

# B Experience

## Our plane was hijacked



by Nancy Traversy

It was my 40th birthday and as a surprise present my husband had arranged a holiday to Kenya. We were six hours into the flight and drowsing, my four children draped around me, when there was a loud grinding sound and the plane **shuddered** violently. We all sprang awake, sat bolt upright, and looked around us. This wasn't turbulence; it was like nothing I'd experienced before. I fastened everyone's seatbelts. Then it happened twice more. We started to climb steeply, then went into **freefall**.



My daughter, Kristen, had a window seat and could see the plane turning upside down. The ground was visible above us. The oxygen masks dropped down and my heart went into my stomach. We were dropping out of the sky. All around us people were screaming, crying, and praying; everything in the cabin was flying around. So many thoughts were crowding in my mind. I said to my husband, 'I think we're going to crash!'

I turned to my young son sitting across the aisle. My instinct was to hold him, but was he safer strapped in his seat? 'Life doesn't always begin at 40' popped into my head. I was whispering goodbye to my husband, feeling weirdly calm, though I was sure we were going to die, when suddenly the plane levelled off. Seconds later, the breathless voice of the captain came over the speaker: 'A madman has tried to kill us all, but we're going to be OK.'

Relief flooded through me and then the captain's voice came back on, much more composed this time: 'A **deranged** man broke into the cockpit and tried to kill himself and all 400 people on board. He's now in a passenger **restraint kit** in the galley, and we'll be landing ten minutes behind schedule.' It was wonderfully British; I half expected him to wish us a pleasant flight.



The atmosphere was buzzing: everyone was talking and hugging. A steward announced that breakfast was cancelled because it was all over the cabin. My main concern was just getting off that plane.

It was 24 hours before my husband and I felt ready to talk about what had happened. It was hard to comprehend that we had nearly died.

We later learned that a 6ft 5in man had gone into the cockpit and attacked the pilot, trying to wrestle the controls off him. During the fight, the autopilot was disengaged and the plane started to climb so steeply that the engines **stalled**. This caused the noises we heard. It then tipped upside down and plummeted 12,000 ft. If the plane had fallen for four seconds longer, the pilot would not have been able to save us. Luckily, a basketball player in business class managed to crawl to the cockpit and restrain the attacker, which allowed the pilot to restart the engines and level the plane, despite having had half his ear bitten off. No charges were laid against the attacker, who was found to have mental health problems.

Our holiday in Kenya was **subdued**. I looked into every conceivable way of getting home without flying, but it wasn't possible. Fortunately, the journey back was uneventful.

The whole experience left me **reeling**. I learned that our pilot never flew again, which didn't surprise me. I found myself questioning my decisions in life. I was about to move to the USA to expand my publishing business, but was this a sign that I shouldn't?

In the end, we did make the move to New York – just weeks before 9/11. I watched the footage of the planes involved in the attacks time and again, feeling so lucky to be alive, unlike those poor souls. In a way, it brought **closure**. I was able to draw a line under our **ordeal** and get on with life.

I still fly regularly for work, but wouldn't describe myself as relaxed. That one flight will remain etched in my memory forever.