

Session 01 Flight

In the end, you learn the difference between an origin and a coming of age can be as simple as an airplane crash. Just your typical, everyday mile-high disaster.

This model in particular—the one that I'm on—is a Boeing 747-400. It holds 416 passengers, has a wingspan of 64.9 meters, and is notorious for storing in-flight meals five degrees below the recommended temperature. These are the types of things you know when you're a commercial airline pilot, an engineer, or me.

If you want to break something correctly, it's best to know everything you can about it. Potential food poisoning or diarrhea by way of an undercooked Salisbury steak ranks right up there with understanding how the landing gear and turbines work. Study your statistics and diagrams. Never overlook the little things.

From seat 5G of the first class section, it's a parade of coach passengers trudging along on the blue and cream carpet, admiring the oversized slate gray leather seats, these "thrones of the skies," as they're sometimes called. They revere the padded armrests and expansive legroom, the bottles of French champagne already being poured. Ornate tins of caviar and cashmere blankets patterned in tasteful pilot wings. For all of about ten seconds, these people get a sample of the good life. Just a taste. Airlines do this to encourage people to upgrade their tickets. It's their way of saying, "This is what you're missing."

For at least the first hour of the flight, all the coach passengers are haunted by this same luxurious imagery. Anyone in marketing or sales knows this just as well as I do. In a few hours though, prestige will be the least of their concerns.

Flight 8160 is scheduled to cross an ocean today, but it'll never make it.

Holding over 57,000 gallons of fuel, this aircraft has a maximum range of approximately 7,200 miles. That means, theoretically, we could fly from New York to France on a half tank of gas. A rigged fuel gauge and an absent pump technician is all it would take to get the job done, but that's being optimistic.

If you're me, then you already know the captain has two successful emergency water landings on his record. Another three on land. Your weekend would be split between a cramped life raft and a rescue freighter. Then a police station.

When a \$266,000,000 aircraft drops out of the sky, everyone gets questioned, including first class. Even Mr. Hero Pilot would get a turn in the interrogation room, so it's important to get this right the first time.

No survivors.

No questions.

Overhead, the red and off-white "fasten seatbelt" sign illuminates, accompanied by the formal announcement to raise all tray tables and turn off our cell phones and any electronics. Forget what you've heard about these items causing any sort of damage to the plane or its instruments. That's a rumor. You could start a telemarketing firm in here and all the pilots would notice is some light radio static.

Being able to discern a scare tactic from a threat is important when you're 40,000 feet above the ground. If you're a terrorist, a hostage, or me, then you already know this.

Meanwhile, on ground-level, the spray-tanned stewardesses pitch us the safety spiel from their respective aisles, hand-gesturing along with the FAA-standardized commentary as the plane distances itself from the terminal. We're given the "how to" walkthrough of operating a

seatbelt and the correct way to apply an oxygen mask, a systematic tutorial on seat cushion floatation devices.

The speakers say things like “don’t panic” and “calm, orderly fashion.”

They pair the words “in the event of” with some sort of disaster.

Emergency exits are pointed out. Nobody looks.

We’re all barely listening.

Even on the brink of a catastrophic affair, these people are more concerned with reading USA Today or their in-flight magazine. Playing travel-sized board games. When you’re surrounded by this much ignorance, you can pretty much get away with murder.

Or in this case, over four hundred of them.

We can relax for now.

Calculate cruise speed in relation to the rate of ascent, and we’ve got at least four hours to reflect on our lives. That’s plenty when you think about how it’s all going to flash before your eyes anyway. One last montage of spouses and children, your immediate unconditionally loving family. Pet dogs and cats.

If you were about to bite the big one in the dead center of the Atlantic Ocean, more than likely, that’s what you’d get.

But not me.

Just like anyone who’s been tampered with and brainwashed, I’ll end up seeing the person that got me into recreational terrorism in the first place. She’s the one that taught me everything I know, including how to take down this airplane.

About a year ago, she was my therapist.

Her name is Dr. Paradies.