dad, and this job which, though he was gone, still bonded me to him...

...and about my horrible new manager – a classic micro-manager who apparently subscribed to the idea that yelling was motivational. The day she went on an extra-loud tirade (just outside the office of the president) was the last straw.

I quit that day and never looked back, and have never regretted the decision.

Life... sweet life... is too short.