

Air Tran Flight 297 Incident

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Air Tran Airways Flight 297 was scheduled to leave Atlanta at 4:43PM in route to Houston Hobby Airport. Because of my position as Corps Commander of the ***Houston Regional Community Chaplain Corps***, I frequently wear my Chaplain jacket as I travel. Like some sort of heavenly magnet, the Chaplain jacket invites discussion with a wide variety of people who are struggling with issues in need of a comforting ear. My connecting flight was late and the door to the jet way closed prior to my boarding. So, even though I was rescheduled on a much later flight far from C-16 I settled down with a newspaper and only 1/4th of my remaining cell phone battery.

While waiting at the distant gate, I noticed on the scheduling monitors that Flight 297 had returned to gate C-16 and was scheduled to leave at 5:45PM. I hurried back to gate C-16 in hopes of boarding my original flight after it strangely returned to the gate.

Upon arriving at the gate I noticed that there was a look of solemn concern on the faces of the gate attendants. I asked if I could get on flight 297 when they returned to the gate. Their faces indicated a distinct level of stress that let everyone in the seating area know that there was a problem on board. When I approached them a few moments later I said, "I am a Chaplain. Is there some way that I can be of help?" They said, "No." Obviously, an event had occurred that they would not talk about.

Over the next thirty minutes officials from Air Tran started arriving at the gate, flashing their badges and going down to the plane. After 6-7 officials exited the door, suddenly it flew open and 12-15 people from the flight hurried off the plane. Anger and fear was etched on their faces as they jerked their carry-on and tore into their computer bags to schedule another flight out of Atlanta.



One gentleman confronted the gate agent demanding his luggage be removed from the flight. As I spoke to him he related that when Flight 297 left the concourse the first time it began taxiing to take off when approximately 12 men of Middle Eastern appearance stood up and began dancing and singing in an Arabic dialect. They refused to be seated when directed to do so by the flight attendants. Then, the singing stopped and some of the men took out their cell phones and began taking pictures of the other individual passengers. Again, the men were ordered to be seated by the flight crew and refused while continuing to take their pictures. Next, the de-boarded passenger related that a few of the men gestured with imaginary guns as their fingers, indicating with their triggering action that they would shoot the people on the plane.

The flight crew declared an emergency and the plane returned to the concourse. The 12 men were taken to another area of the airport and questioned. It is my understanding that their luggage was removed and checked. Then, ten of the men were allowed to get back on the plane. That's when the 12-15 passengers decided that they wanted to get off that plane and take other flights. This ordeal had gone on approximately 2 hours to this point.

With much concern I was allowed to go down the jet way to the plane. There I encountered a man claiming that he was from Homeland Security to assess the situation. I related to the Homeland Security man about the claims of the photos and the shooting hand gestures related by the first man to exit the plane and I told him that I was a Senior Chaplain familiar with Critical Incident Response and would wait to help him should the passengers need my help. He said, "Thanks."

The flight crew hurriedly walked past me leaving the plane with their baggage. The flight attendants were emotionally shaken, red faced, in tears and were sobbing. A new flight crew was ordered for the flight. All remaining passengers awaited their next crew, unsure of the ultimate destiny of this flight.

When I boarded the plane the air was tense and filled with emotion. Many of the passengers were obviously upset and at wits end. Often passengers would look back then forward to



assess any change in the suspicious activities of the 10 hostile Middle Eastern passengers. Although my seat was 22D I moved to the back of the plane to gain a better view of any actions that might take place in front of me. Some of the Middle Eastern men were in the Business Class area and the remainder was seated in the back of the plane. They spoke only Arabic and I did not understand what they were saying although a strange burst of laughter would erupt as they spoke.

I struggled to see if these men were merely tragically toying with the emotions of the other American passengers or if they intended to do more. I calmed the new flight attendants and told them where I would be seated if they or any of the other passengers needed me.

I asked the flight attendant if she did or did not know whether we had an Air Marshal on the plane. She said that they were never told when one was on board. I prayed for the peace to handle whatever might happen on the flight but kept my eyes peeled forward for any suspicious movements.

One of the other passengers in mid-plane grew restless and began to show signs of rising agitation. He got up from his chair looked back and then to the front of the plane and paced back and forth between three to four rows. I prayed that that he would not become violent with some of the men but then he quickly sat down and remained quiet until the end of the flight.

One hour into the flight thankfully nothing had happened. The outer skin of Flight 297's body must have radiated with prayers ascending into heaven from the passengers...and the one Chaplain at the back of the plane. Each of the Middle Eastern men remained quiet but frequently went into the overhead compartments to retrieve what appeared to be electronic devices and other packages from their backpacks. I was thankful when the men in the back of the plane appeared to nod off into a harmless sleep.

One of the 10 men from Business Class came back to retrieve a box marked as a Mac Notebook. He brought it to the front of the plane and put it in third compartment on the left of the plane. There must have been four or five airline pilots in uniform on board making connecting flights



through Hobby Airport in Houston. One of the pilot passengers moved the Mac Notebook box to another overhead area without anyone observing the new distant hiding place for his package.

Finally, the pilot announced that we were only 285 miles from Houston and under an hour of time to go. Still nothing happened. The flight attendants appeared to be calming down but the heads of passengers periodically bobbed forward and back, still watching for activity from the men.

Obviously, in Atlanta the officials from Air Tran had been placed in a difficult ethnic position that directly resulted from the inappropriate, threatening actions of these 12 Middle Eastern men. And, obviously vacillating between appropriately removing these men permanently off the plane and sequestering them for the threats they made toward these passengers on the flight...or taking the “politically correct” action of taking them off, questioning them and then putting most of them back on the plane...Air Tran took the easy way out and put most of them back on board. As in most dilemma situations both parties are never equally affected by the resulting action. By putting 10 of the men back on the plane, Air Tran decided that it was better to emotionally traumatize each and every one of the remaining passengers on Air Tran Flight 297 for the remainder of the flight. They had a chance to remove the offenders...but didn't.

Only a few weeks before this flight experience one Middle Eastern man killed many soldiers in the name of Allah at Fort Hood, Texas. This experience placed many in America into a 9-12 state of mental preparedness. Most of us realize that there are pockets of radical Islamists right here in America awaiting either an internal or external signal to strike again at Americans...just as they did on 9-11. The realities of these events can't help but condition our minds for protection.

As a Chaplain I ask myself, would America have been better off if a group of passengers on Air Tran Flight 297 assumed the 9-12 mentality of preparedness and launched a group attack on these men, forcing them into their seats until the plane parked again in its Atlanta International jet way? Were the passengers right to just put up with the obvious intimidation by these men



until the flight was over? And, could it be that we actually endorsed the actions of these men by not taking action against them when they made their first imaginary shooting action toward an American on that flight?

How many times would it take for Americans forcefully to stand up for their safety based solely on the aggressive and threatening actions of these men as people threatening Americans, for them to see that Americans won't tolerate physical or psychological intimidation at all anymore?

Is it inappropriate for Americans to stand together, draw a line in the sand, and say this will not happen to me or any of my American brothers/sisters? Do we not have a duty and responsibility to stand against this type of intimidation?

And this is the most difficult question of all: For those who were passengers that evening on Air Train Flight 297, could it be that we actually planted the seeds for the next intimidation by those who would attack us in our own homeland...by not acting together to stop the intimidation and threats?

As long as there are those who would claim *Jihad* as the proper way to solve ideological differences between religions, countries and civilizations, "intimidation" and "threats" will continue to be the initial instruments of force used against peace-loving people. As we become sensitized to the successive "intimidation" and "threats" we will become less and less responsive in our own defense. Then, as we find ourselves lulled into believing that the next intimidation or threat is just that...it will be an actual attack on America. We will not have learned from the deaths of all those Americans who died at the Twin Towers in New York or at the Pentagon in Washington DC.

Even peace loving Americans must awaken to the reality that our enemies intend to wipe us from the face of the earth through Jihad. Intimidation and threats are merely the precursors to the violence which will come. Ideally, all mankind should respect the beliefs, customs and religions of others on this earth. And, God knows that someday we may actually reach that point. But until that time America must set boundaries that protect its people based upon



what is right or wrong for America and its people. In order to survive as a nation of people claiming American values and ethics, we must stop political correctness as a way to temporarily appease those who would kill us in a heartbeat. It's time we deal in reality and speak honestly and accurately about the facts in each situation. Face it, you cannot prevent someone from getting their feelings hurt when you speak the truth.

If America is to survive...and I pray to God that it does, we must enforce boundaries that define us as Americans. If we don't enforce American values and just bend the truth to make people feel good...very soon America will become impotent before the world.

I believe that God didn't make a mistake when he brought together the forefathers of America. These men were tested and from the fire of the American Revolution a new country was born. Today we can perpetuate our America or we can remember it as a distant dream that didn't last.

I, for one, believe that God did not make America as a mistake. And, from that belief in America, the truth must be spoken as it is in reality. When intimidation or threats confront an American citizen or an American ideal, we must stand together and hold the boundary set by our American forefathers. In truth words mean very little. How we act reveals what we really believe.

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