

The Douglas DC-9-31 crashed near the Charlotte/Douglas Airport, North Carolina, shortly after the flight crew executed a missed approach. Thirty-seven passengers died. Lead flight attendant, Richard DeMary, discusses events immediately following the accident.

CABIN CREW



Training saves lives

I HAD A 9:30AM CHECK-IN ON SATURDAY and our first departure was from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA at 10.30am. We went to LaGuardia, New York.

It was a DC-9 trip and we were going to be home the third day around noon. I was flying the lead position, so I held a briefing with the other flight attendants.

We talked about the emergency exits that we were each responsible for as flight attendants. Just prior to landing or taking-off, we think about, "What is my emergency exit? What do I do if my exit is blocked? Which way does the handle rotate? What are my actions at the usable exits? What is my command or what is my brace signal? What is the brace position?"

We went over those and simple things like service flow – who's going to be responsible for what aspects of the service. En-route to Charlotte we had cleared the cabin and did the arrival announcements.

Probably the first hint of trouble was when the crew initiated the go-around. There was a lot of rain, and we could not only see the rain, but hear it. That wasn't a sign of trouble, but it was something that caught my attention. And then the go-around happened.

I had been in go-arounds before but this one just didn't seem normal. We weren't going anywhere. We didn't feel like we were climbing. I remember the sinking sensation

of falling and knowing we were in a go-around.

The first real sign of trouble then was this sinking sensation, and then knowing we were off the airport and hearing "Terrain! terrain! terrain!" [A ground proximity warning from a system in the cockpit.] Almost immediately there was the impact. It happened so fast. Initially, it was disbelief and then just the terrifying feeling of crashing.

Two impacts: My recollection was that there were 2 impacts. Some people say there were

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3, but I remember two. The first impact was with the ground – I recall the sound of trees breaking. The force of the impact was extremely violent.

Then immediately after the first impact, the second and most violent impact, to me, is when I think we hit a tree. The impact peeled back one side of the aeroplane – broke it apart into 3 sections. The nose section,

where I was with a few passenger seats, went off to the left.

I remember not seeing anything, sitting in my jump seat.

When the aeroplane came to a stop, I knew that it was time to get out, time to evacuate. I immediately went for my seat belt, and started yelling, "Release seat belts and get out! Release seat belts and get out!" which is the first command that we would yell upon coming to a stop.

At that point Shelley, the flight attendant next to me, was yelling her commands, "Release seat belts and get out", and trying to get her seat belt unbuckled. She had shattered her knee cap and she had some burns. She couldn't even crawl.

I grabbed her and carried her on to the street and dragged her to a safe distance from the aeroplane. That was my focus at that point, just getting her away from the aeroplane.

Then the awareness of being in the accident, that now I have survived, that I have to do something, became full force.

It became very important for me to help anybody that I could help... not only to help but to search, to find people. I was completely disoriented as far as where the rest of the aeroplane was. At that point, the thought crossed my mind that Shelley and I might have been the only ones who survived.

I remember ending up by the tail section. It was very quiet, I didn't hear anybody, didn't see anybody. There was a break in the aeroplane, a break in the fuselage. I thought, "Well, I have to do something" and I started yelling my commands.

I thought, "Well, it's a starting point. If people are in shock, and they hear, 'Release seat belts and get out!' it's going to give them the starting point!", so I started yelling, "Release seat belts and get out! Release seat belts and get out!"

I had really given up at one point. I thought, "Well there's probably nobody that survived".

But I had to have faith that somebody might have survived – somebody might be in there. I remember how hot it was. The fire was tremendously hot.

Then a woman appeared from the break with a baby. She came towards my voice. I grabbed the baby and grabbed her arm and pulled her out, and took them to safety.

I went back and continued to yell, "Release seat belts and get out! Release seat belts and get out!" and another woman appeared at the same opening... she was yelling, "I don't want to die! Help me! I don't want to die!" She had some injuries, I think, because she was basically immobile. I literally had to just bear-hug her and pull her out.

Training: I emphasised to the investigators that I find it very important to be in the brace position upon landing and take-off. You increase your chances of survival. I know that

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there are people that take a more casual approach to the landing and take-off phases of flight. But I can't over-emphasise how important the brace position is. So we talked about that and I actually gave a demonstration of what my position was like.

I think, based on my training, I did what I had to do. I did the job that I could do to help others survive. And I can't imagine doing anything differently. I can't imagine having any other training that could have prepared me better, could have even prepared me for that situation.

As flight attendants, we know that an accident could happen. We're trained that way.

It's drilled into us that it could happen. Sometimes I think flight attendants tend to think, "It'll never happen to me. It only happens to other people". It does happen. It has happened to me. But it is survivable. And without that survivability factor it would make this job a little more difficult.

The training on emergency drills is most important. I've always had a concern about whether the drills would come to me. The drills are the foundation for our training and I think flight attendants will always fall back on that. My training was a starting point for taking action after the crash. When I think about the events of my accident, I know that it all fell into place. And the reason I say that

exits and back exits, actually using the tail-cone exit and evacuating through a tail cone of an airplane. I would say we had every imaginable emergency training with the exception of an airplane that's completely torn apart.

For instance, my aeroplane, when we finally came to a stop in my accident, there was nothing there. Nothing looked familiar, so it would be hard to train for every situation that arises. It would be impossible because it's endless, the situations you can find yourself in.

I recall somebody saying that you're given all the training that you need, that we think you need, but the bottom line is use your



– the training all comes back to you – is because when I started to yell, "Release seat belts and get out!", I found myself actually releasing my seat belt and getting out. It became a starting point for taking action. I think that the command does the same thing for passengers. Each command not only gives directions to the passengers, but it is a starting point for the crew members as well.

I guess for all flight attendants, an accident should always be something that's in the back of your mind. It should be there because it does happen. Yes the training will come back to you. It does come back instinctively.

As far as everything in training that the company has taught us, I thought that all our instructors were extremely credible. We had training as far as evacuating every type of airplane that the airline has. All exits, front

common sense and do what you have to do to survive because certainly, if you survive, you have the opportunity to help others.

Of the 200 hours of training it seems to me 195 hours were devoted to safety. They want to devote as much time as possible to the safety aspects of flight attendant training rather than the service. If you see yourself as an airborne waiter or waitress then that's what you are. It's an element of our job, but to me, pouring a soft drink is so small compared to the duties of a flight attendant.

I think that's why our training emphasised more of the emergency drills and survivability rather than service.

Based on an interview with Richard DeMary by Flight Safety Foundation editorial staff. Reproduced with permission.