

Let's Roll: A Tribute to the Passengers of United Flight 93

The terrorists had years to plan; the passengers, mere minutes. The terrorists presumed all the weak Americans aboard the various flights they hijacked could be cowed with box cutters and fake bombs. When those cowards targeted United Flight 93 their presumption didn't serve them well. They tangled with the wrong bunch of Americans, and today I'd like to recount tales of heroism, of Todd Beamer, of Jeremy Glick, Mark Bingham, and Tom Burnett, and of flight attendants CeeCee Lyles and Sandy Bradshaw.

"The first American flag flown by the patriots of the early Revolutionary War was not the Stars and Stripes but a banner showing a coiled snake, with the inscription DON'T TREAD ON ME. America's latest war for freedom did not begin with a speech by George W. Bush or a cruise-missile attack on a terrorist-training camp in Afghanistan. It began with a group of citizen soldiers on Flight 93 who rose up, like their forefathers, to defy tyranny. And when they came storming down the aisle, it wasn't the Americans who were afraid."

9:03

United Airlines Flight 175 crashes into the South Tower of the WTC. United warns pilots to "Beware cockpit intrusion." One of the two pilots simply typed, "Confirmed."

9:27

United Flight 93 checks in with Cleveland flight control with a jaunty, "Good Morning."

9:28

Cleveland control hears screams and scuffling over the radio channel. Asks if somebody called and gets no answer. One minute later, a controller hears a pilot yelling, "Get out of here! Get out of here."

9:30

Passengers are herded to the back of the plane. One terrorist, with a red box strapped around him, guards them. They immediately start phoning loved ones and discussing amongst themselves what to do. Who are these "weak and impudent" American infidels?

Jeremy Glick, a 6-foot-1 220-pound NCAA Judo champion.

Tom Burnett, a take-charge kind of guy who was a college quarterback.

Todd Beamer, a college point guard known as a "gamer," the team member who makes the winning play.

Mark Bingham, 6 feet 5, had played rugby on a championship team at Cal (once arrested for tackling the Stanford mascot at a football game!)

Lou Nacke, 5 feet 3 and 200 pounds, was a weightlifter with a superman tattoo on his shoulder.

Rich Guadagno, trained in hand to hand combat.

William Cashman a former iron worker and paratrooper with the 101st Airborne.

Alan Beaven, 6 feet 3, a rock climber and former Scotland Yard prosecutor

Flight attendant CeeCee Lyles had been a detective with the Ft. Pierce, Florida police force.

Linda Gronlund, a lawyer, had a brown belt in karate.

Lauren Grandcolas had organized a skydiving expedition. On her fridge she had a note, GET BUSY LIVING OR GET BUSY DYING.

There was even a pilot among them: Don Greene, who, with the right instructions from ground control might have been able to land the Boeing 757.

9:36

United Flight 93 makes a hairpin turn west of Cleveland and heads southeast toward, D.C.

Deena Burnett was preparing breakfast for her three girls in San Ramon, CA when the phone rang. It was Tom. He told her they were being hijacked and told her to call the authorities. Deena called the FBI. She was on the phone with them when her call waiting beeped. This time Tom told her the hijackers were in the cockpit. Deena told Tom about the World Trade Center.

Jeremy Glick called his wife Lyz. He described "three Iranian-looking men" wearing red headbands and said they had a bomb. Lyz panicked for a moment when she heard the word 'bomb.'" For several minutes husband and wife said "I love you" over and over. Jeremy asked Lyz if it was true, as other passengers were saying, that the WTC had been attacked. Lyz told him about it. Lyz asked Jeremy if the hijackers had machine guns. "No machine guns, just knives."

Todd Beamer's call, at 9:45, was routed from an Airfone to operator Lisa Jefferson at GTE's Customer Center in Oakbrook, Illinois. Lisa and Todd were all business until the plan lurched and bobbed (some speculate the terrorists, knowing the passengers were up to something, were attempting to knock them off their feet and frighten them). For a moment his composure cracked, "Jesus we're going down." Then he steadied. "We're coming back up." "Lisa," he said suddenly. "Yes?" responded Jefferson. "That's my wife," said Beamer. "Well, that's my name, too, Todd." "Oh, my God. [pause] I don't think we're going to get out of this thing. I'm going to have to go out on faith." Jefferson tried to comfort him. Todd made Jefferson promise to call his wife if he didn't make it home. He told her about his little boys and the new baby on the way. Then he said the passengers were going to try to jump the hijackers. "Are you sure that's what you want to do, Todd?" "It's what we have to do." He asked her to pray with him.

Sandy Bradshaw's husband, Phil, could hear a group of men reciting the 23rd Psalm in the background. "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Sandy told Phil, the flight attendants were filling pots with hot water to throw on the hijackers. "It's time to go now, we're running up to first class."

CeeCee Lyles was telling her husband, Lorne about the situation. They were saying their good-byes when suddenly Lorne heard screaming, and CeeCee yelled, "They're doing it! They're doing it!"

Tom Burnett called Deena for a fourth time. "We're going to do something," said Tom. Deena pleaded with him to sit down and not draw attention to himself. "If they are going to run this plane into the ground, we're going to do something." Deena told him she loved him and asked what else she should do. "Just pray, Deena, pray." He hung up.

Todd Beamer and Lisa Jefferson prayed the Lord's Prayer. "Jesus help me!" he said, then Jefferson heard him recite the 23rd Psalm and say, "Are you guys ready? Let's roll."

"Beginning at 9:57 the cockpit voice recorder began to pick up the sounds of a death struggle. There is the crash of galley dishes and trays being hurled, a man's voice screaming loudly. The hijackers can be heard calling on each other to hold the door. One of the passengers cries out, "Let's get them!" More crashing and screaming. In a desperate measure to control the rebellion, a hijacker suggests cutting off the oxygen. Another one tells his confederates to "take it easy." The end is near. The hijackers can be heard talking about finishing off the plane, which has begun to dive. The hijackers cry out, "God is great!" The cockpit voice recorder picks up shouting by one of the male passengers. It is unclear whether the passengers have breached the cockpit or are just outside the door. Eyewitnesses on the ground in Somerset County, PA, saw the plane rocking from side to side as it plunged to earth. United Flight 93 was about 20 minutes from the Whitehouse when it crashed.

On September 15, Lisa Beamer and Lisa Jefferson had a tearful conversation. Jefferson told Beamer that her husband had been calm and matter-of-fact. Lisa Beamer was relieved; she had not wanted her husband to die in terror. Actually, Todd had been afraid. They all had been deathly afraid. More than once, he cried out for his Savior. But Beamer, like so many other passengers and crew aboard United Flight 93, overcame his fear. They did not wait to die. They went out fighting and by doing so they may have saved countless others and spared the Whitehouse from death and destruction. And the fifty foot crater United Flight 93 left in that PA hillside was the first strike of our war on global terrorism.

Lisa Beamer found this Teddy Roosevelt quotation on a piece of paper at the bottom of the in-box on Todd's den office:

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena . . . who strives valiantly, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in worthy causes.

For the rest of my life I'll associate the words "Let's roll" with Todd Beamer and the others who spent themselves denying terrorism on United Flight 93. I hope that, in part because of this tribute, that association is etched also in your hearts and minds.

(This speech is based, in large part, on a November 26, 2001 *Newsweek* article, "The Real Story of Flight 93.")