

My Aluminum Parachute

by Mark L Berry

An onshore breeze stirred as the mercury began its slow descent from near the top of the thermometer glass, barely cooling from the afternoon high over 90°F (32°C). Some high-altitude cirrus clouds stirred with the imperceptible speed of a clock's minute hand. I've flown thousands of flights into New York's major airports, and admired Long Island's southern shore so many times I could paint it as it must have existed on the evening of July 17, 1996.

The sky was that deep shade of blue you see only at dusk during summer, in the moments immediately before the sun finally sets. After a full day of absorbing radiation, heat, and light, the ocean set up a low shimmer above the rolling waves as the atmosphere tried to reclaim what the golden orb had tirelessly delivered while passing overhead. The distant colored sails of leisure boats jibed and tacked—small irregular triangles bending and pulling their water-skimming vessels. And above them were departing aircraft—some fanning out for a variety of US cities, while the European-bound flights queued up offshore like a string of marching ants on an invisible fishing line, all heading for the North Atlantic track system with an entry point somewhere far-off near Newfoundland.

A recent departure from JFK International Airport joined the procession—a red and white Boeing 747 with four engines, each producing roughly 50,000lb (22,700kg) of thrust during climb-out. From the shore, it appeared as a Cross of Lorraine—a single line for its body with two lines across it, one larger to represent the wings, and a smaller one for the tail, such as a stick figure a child would draw. Behind the airplane's windows,

too far away to see, are 230 passengers and crew. And although I know several of them, someone special to me is in seat 3-2 in the forward first class section: my fiancée Susanne Jensen (*Airways*, September 2010).

Air travel was a regular requirement of her job, and Susanne always looked forward to it. She could hear the aircraft's inner workings from her upfront seat, and through her time with me had some idea of how and why it all functioned. The gentle vibration after takeoff as the landing gear retracted and stowed, followed by the hum of jackscrews retracting the flaps for the aircraft's acceleration, reminded her that she was now safely on her way to Paris. I'd shared part of my professional aviation training with her and explained that most aircraft accidents happen in the first eight minutes after takeoff, or the last three minutes before landing, when the aircraft is close to the ground. With the world becoming smaller outside—dwellings turning into doll houses and then further reducing to pillboxes, trees shriveling to matchsticks, and people shrinking to mere dots as her flight climbed—she would have already reclined her seat and most likely removed her high-heeled shoes with a smile of satisfaction, happily unaware that anything was about to go fatally wrong.





At 10,000ft the flight attendants would have just been given the signal to unbuckle, rise from their retractable jump-seats, and begin their service; but there wouldn't have been time to wheel the aluminum carts out into the aisle. Susanne would now be reading reports and notes from her briefcase, mentally preparing for her multilingual financial meeting in the morning, or chatting with my co-worker and friend Captain Gid Miller, deadheading on this flight and seated across the aisle to her right. If she instead looked beyond the seat to her left, her view out of the pressure-retaining, double-pane window would have faced north across the water toward a steady string of Long Island's strands—Atlantic Beach, Long Beach, Lido Beach, Point Lookout—with the slowly setting sun behind her casting lengthy shadows. She may have recognized Long Beach as it went by, where I had a pad when we first started dating.

TWA 800 had taken off about an hour late, but some of my off-duty pilot and flight attendant friends might have still been packing up the beach volleyball net by the shore, although they'd now be far too small to identify from Susanne's vantage point. With a USAir flight overhead, her 747 was restricted from climbing

above 10,000ft until adequate aircraft separation was obtained. More seaside communities—Jones Beach followed by Fire Island—would have slipped by creating a beautiful moving view from the largest successful commercial aircraft of its day—one I'd hoped to eventually command. But Susanne's Long Island sightseeing ended without warning at Smith Point near Moriches, New York.

Many witnesses reported seeing a streaking flash of light; that's what shakes the perfect summer evening's tranquility when I imagine what happened. The sky is suddenly stained with exploding smears of red and orange airborne violence. A glowing fireball spreads out from Susanne's 747 like a grenade. At 2031lt near the longest day of the year it was still daylight, but not for much longer. The only red in this image should have been the pair of painted red stripes that ran the length of the aircraft's 230ft (70m) fuselage, and the red tail displaying TWA's slanted, white-letter logo. The only orange should have been the impending sunset.

Whatever caused TWA 800's center fuel tank to explode, that initial blast would have instantly shoved Susanne and everyone else onboard 12ft (3.5m) upward

and 17ft (5m) to the right, according to William Donaldson, an independent researcher and retired US Navy commander. The Suffolk County medical examiner's office announced that the probable cause of death for almost everyone onboard was a snapped neck. That's the feel-good report for victims' families so that we imagine our loved-ones departed this world quickly and painlessly—and the bulk of the passengers were seated in the main coach section where this probably was the result.

But because first class, in the nose of the aircraft, broke off and didn't remain with the rest of the now-burning wings, fuselage, and tail, I can't get this image of Susanne out of my head: she's freefalling for what would have felt like a lifetime, lap-belted to her dark blue seat styled with a single narrow white and two wide red vertical stripes. She's in pure panic while flopping about violently, gasping for breath from the sudden decompression, and deafened by the explosion and resulting wind noise—only to finally die with her eyes wide open when impacting the water at roughly triple highway speed in what would later become known as the yellow debris field.

My only consolation is that, without being able to turn around she never saw behind her the giant hole where the rest of the aircraft should have been—an oblong oval opening to the tumbling sky, bordered by torn cables, shredded aluminum aircraft skin, sheared beams and spars, and accented with sparking severed wires. And I hope she couldn't comprehend what was actually happening if she lived long enough to ride this nearly three mile-high, freefalling 'hell-elevator' all the way down to the ocean's surface, and then sink to 140ft (42m) below, where her body would wait to eventually be recovered.

She's gone. In hardly more time than I can hold my breath, her life was over, and mine was torn inside out. The 747 that went up whole and came down in 876 pieces invaded every part of my life.

Moving on from real-world disaster isn't so easily imagined. I can't simply paint over the images in my brain of the streak of light, the burning jet fuel, the now lifeless bodies, and the splintering aircraft. The woman I loved, nestled in the safest, most sacred place in my professional aviation world, was eradicated out of a clear evening sky without so much as a hint of a warning.

Six days later I couldn't turn away from the news; it was everywhere. *The New York Times* reported, 'At the Ocean's Edge, a Wrenching Farewell', and the *Connecticut Post* printed an article, 'Ocean of Tears'. Even standing with Susanne's family knee-deep in the receding tide—floating a rose for her out to sea, along with a crowd of other mourners—was a spectacle captured by cameras, microphones, and a fleet of high-powered antennae trucks. Gone forever was the

love of my life, torn from the sky while in the trusted and competent hands of my fellow employees—my mentors and my peers. The red and orange fireball that consumed her life also burned its way into my core existence. I'd lost everything, and even my airline didn't know what to do with the pilot whose fiancée was on that flight.

As the days and weeks and months without her stretched on, I looked for solace within the familiarity and fraternity of the cockpit—the only thing with meaning I had left, and what became known as my aluminum parachute. Each morning I woke up in a bed that Susanne and I had picked out together. I went to work for the same airline where she'd spent her final moments. It wasn't much, but returning to the cockpit was something tangible for me to hold on to, and a reason to get out of bed. After I buried Susanne, I buried myself in my work... ➔

(My Aluminum Parachute', written by Mark Berry with music composed and recorded by Simon Ashby, may be accessed at this issue's entry at www.airwaysmag.com. Mark's completed manuscript, '13,760 Feet: Living with TWA Flight 800' is seeking a publisher.)

13,760 Feet
Living with TWA Flight 800 -
My Fiancée's Fatal Flight that exploded offshore Long Island

by Mark L. Berry
Contributing Editor for Airways Magazine
Infused with 33 Original Companion Songs