

Chapter 1

Anger in the Air

8/11

On August 11, 2000 (which I refer to as 8/11), on a routine flight from Las Vegas to Salt Lake City, a muscular young man stood up out of his seat and a turning point was reached in passengers' attitude towards flying.

At the gate earlier, 19-year-old Jonathan Burton, tall, blonde, and square jawed, with an open smile and a football player's build, had just said a cheerful goodbye to his mother. An hour later, eyes dilated, he was pacing up and down the aisle, telling a flight attendant, "I'm fine. It's just the drugs." Suddenly he charged from the back to the front of the plane, screaming, "I can fly this plane!" before leaping up and kicking through the cockpit door.¹

Reports vary on what happened in the pandemonium that followed, but all agree that a few male passengers jumped up and blockaded the cockpit while a female flight attendant and several other male passengers eased Jonathan, who had recently watched a TV special on plane crashes,² towards a seat on the exit row. As they did so, he suddenly lunged for the emergency exit, screaming that he had to get out of the plane. Passengers again restrained and soothed him, asking questions to distract him from his fear. They seemed to have calmed Burton down, when a passenger said, he "went ballistic" on hearing that an off-duty policeman had come to help. Powered by panic and adrenaline, he seemed unstoppable as he kicked, bit, and punched as many as eight men, hitting the policeman hard enough to spray blood around the cabin.³

At that point it was as if an emotional switch had been thrown. The passengers, presumably bursting with their own adrenaline, began pounding and kicking Burton all over his body, pinning him to the floor long after he'd gone limp. Within hours, Burton died of strangulation.⁴ According to the autopsy report, when police

1 Timothy Roche, "Homicide in the Sky," *Time*, October 2, 2000, found at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,998079,00.html>.

2 "Air Rage Death Clarified," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, September 17, 2000, found at http://www.reviewjournal.com/lvrj_home/2000/Sep-17-Sun-2000/news/14407481.html.

3 Roche, 2000.

4 "A Death on Descent," *CBS News*, September 21, 2000, found at <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2000/09/21/national/main235154.shtml>.

walked on the plane they found him lying face down, “with at least one individual standing on his neck.”⁵

Known as a gentle soul who’d won an award for his work with the elderly, Burton had no history of mental illness.⁶ The autopsy showed just barely detectable trace amounts of cocaine and THC (the active ingredient in marijuana) in his system—probably not from recent use and not enough to account for his outburst.⁷ The death was ruled a non-criminal homicide, and no charges were filed.⁸

What turned Jonathan Burton from a harmless passenger into a threat to the safety of Flight 1763? And what turned his fellow passengers from supportive helpers into a death-dealing mob? This book will examine the potential answers to those questions and look at what can be done to minimize future such “air rage” episodes.

The media frenzy over the 8/11 incident first brought the phenomenon of air rage (so named because of its similarity to drivers’ irrational bursts of road rage) to widespread public attention both because it was shocking and grisly and because it was the first incident in which an American had died. But Jonathan Burton’s death was just the culmination of an explosion of air rage incidents in the years leading up to 8/11. Between 1994 and 1997, the number of air rage incidents reported around the world had more than quadrupled from 1,132 to 5,416⁹—and as many as 30 times that number had been swept under the rug by image-conscious airlines. The International Air Transport Association that represents the airline industry worldwide said there were 10,000 incidents of air rage in the United States in the year 2000.¹⁰

It’s significant that during the same period, from 1995 to 2000, airlines were experiencing a considerable decline in service.^{11,12} Overbooked flights, persistent delays, and shabby aisle treatment at the hands of surly flight attendants contributed to declining service rankings for even top airlines, including American, Delta,

5 Michael Janofsky, “US Declines to Prosecute in Case of Man Beaten to Death on Jet,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2000, found at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9406E5DE103BF932A1575AC0A9669C8B63>.

6 Roche, “Air Rage Death Clarified.”

7 Roche, “A Death on Descent.”

8 Janofsky, “US Declines to Prosecute.”

9 E.W. Fine, *Air Rage Behavior: Implications For Forensic Psychiatry*, paper presented at the 2001 symposium conducted at the meeting of The American College of Forensic Psychiatry, April 2001, p. 3, found at <http://www.forensic psychonline.com/psychiatry2001.html>.

10 Anonymous and Andrew R. Thomas, *Air Rage: Crisis in the Skies* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2001), p. 23.

11 Angela Dahlberg, *Air Rage: The Underestimated Safety Risk* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 60–61.

12 U.S. Dept. of Transportation. *Air Travel Consumer Report* (Washington, DC: Office of Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings, 2001), found at <http://www.dot.gov/airconsumer.ost.gov/report.htm>.

USAir, and United.¹³ For passengers, the results were infuriating, and the question arose: Did this epidemic of poor service spawn the metastasizing rage?

It's hard to remember now, but throughout their first 60 years of existence, the airlines were known for providing champagne service. Because theirs was the gold standard for customer care, other industries looked to them as models of how to keep customers happy. However, when the airline industry was deregulated in 1978, airline service and the quality of the flying experience began to deteriorate in the United States.¹⁴ And when bargain airlines arrived on the scene in 1992, offering fares as much as 70 percent lower than the rest of the industry, airlines across the board were forced to cut fares to compete. To keep profits up, they switched from selling relatively few high-priced tickets to a smaller group of pampered customers, to selling low-cost tickets in bulk. The result of lower prices, a lower profit margin, and more riders was a drastic cut in services.

For passengers, says Andrew Thomas, co-author of *Air Rage: Crisis in the Skies*, it was like going from shopping at an elite emporium like Harrods or Nordstrom, to standing in line at WalMart.¹⁵ As a result, since low-cost fares came in, airlines have been barraged with complaints about poor service, and the Airline Quality Rating, an annual analysis of Department of Transportation Statistics, says no airline is immune.¹⁶ Even Delta, Southwest, and Northwest Airlines, all previously known for some of the best service within the industry, have seen their customer service ratings fall sharply.

By 1995, providing good customer service had apparently ceased to be a driving force in the industry. Companies that used to live by the motto, "The customer is always right—even when he's wrong" seem to have replaced that with, "The airline is always right—no matter what." They strive to achieve maximum profits at any cost, with a blatant lack of accountability for customer satisfaction. This refusal to recognize the importance of customer service has created a dangerous and detrimental environment for the flying public. Airline personnel's lack of courtesy, respect, civility, and sensitivity to customers' needs has helped fuel the growing epidemic of air rage.

The consequences are more than unpleasant. Air rage is the single greatest threat to the flying public. On August 11, 2000, it was the raging passenger who was killed; but had Jonathan Burton gotten into the cockpit, the death toll could have included everyone on the plane. Air rage has already left airline attendants with stab wounds, bruises, internal bleeding, torn kneecaps, and a broken back

13 M. Drummond, "Customer Service Woes: At a Time When Companies Should be Doing Everything in Their Power to Keep Customers and Keep Them Happy, Many Aren't." *Business 2.0.*, June 4, 2001, found at <http://www.business2.com/articles/web/0,1653,15896,FF.html>.

14 Anonymous and Thomas, p. 83.

15 Ibid.

16 T. Harrison and J. Kleinsasser, *Airline Quality Rating, Press Release*, 1999, found at <http://www.unomaha.edu/~unoai/aqr/aqr99press.html>.

and neck. But when a passenger gets totally out of control at 30,000 feet, it can take the airplane down, as passengers on All Nippon Airways learned on July 23, 1999. Shortly after their jumbo jet took off from Tokyo's Haneda Airport, a crazed passenger pulled a knife on a flight attendant and forced his way into the cockpit. He told the co-pilot to leave, stabbed the captain to death, and took over the controls. Luckily, the co-pilot and two airline employees were able to storm the cockpit, and a non-uniformed pilot was able to land the plane, but not before the plane had come within seconds (and 300 meters) of crashing into the ground.¹⁷

And that was before 9/11.

9/11

At 8:46 a.m. on September 11, 2001, American Airlines Flight 11 flew into the World Trade Center and time stood still. Frozen in fear, Americans watched as planes flew into buildings, people jumped out of hundred-story windows, and screams could be heard for blocks. Then the Twin Towers crumbled into dark clouds of dust that swallowed chunks of downtown New York.

The 9/11 tragedy that altered every aspect of American life permanently changed the course of air travel. Now our images of flying include an airplane piercing a building against a sunny blue sky, blocks-long lines of passengers herded through security checkpoints, and the ever-present threat of more humiliating body searches, not to mention hijacking—all of which add to passengers' anger and anxiety as they walk into an airport or onto a plane.

The 9/11 terrorists succeeded in “grafting a virulently toxic psychology into the very DNA of air travel,” said pilot and columnist Patrick Smith. “Not entirely surprising...in a society that increasingly encourages fear, front and center over rationality or common sense.”¹⁸

As a result, 9/11 has compounded the growing epidemic of passenger rage, while making it more urgent than ever that airlines around the world find ways to prevent it. Airlines used to brag of “something special in the air.” On September 11, that “something” turned into a toxic mix of fear and anger that would slowly seep into the hearts and minds of airline travelers and personnel alike, further eroding the civility of travel that was once an integral part of the industry's culture.

For a short time after 9/11, the number of air rage incidents in America seemed to decrease because fewer passengers were flying, and those who did were on their good behavior. But the heightened tension these attacks added to the flying experience just increased the chances of air rage in years to come. Studies showed

17 Elliott Neal Hester, “Flying in the Age of Air Rage,” Travel and Food section, *Salon.com*, September 7, 1999, found at <http://www.salon.com/travel/diary/hest/1999/09/07/rage/index.html>.

18 Patrick Smith, “Ask the Pilot,” *Salon.com*, May 28, 2004, found at <http://dir.salon.com/story/tech/col/smith/2004/05/28/askthepilot88/>.

that airline passengers, filled with post-World Trade Center attack anxiety, were more likely than ever to lash out at fellow travelers and airline staff, warned psychiatrist Dr Graham Lucas.¹⁹

“Despite a drop in passenger numbers of as much as 30 percent in the past four months, air rage incidents [in England] have not reduced,” Dr Lucas, a British adviser to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), told a Royal Society of Medicine conference on the risks of international travel in January 2002. Although no published figures existed at that time, according to the United Kingdom Department of Transport, early indications from the CAA showed that air rage incidents after September 11, were at a similar level, despite fewer passengers.²⁰

By September 2007, air rage had again become such a problem that United Airlines created an internal committee to review air rage incidents.²¹ That month, author Andrew Thomas said, “Abnormal, aberrant or abusive behavior in the context of the air travel experience is back with a vengeance.”²²

9/11 Blowback: Vigilante Injustice

The 9/11 attacks made it especially urgent to deal with air rage. In the future, when pandemonium begins to break out in an airline cabin, personnel won’t be sure whether they’re dealing with an enraged passenger or a terrorist until after the incident is over, at which point it may be too late. In addition, pilots, locked in their cockpits since 9/11, won’t be there to help. Onlookers, panicked at the thought of terrorism, may overreact as they race to subdue a troublemaker—or, thinking it’s “just a blowhard,” fail to restrain a terrorist. That fact alone makes it doubly important in a post-9/11 world to recognize, understand, and contain air rage much more effectively than we have to date.

At the 2002 Royal Society of Medicine conference, Dr Lucas predicted that “twitchy” passengers could be expected to overreact to anything that struck them as unusual. Paradoxically, their pre-emptive efforts to prevent terrorism could actually put the plane in greater danger. Islamic groups confirmed Dr Lucas’ fears. A report by Robert Mendick in *The Independent* newspaper said that four months

19 Robert Mendick, “Drink Does it. Sex Does it. But the Real Reason Air Rage is Rising is 11 Sept,” *The Independent*, January 13, 2002, found at <http://www.independent.co.uk>.

20 *Ibid.*, para. 3.

21 Kelly Yamanouchi, “United’s New Committee Targets ‘Air Rage,’” *Denver Post*, September 17, 2007, found at http://www.denverpost.com/business/ci_6913089.

22 Marilyn Miller, “Air Rage Taking Off, Expert Says,” *Akron Beacon Journal*, September 28, 2007, quoting Andrew Thomas, found at: <http://www.ohio.com/business/10099131.html>.

after 9/11, Muslim passengers even hesitated before walking to the restroom on planes for fear of being “surrounded” by fellow passengers.²³

“If there is a kerfuffle on the plane”, said Dr Lucas, who is also a consultant specializing in aviation psychiatry at the Priory Clinic in West London, “passengers may well now suspect it’s a terrorist incident rather than just some drunken person.” That natural mistake could turn a small incident into a major fracas, endangering a planeload of people.²⁴

In addition, post 9/11 passengers could be expected to drink more to drown their fears, further increasing the chance of air rage, said Professor Cary Cooper, a behavioral psychologist at University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology. In almost half the officially recorded air rage cases, alcohol was “a contributory cause.”²⁵

But the bigger risk comes from “sensitive” passengers, suspicious of other passengers’ behavior, Professor Cooper said. “My real fear is anybody who behaves in a strange way on a plane is now at risk of attack.” Nervous passengers may target even the most innocuous of their fellow flyers, especially if they are Arab or Asian, Mednick reported. In one case, Murtaza Walji, a father of two from Birmingham, England, was flying from New York to Seattle shortly after 9/11 when a passenger behind him became extremely loud and abusive.

“She was shouting at me. Maybe she was scared but she was blaming me for what had happened in New York,” said Mr Walji, 44. “There were a lot of people on the plane but I was the only Asian.” At the end of the flight, the woman even called security and police, who stopped Mr Walji as he got off the plane.²⁶ *Muslim News*, which began compiling a list of Islamophobic attacks after September 11, had already documented six verbal or physical assaults in the first four months after the disaster. Editor Ahmed Versi estimated that many more had gone unreported.²⁷

What is Air Rage?

In the decade before 9/11, the experience of flying was already more than stressful. Faced with long ticket lines, overbooked planes, sardine seating, bad cabin air, delayed flights, missed connections, lost luggage, and rude personnel, some overwrought passengers had already begun bursting into uncontrolled eruptions of anger. They screamed at, harassed, beat, or stabbed flight attendants. They also attacked pilots, took over plane controls, and tried to open exit doors at 30,000 feet—and in one creative case, a well-dressed but overly lubricated executive in First Class expressed his feelings by climbing up on the food cart and relieving

23 Mendick, 2002.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

himself. Noting the similarities to drivers' irrational explosions of road rage, observers dubbed these outbursts "air rage."

But because they were in the air, these explosions of anger were far more dangerous than even a shootout on the highway. Since airline personnel can't just toss the troublemaker off the airplane (unless they're like one airline pilot we'll hear about later who landed on a desert island and left the rager there), they're forced to handle erupting craziness at 30,000 feet, which can be deadly. On December 29, 2000, a hysterical male passenger stormed the cockpit and tried to grab the controls of a British Airways jet flying from London to Nairobi, sending the Boeing 747 into a terrifying two-mile dive. Many screaming passengers in the planeload of 398 people, which included British rock singer Bryan Ferry, first hit the ceiling and then slammed against the front of the plane as it plummeted thousands of feet. The jumbo jet came within four or five seconds of flipping on its back, after which the co-pilot would not have been able to regain control.²⁸

When Did Air Rage Start?

In the early 1990s, the term "air rage" was completely foreign to the average traveler, partly because the phenomenon itself was less common, and partly because the industry was not anxious to publicize the problem. Not having a specific term for the phenomenon made it easier to ignore, so airlines used euphemisms, reporting only that "an irate passenger" had "caused a disturbance." By not naming the problem, the industry could treat each incident as if it were an isolated case, unrelated to business as usual.²⁹

But it was more than a disturbance in January 1999 when a drunken passenger allegedly harassed the woman beside him, ripping off her headphones and biting them in half before punching the door window of a British Airways jet, smashing the window's inner layer and threatening to cause decompression at 35,000 feet. Passengers feared that "disturbance" could take their plane down. It took four flight attendants and four passengers to subdue this "irate passenger" before the "disturbance" was over.³⁰

It's thought the term air rage was first coined in the 1990s by the news media to refer to unruly passengers as a variation on the term "road rage," a term coined, appropriately enough, in Los Angeles in 1984 by a *Los Angeles Times* reporter when he was covering the story of a truck driver who shot at another driver who cut him off on the freeway.³¹

28 "BA Jet Plunges in Cockpit Struggle," *BBC News*, December 29, 2000, found at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/1092164.stm.

29 Dahlberg, p. 1.

30 Hester, "Flying in the Age of Air Rage."

31 Gary Martin, *Road Rage*. *The Phrase Finder*, found at <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/303700.html>.

Only as the media began to report air rage incidents did the term begin to creep into public use. Now there are as many definitions of air rage as there are researchers, but they all agree that air rage includes “any behavior that threatens the safety of a customer or crew member.”³² The term includes everyone from a passenger who refuses to turn off his cell phone to one who stabs a crew member or tries to open an exit door mid-flight. According to Angela Dahlberg, author of *Air Rage: The Underestimated Safety Risk*, “The term ‘air rage’ is a label now used by the media not only for high profile cases but [to encompass] all forms of passenger behavior causing a disturbance.”³³ The phrase may describe anyone from an entitled first-class passenger throwing a fit when he can’t get his preferred dinner to a schizophrenic suffering a complete psychotic break.

For years, to avoid publicity, airlines allowed passengers to get away with blatantly violent or dangerous behavior that would have resulted in arrest at sea level. Even when wildly abusive passengers were arrested, the companies rarely filed criminal charges. This book will examine the conditions and attitudes in the airline industry that could allow even dangerous passenger behavior to be shrugged off or ignored.

However it’s defined, says author Andrew Thomas, air rage is by far the greatest threat to the safety and security of the 1.5 billion passengers who travel by air each year, because even one small incident that disables airline safety systems or distracts the pilot at a crucial moment could bring down an entire airliner.³⁴

Before 9/11

Before 9/11, according to a study reported in 2000 by the Aviation Safety Reporting System at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), unruly passengers could cause a pilot to make serious flying errors, partly because, in 40 percent of the 152 cases NASA analysts studied, pilots either left the cockpit to help flight attendants deal with a dangerous situation or were otherwise distracted by the crisis to the point that, in half the incidents, it adversely affected the pilot’s performance.³⁵ Addressing the United States House of Representatives Subcommittee on Aviation on June 11, 1998, Captain Stephen Luckey, Chairman of the National Security Committee of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) called

32 K. Tyler, “Afraid to Fly and it Shows. Air Rage is an Escalating Problem. So, Why Don’t Airlines Adequately Train Their Employees for This?” *HR Magazine*, 2001, 46(9), found at <http://www.shrm.org/hrmagazine/articles/0901>.

33 Dahlberg, p. 1.

34 Anonymous and Thomas, p. 25.

35 National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA), Aviation Safety Reporting System (ASRS), “Passenger Misconduct: Effects on Flight Crews,” *Callback*, April 2000, 250, 1–2, found at http://asrs.arc.nasa.gov/callback_issues/cb_250.htm.

passenger interference “the singularly most pervasive security problem facing the airline industry, not only in the U.S., but around the globe.”³⁶

Because airlines had in many cases switched from three-pilot to two-pilot airplanes, Captain Luckey said, “sending a pilot into the passenger cabin to help resolve a dispute seriously diminishes the safety of the flight. This is particularly so in the event of an altercation, which could result in an incapacitated pilot and a resulting one-pilot aircraft.”³⁷

FAA’s Three Levels of Trouble

Flight crews need to recognize quickly when behavior that is simply irritating is about to escalate into verbal threats or even physical assaults. To help them identify problems, airline employees have been given diagnostic yardsticks to help them assess the level of threat each behavior represents so they can decide how to respond. These disruptive behaviors include: assault; sexual harassment (which includes sexual advances, gestures, and innuendoes as well as touching or groping); verbal abuse and threats, and violence.

Before 9/11, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) divided passenger misconduct into three categories:

- **Category One:** A flight attendant reminds a passenger to carry out an instruction—say to turn off a cell phone or put up a tray table—and the customer does so. No further action is required and the incident isn’t reported.
- **Category Two:** A passenger ignores flight attendants’ requests that he comply with federal regulations like fastening a seat belt or stopping verbal abuse or other disruptive behavior that interferes with cabin safety. The attendant has to take further action, like asking the pilot to come enforce the request. The passenger may become verbally abusive and take a while to comply, but eventually does.
- **Category Three:** This is what the FAA means when it refers to air rage. A category three incident is one that endangers someone on the plane. During a category three event, one of the following problems occurs: a passenger’s continuing interference disrupts a crew members work; the passenger’s behavior either injures or threatens to injure a passenger or crew member; the pilot finds it necessary to make an unscheduled landing, and/or crew

36 Statement of Captain Stephen Luckey, Chairman, National Security Committee, Air Line Pilots Association, Before the Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, U.S. House of Representatives, Passenger Interference with Flight Crews and the Carry-on Baggage Reduction Act of 1997, June 11, 1998, found at <http://cf.alpa.org/Internet/TM/tm061198.htm>.

37 Ibid., para. 2.

members find it necessary to put the passenger in restraints such as flex cuffs.³⁸

In his *Salon.com* column, veteran flight attendant Elliott Neal Hester described a striking example of a category three event:

On March 16, 2000, aboard Alaska Airlines flight 259 from Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, to San Francisco, a man...broke through the cockpit door and attacked the pilots. Provoked (or so his attorney claims) by a bad reaction to blood-pressure medicine, Peter Bradley, 39, shouted, "I'm going to kill you," and lunged for the controls.

Having been alerted of the impending attack, the co-pilot was armed with an ax. He fought with Bradley, suffering a cut to his hand that would require eight stitches. Struggling to fly the plane during this tight-quartered assault, the pilot made an urgent plea for help over the intercom. At least seven passengers responded. The 6-foot-2, 250-pound assailant was snatched from the cockpit, wrestled to the ground, bound hand and foot with plastic restraints and taken into custody by federal authorities upon landing in San Francisco.³⁹

The goal of the FAA in creating these categories is to minimize the possibility that passengers' behavior will cross over into category three, which is considered the danger zone, and bring some type of civility back to air travel.

After 9/11

September 11 was a cold, calculated political act of terrorism, not a spontaneous outburst of air rage. However, said author Andrew Thomas, airlines' head-in-the-sand approach to air rage played into the terrorists' hands because they had relied on the fact that pilots routinely left the cockpit to calm angry passengers.⁴⁰ That's one reason that, since 9/11, pilots have stopped helping attendants deal with passengers.

In a post-9/11 world, Thomas says, the situation has changed. To combat terrorist attacks in which an attacker could invade the cockpit and incapacitate pilots, airlines have massively reinforced cockpit doors. Unfortunately, this has

38 Robert Bor, Morris Russell, Justin Parker, and Linda Papadopoulos, *Managing Disruptive Passengers: A Survey of the World's Airlines*, 1999, found as a 2000 reprint at <http://www.skyrage.org/pdf/academic/rbor.pdf>.

39 Elliott Neal Hester, "Cockpit Assault," *Salon.com*, April 8, 2000, found at <http://archive.salon.com/travel/diary/hest/2000/04/08/cockpits/index.html>.

40 Michael McConnell, "Air Rage Takes Back Seat in Our Post-9-11 World," *Detroit Metro Connections*, September 19–October 2, 2002, found at <http://metro.heritage.com/dtw100202/story3.htm>