

Night Flight: Airborne Hell to Liberia

By Elizabeth Binsfield RN

As a military brat, I flew often during the first twelve years of my life. I was never afraid to fly, but my stomach did not relish the experience. It escalated to the point where, once old enough, my little brother would walk the plane's aisles, collecting those heinous little bags from the empty seats and announce "Here you go, Lizzy, for when you get sick!" loud enough for the ground crew to hear. *Great.*

In December of '81, I flew to West Africa to visit my family for Christmas break - my first flight since '74. Now a nineteen year-old college sophomore, I was significantly more self-conscious about public displays of emesis. Smoking was still permitted in the world back then, and simply the *smell* of a stale smoky airport could trigger my nausea, not to mention the necessity of spending several hours in an enclosed smoke-filled tube with wings. The initial DC to JFK leg of my flight told me all I needed to know...it wasn't going to go well, despite the Dramamine I had taken as a precaution.

Once I boarded my international flight, I found my seat and got as comfortable as one could in Pan Am coach, and tried to will myself to sleep. They would be boarding the 747 for some time.

There were two rowdy African men chatting in the aisle nearby, drinking a clear liquid - with what looked like thick bamboo stalks in it - from a large pickle jar. (I later learned that it was Sugar Cane soaking in the African equivalent of moonshine.) They were talking and laughing rather loudly, but I did my best to ignore them and invoke sleep.

I was suddenly awakened by one of the men sitting abruptly beside me. He was apparently going to be traveling the entire nine hour flight at my right elbow. Introducing himself to me and handing me his business card, he explained that he was an import-export executive from Nigeria. He asked what I did for a living, and seemed wholly unimpressed by the fact that I was a college student on my way to visit my family. He continued to chat animatedly and I listened politely while trying to appear as tired as possible, hoping he'd take the hint and let me sleep. Finally, the flight attendants announced the preparation for takeoff, which distracted him from talking and I was able to get to sleep before he could rev up again.

Once airborne and leveled off, the flight attendants brought drinks. I took a sip of the Coke I'd ordered, hoping that it would settle my stomach, but couldn't muster enthusiasm for much more, so I dozed off. I dreamily heard ice rattling, opened one eye and saw the last of my Coke being downed by my seatmate. I felt too lousy to worry about it. Besides, a replacement was only the push of a button away.

Later, the flight crew came around to take dinner requests. This was back in the day when, not only was a meal served; you had your *choice* of entrees. I declined a meal, at which point my

neighbor piped up and said “Oh, no, please...you must eat...for me.” Assuming he was chivalrous and would not eat in front of a lady who had no meal, I ordered the chicken and promptly fell back to sleep.

Awakened by the flight attendant asking me to lower my tray table, I glanced at the meal she placed before me and decided that my stomach and I weren’t ready for airplane food yet. Figuring I could wake later and nibble on it, I went back to sleep, lulled by the white noise of jet engines and my neighbor busily opening plastic-wrapped cutlery.

I awoke to conspicuous quiet. I opened my eyes in time to see him exchanging his tray for *my* tray. I glanced at his tray. He had eaten *everything*, including the pitifully desiccated parsley garnish. I was too miserable to complain. I disgustedly fell back to sleep.

Upon reaching the African continent, the first stop was Dakar, Senegal. Their “runway” was unpaved and dotted with huge potholes. The landing was less than smooth and my intestinal misery came to full realization, requiring the discreet use of the bag in the seat pocket in front of me. I was wearing a Dolman sweater, which had sleeves like a bat’s wings – trendy in the early 1980’s. I hid my carefully wrapped secret under one of my wings until we were again airborne for Liberia and it was safe to buzz for assistance.

As the flight attendant reached across my neighbor for my “package”, I brought it out from beneath my “wing”. We three noted with simultaneous horror that the defective bag had a *hole* in it. The flight attendant, God bless her, quickly placed a second bag around mine. My neighbor, however, now scooted up the back of his seat, suddenly regarding me as though I had the plague. I looked down at my clothes, now ruined, which boldly revealed my condition.

As the plane taxied to a stop on the tarmac in Liberia, the ground crew rolled the movable stairway up to the side of the jet for deplaning. My neighbor was so glad to see me going at last that he practically tossed my carry-on bag to me from the overhead bin and all but pushed me down the aisle toward the cockpit. As I approached the door of the plane, the incomparably suffocating Liberian heat and humidity swallowed me whole and took my weakened breath from me. Through the piercing morning sunlight I could see my mother, standing at the foot of the stairs on the tarmac. She was looking up at me from under her hand, which shielded her eyes from the hot African sun.

“Oooh...*bad flight*,” said she.

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