

911: My Story

While we each have our own individual story of where we were and what we were doing on September 11, 2001 and beyond, I want to capture my account of being a “stranded yank” in Canada. This effort represents my need for closure, a way to capture the “extraordinary” so that I can get back into the “ordinary” activities of my life. Hopefully, it also will serve as an invitation for you to share your own individual experience.

I had been airborne for just over an hour on U S Air flight #335 from Brussels at the time of the first attack. Four or so hours later, the pilot informed us that we had experienced higher-than-predicted head winds and, although we certainly had enough fuel to reach our destination of Philadelphia, we would be going into our fuel reserve and he did not like to do that. Therefore, we were going to land in (Moncton, New Brunswick) Canada where the ground crew was prepared to take 45 minutes to add the necessary fuel before we would continue on our way. (I think the 45 minute timeframe was geared to allay the anxieties of the majority of the passengers who were scheduled to make connecting flights in Philadelphia.)

Once we landed at 1:30pm EST, I asked a flight attendant if I could use my cell phone. After consulting the captain she said, “Not yet”. Then the captain announced that he had actually told us “a little white lie” about the reason for the premature landing. The real reason was because “America was under attack” and all airports had been closed. He added that the twin towers of the World Trade Center had been destroyed and a portion of the Pentagon had also been hit. It seemed totally surreal. The actual words he was using did not even seem to fit into the same sentence! He also indicated that U S Air had already begun to contact our homes to alert our families of our diversion to Canada. Since I live alone, I realized that none of my family members were aware so I became especially eager to be in contact with at least one of my daughters. I tried to call Debbie’s phone number (which I could remember) but couldn’t get a strong enough signal on my cell phone. Now I was beginning to really feel distant. Paul, a fellow passenger let me use his cell phone and I was absolutely thrilled to actually talk to Debbie. So was she! She also described some of the specifics of the horrific events of the morning.

The mood on board was a quiet, cautious anxiety. Significant concern and curiosity seemed to be primary. I hugged a man who was very quietly crying and I saw an older man in first class saying his rosary.

We were also informed by the Captain that we did not know how long we needed to be on the ground but that we had food and water plus sufficient systems to remain on board comfortably. He also encouraged us to listen to BBC via our headsets for more details. I think it was about 2:30pm by this time. After an hour or so, it was decided to serve our second meal which provided another form of comfort as well as a distraction. I’m not at all sure if we were hungry but we also had no idea about when or where our next meal would be.

Two hours or so after landing, about 3:30pm EST, we were allowed to deplane and were directed toward a large hanger at the airport. Entering the hanger, we were directed to walk across a wet rubber floor mat very deliberately with both feet. We later learned that the “liquid” was vinegar to avert mad cow disease in Canada.

In the hanger, chairs had been arranged theater style to accommodate the 2000 or so passengers from the 10 international flights that had landed at this small airport. The head of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police welcomed us and also noted that as we were to begin to watch CNN on the large screen television provided, the images we were going to be seeing would be very disturbing. His sensitivity was a beginning to the many kindnesses we were to experience over the next few days.

We were seated in specific flight groupings which accented the way that flight attendants from the different airlines were attentive to everyone, not just their own flights. Smokers who were being really challenged by this unexpectedly extended time were allowed to go outside where an area was roped off for them and for anyone else who just wanted to be outside. We were already becoming a caring community.

The Red Cross was also quite present and attentive. Volunteers helped in so many ways, from the simple effort of handing out bottles of water to assisting a woman in pain named Inga. She and I had shared the middle section of the bulkhead or first row in coach class on board. She had been physically uncomfortable during the flight as a result of having had elective surgery in Belgium the day before so we decided to ask if she could lie down. In response, they not only provided a cot but also alerted paramedics who were specifically focused on her comfort and care. They suggested strongly that she go to a local hospital in case she needed medical attention. There she could also be assured of a bed for the night since that was still a question for all the others of us unexpected “guests”. I was asked if I would be willing to go with her to the hospital because the flight attendant thought that I was her mother. I would certainly have gone but Inga didn’t feel that it was necessary. A form of customs clearance was devised for her to leave and she was then taken to the hospital.

Soon afterward, I became really excited when my cell phone rang and it was Debbie. I would not have known that her call could be received even if I could not initiate a call. We had a wonderful chat comparing notes and reminding one another of how much we matter to each other. Later, my Annie also called and I used all my “juice” talking to my daughters. I had only brought along my cell phone with the expectation that once I landed in Philadelphia on my return after being gone for over a week, I could call for my voicemail messages immediately. I had no expectation that I would need my charger so I did not have it with me.

About this same time, the local MacDonald’s arrived with boxes of chicken McNuggets and French fries. I had never eaten McNuggets but they sure tasted good then.

It was now @ 5:00pm EST. The process of clearing customs was organized per arrival sequence for each flight. I think it was @ 7:30pm EST when my flight, the third to have

landed in Moncton, was directed to go to buses to be taken to another part of the airport to clear customs. We were also required to go through a security checkpoint because we were also considered to be suspects! After both processes, we were loaded onto buses again for the 10 minute drive to the Coliseum, a hockey rink. We heard the last part of Bush's address on the ride. It was now about 9:15pm EST.

The Canadian hospitality was in full evidence as we arrived. We were welcomed by a Red Cross representative who came on the bus to outline the procedure of registration, etc. We walked into the building through an aisle of people saying welcome, handing out bottles of water and offering food. Even a boy scout troop was present in case we needed help with luggage. I felt really fortunate to have arranged my packing so as to be able to carry-on all my "stuff" because no baggage that had been checked was made available during the entire time in Canada. In fact, the planes were very carefully checked, including the baggage, at some point before our later departure.

Registration reminded me that I was indeed a displaced person for the first time in my life. I was also reminded that I was only being inconvenienced while many other lives were being changed by the events of the day.

After registration, I was directed to another area where local people who were willing to open their homes to us, were being matched with stranded passengers. In the line behind me was a man from my flight. An individual approached us and said that he had room for us. At first I was relieved but then began to wonder if a misunderstanding could be present. So, I asked the potential host if I could ask a question about the accommodation, specifically, was he providing two beds. He said "yes". Again, I felt relief. But I then wondered if those two beds were also in two rooms so I asked that additional question. He said "no, they're in the same room". At this point, I began to feel the unusual nature of the situation but determined and then indicated that the arrangement was not comfortable for me. Standing nearby was a woman, Carol, who was willing to host passengers and she approached me and said that she had had a private room that I could use. A couple, Joe and Peggy, who had been on a TWA flight from London, happened to approach this point at the same time and were also offered a haven by Carol. In a matter of minutes, we were in her car going "home". We were absolute strangers now united in our need and her welcome compassion. We learned that she is a minister who decided to come to the coliseum to offer her home to stranded passengers. She was on her way home after being at her church organizing ways for her congregation to help since, we learned later, so many just wanted to do something.

Her husband, Merlin, was also very welcoming when we arrived at their home. It was now 10:30 EST (but, given our travel, was 3:30am EST for Joe, Peggy and me, so just getting to bed was our immediate goal). Carol said that she would take us back to the coliseum for the next morning's briefing.

We awoke to a splendid breakfast that Carol and Merlin had prepared for us. After a grace that included gratitude for much more than the food we were about to enjoy, we began to share where we had been, why we had traveled, etc. I was amazed to learn that

Joe and Peg, who had been visiting her son in London, live in Jackson, Mississippi where my brother Allen and his wife Rita live! Joe and Peg had each retired in California and decided to go to live in some warm place that promised a quality lifestyle. They identified Jackson and, in 1997, moved without even having a place to live. They now own and run two coffee “stations” called “Jackson Java” in two area hospitals. It is very likely that my sister-in-law, a nurse, has at least enjoyed their coffee! Small world! We also learned that Carol is a minister and that she and Merlin had just celebrated their 35th anniversary. They have been living in this very comfortable home which they had designed, since 1969.

Getting back to the coliseum was another reminder of the significant commitment of this community to help. As I would say “thank you” for the food, the services, the cell phones, the computers, etc., which were all made available to us at no charge, the consistent response was “It’s the least we can do”. I was so amazed and heartened by their sincere generosity of spirit.

It had been realized that none of us had planned to be in Canada so therefore we didn’t have Canadian money which was one of the reasons to make food and the other services available. I guess they could also have arranged a way for us to exchange money but instead they treated us like welcome, however unexpected, guests.

The delayed briefing was limited in information but impressive in terms of panel members. The heads of the airport, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Red Cross, plus the mayor were all present and eager to be helpful. It was suggested that the two Canadian flights would be allowed to continue to their destinations later that evening but that there was no information yet about the other flights. Another briefing was scheduled for 3:30 that afternoon. So, we “entertained” ourselves with more food and also with standing in lines to use the cell phones and computers to check our individual emails.

At this time, I met a delightful couple who live in and were on their way back to Montreal. I had recently been there to attend a workshop that we determined was held very close to his office. He’s a periodontist who, as a resident of Montreal, also speaks fluent French. I asked him if he’s always spoken French and he said “No” since he grew up in Detroit!

At @ 12:30pm, I was finally at a computer to check my email when we were all evacuated from the building. The unmentioned at this point was that it must have been the result of a bomb threat. Indeed, that was accurate, we later learned. In fact, the threat had been made from a phone inside the building. Again Red Cross volunteers were walking among us providing water, food and even suntan lotion. I commented at one point, that if we were to keep on drinking so much water we would need portable toilets soon. A Red Cross volunteer was nearby and noted that they would be arriving any minute...and they did! In addition, a truck hauling portable stadium seating was brought as a place for us to sit. Picnic tables were brought out from near the building and the blankets used the night before by those who slept on the floor now became used as “picnic” blankets. Daniel decided to take off his shirt to enjoy lying in the sun. An

especially delightful “senior” male volunteer came over and remarked that he wished he had as much hair on his chest. I didn’t learn his name but in his own way this volunteer was very much enjoying the role of “pixie” going around spreading light-heartedness via his “pixie dust”. I was reminded of my Daddy who ever interacted with others in a similar way.

Again I enjoyed chatting with others and sharing stories. I mentioned that while standing in a line earlier, a Red Cross volunteer walked along the line asking if any of us needed socks or underwear. Paul, the passenger who had let me use his cell phone while still on board the day before, said that his wife had suggested to him that he simply turn his shorts inside out! I later learned that a local company had even brought baseball caps with their logo to be used as protection against the sun. I would have loved one of those as a souvenir!

At @ 3:00pm, the “all clear” signal was given and we realized that once again the Canadian sensitivity had been evident since we had not even seen the bomb squad, their dogs, etc. They had entered through the front of the building. We were all evacuated out of the back.

As I re-entered the building, I went quickly and directly to the computers so I could get back to my email. I wanted to let Debbie and Annie know that they could very likely reach me by phone at Carol’s home that evening since it was becoming more and more obvious that we were going to spend another night in Canada and she had sincerely offered to host the three of us again if needed.

I realized that I had not journaled since we had landed so in this interim of time I found a quiet spot to begin to capture my thoughts. I noted that it was 2:45pm EST, what Mother calls “wishing time”, when the hands of a clock are outstretched. It was ever so easy to wish that none of the tragedy had occurred. My primary reflection was gratitude. I was becoming even more aware that while my life was temporarily inconvenienced, so many, many other lives were totally changed. I also realized that the very significant care and attention of the Canadians represented a balance that countered the horrific events of the day before. I also began to consider how I could perhaps lead a sing-along to add another dimension of hope and release to our situation. I thought I would start with “Kum-ba-ya” and then let others decide on the many other possibilities we could sing together, including American patriotic selections.

At 3:15pm, the afternoon briefing updated us that the Canadian flights were going to continue their journeys that evening but that there was no indication yet about when the international flights would be departing. We were encouraged to contact our “billets” again to make arrangements for the night. We were also given a hotline number to call the next day to learn when our individual flights would be scheduled for departure.

Wandering about talking to others was ever a delight for me. One individual I approached was wearing a Roman collar and I asked him if he were “having a lot of business”. He responded that “yes” he had and that he also was making a point of

isolating those who seemed alone. I asked if he were connected to a specific church and he explained that indeed he was in-between churches at this time. A few years before, he had thought that he wanted to be out of the ministry and so became a full time employee of New Brunswick Telecom (the organization that was making cell phone available to us as stranded passengers to call around the world at no cost). For the last several weeks he has been in the process of interviewing with Anglican churches since he had realized how much he missed ministry. We chatted about his options and the learning's from a recent, interesting interview he had recently experienced with a panel from one of the churches. He had decided the day before that more than being at his job, he wanted to be at this coliseum. When he proposed that idea to his management he was informed that he had their support "to do what he needed to do".

Supper began to arrive. One restaurant was represented by their uniformed chefs and staff who set up tables, covered them with bright yellow tablecloths and began serving soup, some other entrée, a delicious vegetable lasagna and a fresh green salad. Delightful! There were also several home-made pasta dishes along with the constant presence of water, fruit juices, coffee, tea and donuts (from the local chain of Jim Horton's Coffee Houses). Barrels of Kentucky Fried Chicken and many other chains were also present as well as a Chinese restaurant. Earlier for lunch, I had also quite enjoyed a splendid beef stew that I learned had come from the best steak restaurant in Moncton! (My brother was shocked to learn that I had enjoyed the beef since I rarely eat it! Given unusual situations I suppose we can also expect unusual results!)

Joe and Peg and I had contacted Carol again to ask if we could again enjoy her hospitality. She seemed actually pleased to be able to help again and indicated that she would come pick us up by 6:30pm, Moncton time, which, in fact, she did.

On our way home, Carol indicated that she needed to go to a nursing home where her mother lives to pick up some flowers that had been delivered there by one of her daughters. The flowers were their anniversary gift. We offered to also go with her to meet her mother. She was really delighted with our suggestion. She brought us to a "community room" where two women were playing dominoes and with a resident nurse's aid were watching the news on television. Carol introduced us as stranded passengers (we had become a form of celebrity in this small town) which seemed to make the experience that much more real for them. We were asked where we were from, where we had been, etc. It was really a delightful experience. We also had the chance to talk with Carol's mother briefly as well.

While Joe and Peg wanted to visit a quaint coffee shop in the area that evening, I really wanted to be back "home" at Carol's to talk on the phone, which is one of my favorite activities at any time!

In between everything, we watched television. It was still seeming surreal but the specific goodness and easy generosity of the people of Moncton were constant and welcome experiences of gentleness.

The next day, Thursday, Carol needed to complete her planning with three other ministers for a Prayer Service that evening. Merlin also needed to be away and they allowed Joe, Peg and I to be at their home for what we thought was going to be the morning. The hotline number had been helpful in providing information about departure times but the delays began to be the norm. Carol came home and suggested that we might like to get out for lunch as a change. As we drove around, I noticed the many flags at half-mast which felt like a very supportive gesture on the part of our neighbors to the north!

More television that afternoon plus the opportunity to get on email at the home of a neighbor of Carol's made the time pass quickly. At 6:30, Carol needed to be at the church for the service. Joe, Peg and I had already determined that we would like to also attend. Both Carol and Merlin seemed proud to introduce us to others as their guests for the past two event-filled days. We were even introduced by name to the assembled congregation at the beginning of the service. I was very touched to see an American flag draped over the pulpit and several people dressed in red, white and blue.

Immediately after the service, I was brought to the airport to begin the process checking in prior to boarding. My flight was now #8918 to indicate some special category and was scheduled to depart at 11:00pm, Moncton time. It was so good to also see my fellow passengers and learn about their individual experiences of kindness. Inga was feeling healthy and energetic and had somehow been given two Canadian pins. She gave me the second one. The Red Cross was again present and attentive to our needs. They were amazing in their genuine concern and ready hospitality.

At 1:00am Moncton time, Friday morning, we were still going through the process when the Mayor of Moncton came to say goodbye and thanks for our cooperation. Imagine! She also distributed little Moncton pins which, along with the Canadian pin, I have worn proudly since my return.

After we had all boarded, the head of the airport came on board to say goodbye and thanks to us. Imagine, he was thanking us! He also encouraged us to return at a happier time and remember to enjoy their lobster!

A flight attendant suggested that we each capture our stories and send them to her to compile. She also suggested that we send a postcard from our individual home areas to the city hall as a thank you for their enormous generosity.

At 2:00am, Moncton time, we lifted off and were so happy to land in Philadelphia at 2:45am, EST.

I experienced yet another generosity when the family of another passenger, Tom, took me home. It was 4:00am on Friday the 14th.

My trip was finally ended physically but because I felt “on hold” while in Canada not knowing really when or how I was going to be able to return home, my emotional journey had just begun.

I now have tasks to accomplish that I welcome such as—

Writing a letter to the President of U S Air to alert him to the totally professional and caring way that our flight crew managed throughout the experience. I learned from the flights as we were all sharing our stories during the waiting in the lounge area before departing for Philadelphia that during the 4.5 hours that we were airborne they did not know whether or not we might also be a potential flight to be hijacked. During the flight, the flight attendants had quietly but definitely removed the fire extinguishers to be used as defense if necessary and had also made a pact among themselves that it was absolutely going to be over their dead bodies that anyone would get to our cockpit!

Writing a letter to the President of New Brunswick Telecom to thank him for both the use of cell phones and the kind assistance of his many employees.

Sending donations to Carol’s church and to the Canadian Red Cross.

Realizations include the following:

1-- I’m ashamed to report that I was not so aware of God during the ordeal but it was impossible to miss so much goodness that surrounded me—an extension of God!

2—These Canadians may have redefined the word “hospitality” for me and coming from New Orleans that’s a huge concession. Their generosity of both spirit as well as tangible services will always serve as a model for me of other-oriented compassion.

3—The experience of being in real time during the attacks and even actually viewing the second plane going into the second WTC tower is unimaginable to me.

4—The unabashed patriotism displayed with flags and ribbons plus dressing in red, white and blue is all quite new, true and lovely to me.

5—The sights and sounds of planes in the air have new meaning.

6-- The many, many demonstrations of courage suggest examples of leadership that I intend to include in my research and my work.

A final comment—As I was leaving the customs area here in Philadelphia an agent asked how long I had been gone. I replied that originally it was to have been eight days but... and he finished my sentence by saying, “And it turned into forever”.

Amen!

P. S. By the way, I was returning from Europe where I had been visiting two young men who I had met 15 years ago in the Philadelphia area. The three of us were the only passengers on an airport van. I was returning from a domestic trip and they were coming to the states to go to boarding school. In the process of our 30 minute ride together, I learned that they are brothers who had been in boarding schools since they were five years old. They were now 15 and 16. They were unsure about when they would be going back home to Europe, perhaps not until school was over the following June. I mentioned that I had also been in boarding school when I was in high school and it had been a great experience of independence for me but that it certainly was lonely at times. So if they would like, I would be willing to go visit them sometime, take them out to a movie, etc. Actually over the next few months, I began to really care for them and arranged to bring them to my home for visits, including weekends. I also taught them how to drive. I determined that I would like to have them live with me the next school year since they had never experienced coed school, Friday night football games, etc. and I went to Europe the next spring to meet their (divorced) parents and secure their permission. I explained that there were three items we did not know:

- 1—Could the three of us live together.
- 2—Would the boys “like” the experience of the local high school.
- 3—Would a man come into my life that would change my priorities.

That summer the boys began to live with me and it did not take me very long to realize that I had been over-ambitious in many ways including the reality that I did not have insurance for them. So, I let them and their parents know that I could not continue the arrangement. I let the boys know that I still cared for them very much and wanted to be considered a mentor or resource. They were very hurt and, I think, felt abandoned. After some time, they individually contacted me and I have indeed loved being a part of their lives since. Roderick now lives in Luxembourg where he is very happily married and expecting their first child. He is European Technology Project Manager for Sapa group. Sebastian is based in Paris as a consultant with Accenture. We had a beautiful time together visiting and sightseeing in Europe.