

Lightning Strikes

During my thirty-three year career as a pilot with Western Air Lines, I had many experiences, mostly good but a few bad or as told in the words of an airline pilot, "Hours and hours and hours of sheer boredom, punctuated by moments of stark terror."

One of those moments occurred on the morning of March 29, 1955, when Dick Young, the Captain, and I, the copilot, took off from Seattle-Tacoma Airport in a Douglas DC-4, N99721, ship # 212, as we normally would refer to it, accompanied by a Flight Attendant, (at that time called Stewardess) Mary Fadden. We proceeded to our first point of landing, Portland, Oregon, and landed without incident.

Upon disembarking the aircraft, we proceeded to the dispatch office at which point we checked the weather along the route to our next point of intended landing which was Oakland, California. There appeared to be severe weather conditions along Amber 1, the airway we normally take as the most direct and scenic route in good weather, but decided to try to go around the back side of the front, along the Pacific coast, over what we thought would be a more comfortable flight for our California bound passengers.

Once again airborne, we could cruise at a lower altitude, as the mountainous terrain was far to the east, and provide our charges easier breathing, and a smooth trip. We filed our flight plan over North Bend, and Coos Bay, Oregon, and thence to Crescent City, Arcata, Ukiah, and Point Reyes, California, at which point we could transition ourselves for an approach into Oakland. Dick Young, the Captain, was flying, while I was handling the radio communications, reporting over check points, with time, altitude, and estimated time over the next check point. All went rather well at our cruising altitude of 8,000 feet until we were approaching Crescent City. At this point the sky got darker and darker until it was almost like night time. The air got rougher until it took the two of us to control the airplane. We experienced an updraft that threatened to take us to a higher altitude, at which point, Dick pulled the power back to maintain our cruising altitude, when BLAM! we were struck by lightning! It was right on the nose of the aircraft and felt like a bevy of flashbulbs was fired into my face. Dick shouted, "No Airspeed! ! ! and immediately started adding power thinking we were about to fall out of the sky. I looked at my instruments and saw that my airspeed indicator was acting normally, and we had plenty of speed to continue with out adding more power.(Thank goodness for redundancy.) What had happened, we subsequently discovered, was the lightning strike had sealed the Captain's pitot tube, through which air passes to give us indication of the speed with which we are traveling through the air. We also lost all High Frequency radio communications, and the inability to tune in any navigational aids. At this time, the Stewardess came to the cockpit and asked, "What was that?" Dick replied that we were rather busy at the moment and didn't have time to explain. At that moment, KABOOM! Another lightning bolt discharged off the plane on the left wing tip, blowing every static wick off the ship. (Static wicks are used for the purpose of neutralizing static electricity that builds up when flying through clouds that have a different electrical charge than the plane flying through it.) Mary hastily departed the cockpit and left us struggling with this bucking bronco of a plane. The wind was incredible with heavy rain and hail that was pelting us unmercifully. Moments later KERWHAMM! We felt and heard the third bolt of lightning, and upon landing, discovered a six inch hole blown out of the top of our vertical fin! We also learned that Mary was in the rear of the plane to escort a sick passenger to the toilet, when that final lightning strike occurred. (I suppose she thought the lightning was following her around the plane.)

Shortly afterward, things started calming down, the sky got lighter, the air got smoother, and our nerves were settling, as we emerged from the violent thunderhead we had been riding.

After numerous attempts to contact somebody on the radio we finally contacted a San Francisco company radio on VHF, the only radios that were working, and told them we were going to come straight into SFO, (San Francisco International Airport) and not land in Oakland because SFO was a maintenance base, and we had some damage to the airplane that we wanted looked at. When the radio operator inquired about how much damage there was, Dick responded in his inimitable wit, "Well, we haven't had time to get out and walk around the airplane to see where the damage is."

Upon landing in SFO and discharging our passengers, we assessed the damage which I previously described. In addition, there was the aluminum skin of the plane which felt like sandpaper when rubbed. There were thousands of tiny balls of aluminum that were caused by the melting of the skin that had to be polished out before the ship was returned to service.

We ferried # 912 back to LAX (Los Angeles International Airport) without further incident.

I donned my uniform coat and departed the plane. Upon arriving in the Dispatch office, Dick looked at me rather quizzically and said, "What happened to your wings?"

Looking down at the wings above my breast pocket, I noticed about one-half-inch was melted off each wingtip! My jacket had been hanging on the radio rack during the flight and apparently the lightning strike that melted our radios had arced across the antenna post to the wings of my coat, and didn't even singe the material. I have those wings to this day as a constant reminder of a "moment of stark terror."

No one ever saw that Stewardess again after we landed in SFO!

By Unknown Author and Copilot

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