

## **THOSE SEVEN HOURS OF TERROR**

It was midafternoon on Friday, December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009. Delta Flight number 253 was flying smoothly towards Detroit. Everyone had just finished breakfast, and was busy filling in the US immigration and customs forms. Most of the passengers were watching the inflight – GPS screens. Everyone was waiting to land, as we were not far from Detroit, and reunite with respective families to enjoy Christmas festivities and dinners. The captain announced on the overheard system that we have started our final descent into Detroit, and would be landing in about twenty minutes.

I was on sitting near the rear of the aircraft, on seat 36-C on the Airbus 330. This is an aisle seat with 2-4-2 seating configuration. Suddenly we heard some people screaming in the front section of the airplane. Passengers got up from their seats and ran towards the front. The flight attendants that were in the kitchen area at the back of the plane ran towards the front section with fire extinguishers in their hands.

The captain made an announcement asking every one to remain seated. Nobody in the back section really knew what was going on. People were talking in different languages. Everyone was scared and silently started to pray. Soon, the captain made another announcement, letting us know that someone had lit a fire in the aircraft, but they had successfully overpowered the person, and the situation was under control. He asked the passengers to remain seated, as we would be landing shortly.

Everyone had their own interpretation of what was going on. Nervousness, fear, anxiousness are probably the best words to describe the emotions on aboard flight 253 at this time.

After a short while the aircraft landed at Detroit airport. Looking out from the airplane's windows we could see numerous police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances. The pilot had parked the airplane on the tarmac. The captain announced that the criminal who started the fire and the person who helped put out the fire [who was injured in the process] were being taken off of the aircraft. After waiting there for over an hour, the plane finally moved to the gate, and rests of the passengers were allowed to leave the aircraft.

As all the passengers collected our personal belonging, emptying the overhead cabins, we singled filed towards the front of the plane to make our exit. Near the front

section, we could see some seats that had been charred by the fire. Everyone was confused and scared but thankful that we had gotten off the plane safely.

As we walked down the hall way towards the arrival hall, were directed to pass the immigration booths, go and line up near a baggage conveyor belt. This area was full of government officials from different security agencies along with a team of K-9 Dogs. The agents started walking by all of the passengers with their dogs. The dogs would sniff around the carry-on baggage. Apparently everyone at this point was a suspect. Our cell phones were jammed. Situation was getting quite chaotic, as most of us had been travelling for over 18 hours, no place to sit, no food or water. People were asked to line up if they wanted to go to the bathroom, as the security personnel would escort one person at a time.

Those four hours waiting in the arrival hall, there was no water , no food, people were hungry, Luckily I had bought some sweets and namkeen (Indian snacks) from newly opened Haldiram shop at Mumbai airport, which I had with me. I shared all of them with my fellow passengers. People were happy to eat. In return I got countless blessings.

After hours of wait, the FBI agents showed up. At this point every passenger was interviewed by two different FBI agents. They made copies of our passports, asked us if we had seen anything peculiar. And the finally our luggage arrived. Around 7pm as most of the passengers had been processed, were finally allowed to exit the customs area. When I came out through the sliding doors, there were media crews from all the local news agencies. Everyone was relieved to see their respective families.

Once I reached home, all that was on the news was this story. The details were becoming clear now. Apparently it was not just a fire, but a failed attempt to blow up the airliner. Then only had I realized the gravity of the situation. I am thankful to the almighty God on his kindness to me along with 277 other passengers plus 11 crew members. We truly escaped what could have been a great catastrophe.

As soon as the news spread people started calling me with their love and sympathy. It was very difficult for me to explain each time the same incident. All TV channels were showing the same plane again and again. ***After watching these stories, my mind started thinking if.....***

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