

# THE BOMB ON THE AEROPLANE (PARIS-MONTRÉAL 1983)

by Rutherford

An hour or two after taking off from Paris in August 1983 en route to Montréal, something seemed not quite right – although for some time I couldn't put my finger on what it was. Eventually I realised that, since taking off, the sun had been coming in the left side of the cabin – but it was now coming in from the right. Either the earth was out of its orbit – or we had turned around and were now flying back the way we had come. Looking out the cabin window, I expected to see clouds far down below – but saw instead that we were now flying so low that I could clearly make out the whitecaps on the ocean. At the same time, there was a minor commotion as the flight attendants, in the middle of serving dinner, announced that “everyone was to remain in their seats” and that “the washrooms were now out of service”. When asked, we were told that the flight crew were experiencing “technical difficulties with one of the engines”. Now, I may not know much about aerodynamics, but a Boeing 747 probably glides like a brick. It therefore seemed reasonable that, if, as a result of “technical difficulties with the engines” there was a chance of losing power, the logical strategy would be to climb as high as possible – so as to be able to glide as far as possible. Turning to the elderly French gentleman seated behind me, we shared our suspicions that the reason we were flying so low was because there was a bomb on the aeroplane: so that, supposedly, in the event of an in-flight explosion, survivors would not be killed by the fall.

In the centre seats beside us was a young woman sitting with two young children and who was clearly on the verge of panic. In an effort to distract her, I attempted to engage her in conversation. (“So, where are you travelling to?”) She explained that this was her first-ever aeroplane flight and that she was taking her two nieces to the funeral of their mother – her sister – who had recently been killed in an aeroplane crash. (Well done Sir. Now, does anyone else need to be distracted?)

A very tense and silent half-hour later, we touched down at Shannon airport in the Republic of Ireland where the pilot stopped the aeroplane nearly a kilometre from the airport, reinforcing my suspicion of a bomb (so that if the aeroplane went ‘Kablooey’, the blast wouldn't take the airport with it). Shuttled into the airport terminal in small groups by minibus, we were crowded into one of the boarding lounges where we were kept segregated from all other passengers and permitted no contact with the outside world (no telephone calls). The one concession the airport authorities made was to open a free bar. Just what four hundred very frightened people need most: unlimited free liquor.

Several hours later, after the last scheduled flight had left the terminal, it was announced that every passenger would have to identify their luggage. Shuttled back out to the runway, every bag from the hold had been spread out in a half-kilometre radius over the tarmac.

After several more hours, it was announced that, as the crew had now finished their shift, Air France was flying in a new flight crew from Paris. Eighteen hours after landing in Shannon, we re-boarded the same aeroplane to discover that the cabin appeared to have been the site of the most animated food-fight in aviation history. The dinners that had just been served when the commotion began were everywhere: on the floors, the seats, the walls and the ceilings – upon which hours of sitting in the August heat had added their effect. The sight was unimaginable, but the smell... Oh Lord, the smell...

Shortly after take-off, the captain apologised for the lack of information throughout and explained that “a passenger and all his luggage had been removed from the aeroplane”. We could only hope they hadn't missed one. For the next seven hours until we landed, no one left the security of his/her seatbelt. When the aeroplane finally touched down in Montréal, the passengers broke into the most enthusiastic round of applause I have heard outside of an opera house. The captain thanked us for having been a wonderful audience – and announced that this had been his last scheduled flight before retirement.

As we passed into the arrivals gate at Montréal's Mirabelle airport in the middle of the night and eighteen hours later than scheduled, we were greeted with a standing ovation from those who had driven the three hours from the city to meet their friends or loved ones. We later learned that, all the while we had been stuck in Ireland, no information had been given to those waiting in Montréal; for eighteen hours, our flight had simply been listed as “delayed”, and many had obviously begun to fear the worst.

As a result of the delay, we had missed our connecting flight to Toronto, but were given new tickets on the next available flight. As the small commuter plane began to taxi out to the runway, the captain announced that there would be a “slight delay” due to “technical difficulties with one of the engines”. At least this time we were still on the ground.