

Part II: Terror in the Skies, Again?

By Annie Jacobsen

Last Tuesday morning, WomensWallStreet.com (WWS) published my first-person account of a recent Northwest Airlines flight that I took from Detroit to Los Angeles called "Terror in the Skies, Again?" A heads up about this article went out in our *Daily Cents* email -- our subscriber newsletter which primarily features financial tips and information for women.

On Wednesday morning, the WWS page views were unusually high, something like 10 times the normal amount. Apparently our readers had been emailing the article to their friends, family and colleagues and everyone was reading it.

By Thursday morning, that number had again multiplied ten-fold. It felt like the shampoo commercial from my youth: *they told two friends, then they told two friends, then they told two friends*. We sat in the WWS offices reading through your emails, taking stock of what you had to say. As the afternoon went on, the number of people reading the article continued to increase and the telephone was ringing off the hook.

And then a powerful thing happened. The mainstream media started calling.

The following statement was made by Daniel Drezner, an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, on his website danieldrezner.com:

"I received a mass email linking to this disturbing first-person account by Annie Jacobsen... I can say that the e-mail sent to me and other bloggers was cc-ed to movers and shakers in the mediaspere -- Bill Keller, David Ignatius, George Will, Anne Applebaum, and Nicholas D. Kristoff. So they're certainly aware of the story... I'd like to see real journalists dig deeper into this."

Dig they did. NBC was the first major news outlet to contact WomensWallStreet. The producer I spoke with on the telephone said the FBI had confirmed that 14 Syrians were on the flight, they confirmed the details about what happened upon landing in Los Angeles, and they said that the accounts from the flight attendants regarding what happened during the flight matched the accounts given by me and my husband to the FBI after we landed.

Then I spoke with a producer from ABC. She explained that she could not get Dave Adams, Head of Public Affairs of the Federal Air Marshal Services (FAM), on the phone. So she asked me some of the questions that she had wanted to ask him: Where exactly did this band of 14 musicians play? What was the name of the band? Who booked the band and what kind of music did they play? Did anyone follow up and actually witness these 14 men performing at their desert casino gig? I had none of the answers, even though I had asked Adams these exact questions myself when we spoke last week. The ABC producer also asked me other questions which had crossed my mind after hanging up with Adams. Did I know anything about their return flight on jetBlue? Did the men go back to Syria? Did I believe FAM's story?

And I now have another important question... Is there a link between my experience on flight #327 and the arrest of Ali Mohamed Almosaleh by customs agents at the Minneapolis Airport on July 7 (approximately one week after my flight)? Almosaleh was traveling from Damascus, Syria, to Minneapolis on KLM/Northwest Airlines. According to CNN.com, "Agents

found Almosaleh to be carrying what they described as a suicide note and DVDs containing anti-American material."

It was initially reported by CNN.com that the man "is not known to the intelligence community, and that his name was not on any terrorist watch list." The following day, on *TwinCities.com*, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported that Almosaleh "had something with him indicating a connection with at least one known terrorist." So, did a more thorough check of the man reveal this critical new information? Remember, according to Adams, FAM checked the 14 Syrian men on my flight against the terrorist watch lists. They found no match, so they let them go. I wonder what might have happened if the 14 Syrians on my flight had been looked into more thoroughly?

Since publishing the first article, I have received dozens of emails from people in the airline industry, including flight attendants, captains and pilots, some of whom I have also spoken with on the telephone. As of Sunday morning, to my knowledge, WWS had received no emails from anyone in the airline industry suggesting that the incident described in my first article did not happen. Here is what some of them are saying, all of it on the record.

Jeanne M. Elliott, Security Coordinator for the Professional Flight Attendants Association (PFAA), which represents the flight attendants of Northwest Airlines, said, "By the uneducated eye, and to those who don't walk in our shoes, it may have been perceived that we were doing nothing, when indeed we were putting the safety and security of those passengers as our first priority."

In a letter sent to WWS, she also states, "...the needs of this nation's flight attendants to adequately perform aviation security functions have been delayed and/or ignored." (Click [here](#) to read Elliot's letter in its entirety.)

Gary Boettcher, Member, Board of Directors, Allied Pilots Association, said, "Folks, I am a Captain with a major airline. I was very involved with the Arming Pilots effort. Your reprint of this airborne event is not a singular nor isolated experience. The terrorists are probing us all the time."

During a later phone conversation I had with Boettcher, he told me that based on his experience, it was his opinion that I was likely on a dry run. He said he's had many of these experiences and so have many of his fellow captains. They've been trying to speak out about this but so far their words have been falling on deaf ears.

According to Mark Bogosian, B-757/767 pilot for American Airlines, "The incident you wrote about, and incidents like it, occur more than you like to think. It is a 'dirty little secret' that all of us, as crew members, have known about for quite some time."

Rand K. Peck, captain for a major U.S. airline, sent the following email: "I just finished reading Annie Jacobsen's article, *TERROR IN THE SKIES, AGAIN?* I only wish that it had been written by a reporter from *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times*. My response would have been one of shock as to how insensitive of them to dare write such a piece. After all, citizens or not, don't these people have rights too?

"But the piece was in *The [Wall Street] Journal*, a publication that I admire and read daily. I'm deeply bothered by the inconsistencies that I observe at TSA. I've observed matronly

looking grandmothers practically disrobed at security check points and five-year-old blond boys turned inside out, while Middle Eastern males sail through undetained.

"We have little to fear from grandmothers and little boys. But Middle Eastern males are protected, not by our Constitution, but from our current popular policy of political correctness and a desire to offend no one at any cost, regardless of how many airplanes and bodies litter the landscape. This is my personal opinion, formed by my experiences and observations."

This brings us to the heart of the matter -- political correctness. Political correctness has become a major road block for airline safety. From what I've now learned from the many emails and phone calls that I have had with airline industry personnel, it is political correctness that will eventually cause us to stand there wondering, "How did we let 9/11 happen again?"

During a follow-up phone conversation, one flight attendant told me that it is her airline's policy not to refer to people as "Middle Eastern men." In addition, many emails have come in calling me a racist for referring to 14 men with Syrian passports as Middle Eastern men. For the record, the Middle East is a geographical region called just that: The Middle East. If you refer to people who come from countries in this region (including Syria, Jordan, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq) as "Middle Easterners," you are being *geographically* correct. We call people Americans and Canadians and English and French. I call my relatives who live in Norway Norwegians. So really, what is the hang-up?

The fact that I quoted Ann Coulter seems to have many people up in arms. I want to be clear -- there is no political agenda here. I quoted Ann Coulter for the information she had, not for who she is. Read the quote again and pretend Joe or Jane Doe wrote it. She states the facts. The facts she states are that 10 days after 9/11, Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta sternly reminded airlines that it was illegal to discriminate against passengers based on their race, color, national or ethnic origin or religion.

Perhaps the title of Michael Smerconish's new book sums it up: "Flying Blind. How Political Correctness Continues to Compromise Airline Safety Post 9/11." On June 24, Smerconish testified before the U.S. Senate about the role political correctness plays in protecting airline security in a post-9/11 world. Click [here](#) to read his full testimony.

I keep thinking back to a photograph I saw in the *Los Angeles Times* called "Falling" by Pulitzer Prize winning AP photographer Richard Drew. It's a photograph of a man, his body is stretched out, one knee at a right angle, as if he's lying on a couch, watching television in the living room, relaxing and enjoying life. But he's not. It's a photograph of a man falling from one of the top floors of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. This man jumped to his death, most likely because it seemed a less painful way to die than being engulfed in flames.

This picture is haunting. For a long time I kept it in my office. I still think about this picture and I wonder about this man -- his daily life, what he did for work, what he did for play, what his thoughts were about the world. I think about this person. I think about the meaning of "dry run." And then I think about what it means to be politically correct. And I keep coming up blank.

The above article is based on the opinions of the author and does not necessarily reflect the opinions of womenswallstreet.com

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