

There We Were, in a 747 with a Rabbi, a Purser, and Ted Kaczynski

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*"...Psst! Me thinks someone left something for us on the midnight cart to Sydney." Sayeth Salarino, "No Sh*t, Shylock!" -The Merchant of Venice, Willie Shakespeare, Stardate 1595.7*

One fine June afternoon in 1995, I commuted to start my LA to Sydney flight.¹ Those were good times. I was a 747-400 First Officer (FO), and this was a non-flying trip as Bunkie; that's "relief pilot" for non-airline folks. This was a case where being the non-flying FO was a good thing because we took off about 11 PM and hit the bunk before top of climb. The flight was almost entirely in darkness, but it permitted nearly regular circadian rhythm for the bunkies. We needed two bunkies for the 14 hours to down-under. My recollection is I was Assistant Chief Bunkie, a truly remarkable status.

At report time, Jan, one of the LAX ops people called us over before we got the preflight paperwork started. There was a very strange message from HQ for the flight crew. There had been a bomb threat from the Unabomber claiming to have placed a bomb on board a commercial airline flight out of LA sometime in the next six days.² There were thousands of flights that fit that description. We were but one of them.

The Unabomber was an enigma in 1995.³ Not being sure if this was one person or a group of whacked-out radicals, their modus operandi was to blow up post offices. Their end goals were not clear, hence the technical term used was "whacked-out". Clever random bombings were obviously implemented by a very smart person or persons and usually involved the United States Post Office. This had been happening, off and on, for over fifteen years, and the culprit or culprits had never been caught. Unabomber's most recent bombing was three months prior and it killed someone in Sacramento. An FBI composite sketch looked a lot like the one for DB Cooper. *Unabomber* came into everyday vernacular. Some trembled, others yawned.

Jan, the nice LAX ops lady, asked the captain what he wanted to do about the bomb threat. The captain asked if we had a choice. The ops lady said, "Gee, I don't know. Maybe...not?" We looked at each other and shrugged our shoulders. Captain Bill said, "Okay, then we're going." Just be sure to carefully inspect the aircraft before you board passengers. Frankly, it seemed pretty farfetched. Still... food for thought.

We completed our preflight work and launched into the darkness over the vast Pacific. It was a slow climb at max gross weight. The other Bunkie hit the rack first while I completed the HowGozit (predicted ETAs for each enroute waypoint) and then incredibly, very precisely, and with utmost care, calculated wake-up times. After a "See ya later", I hit the rack for about six hours of circadian rhythm restoration therapy.

At about 0510 Pacific Time, we bunkies got our wake-up dings in the bunk room and gradually stumbled out to start our shift in the window seats. It was still dark except for some stars here and there – between the cumulonimbus buildups. The North Star was no longer visible, and the Southern Cross would soon be off our port side. The turbulence hadn't been bad, thus far, so sleep was possible. We were cruising at our optimal flight level, up on fuel, and a few minutes ahead of schedule. All was routine and peaceful.

Our “change of command” briefing from Captain Bill included an issue with a passenger. The purser had been having difficulty with an enormously obese man in Business Class. During boarding in LA, he had to be wheeled to the entrance door and then he slowly struggled to get to his seat which was not nearly big enough for his ample derriere. This guy was a rabbi, so he said, and demanded inordinate quantities of attention from anyone in a uniform. At some point, he started playing grab-ars with each passing skirt which were always within easy reach of his needy wriggling fingers. The purser and every other flight attendant (FA) had been dealing with this jerk for hours and they were ready to slug him the next time he pulled some stunt. No wonder I hate working with the public. I'd have been fired long ago if I was a flight attendant. Well, I suppose all is now quiet downstairs this late into a night flight. I ordered my first cup of wake-up juice and settled into my optimal view of the instruments and radar screen.

After over an hour of me peering into the void of the intertropical convergence zone, we received a disjointed intercom call from the purser who hung up before she could make her thoughts clear. A moment later, flustered Purser came into the cockpit and disrupted my third cup of coffee in our darkened cave. It must be about that problem passenger, the morbidly obese rabbi in business class. I supposed she had the last straw with him, and she wanted one of us to go downstairs and give him an offer he couldn't refuse. But that's not what our purser had in mind.

“We found a device!”, she blurted out! This was followed by a rapid convoluted discussion filled with incoherent details.

“A bomb device, you say?” Most of us had only studied bomb-threat procedures as part of our annual ground training curriculum. It wasn't supposed to actually happen. Without looking at the book, we bunkies confidently told the purser, “We'll get right on that.” I added, “Whatever you do, don't touch it or move it!”

I didn't like her reply. “We already moved it to the forward galley.” It turned out, a passenger found said device under his seat while thrashing about trying to sleep and dutifully brought it to a flight attendant.

Okay, so it isn't a hypersensitive device. Whew! We dodged that one. I told her to leave it there, obscure it from view, and keep passengers away from the galley. One of us would be downstairs shortly to look it over.

As soon as the purser turned toward the cockpit door, we both grabbed a handful of manuals. After a quick perusal of the Flight Operations Manual (FOM), I went downstairs to take a look. It was neither large nor sophisticated, but it was convincing. It looked like a busted-up Walkman music player, cracked and all taped together.⁴ It had a bunch of wires dangling out, each one a different length and color. Okay, this could be serious...or not. I returned to the cockpit to talk it over with the other bunkie. We decided to talk to dispatch before we got the captain out of the bunk room.

I got on the HF radio and asked for a phone patch to Dispatch. As many heads as possible seemed like the best way to get the ball rolling away from us. We waited quite a while to hear from them. Meanwhile, the captain slipped out from the bunk room to use the blue room. When he returned, we tried to tell him what was happening, but he smirked and said, "Nice try.", and went back to the bunk.

We bunkies gave each other intense looks of incredulity. Those thousand-dollar naps!

The other bunkie had to go drag him out of the rack and tell him "No sh*t, sir, this is real!" I recall that bunkie had also been a war veteran. Captain rubbed his eyes, came to the full upright and locked position, and sat down in the jump seat to get the full update from us. About then, the HF radio operator relayed to us that dispatch wanted us to use the satellite phone. Huh?! Do we have a Sat Phone in this plane? How about that, it's the first one we'd seen. Unfortunately, we didn't know how to use it. Our Comm panel always had a button marked Sat Phone but this was the first time that button was connected to anything but dead air. We grabbed our flight manuals to look at that Sat Phone bulletin we just posted before this flight. Freshly educated, we gave it a try.

I punched in some numbers and we heard a Ma Bell phone ringing. It sounded as close to us as a call from the Denver mayor to the Broncos General Manager after a home loss. "AT&T Operator. Number please."

Alright, we got an answer! "This is United 815. Please connect me with United Airlines Dispatch at 312-123-4567." This was working out better than I expected.

The reply came, "Credit card please."

"What?!" I was so flabbergasted I could only stare at the other bunkie for a moment. I took a deep breath and replied, "Ma'am, we are a United Airlines flight over the Pacific Ocean. We believe we have a bomb onboard. We are in an emergency situation and need to speak with our dispatcher immediately. Tell HIM to pay for the call."

Understanding our dilemma, she replied, "Yes sir, a collect call; please stand by." We soon had our dispatcher, gave him some details, then he said he'd get things moving at his end. We hung up and started to work out a plan with the captain.

While working out said plan, the Sat Phone rang. Wow, this thing works both ways. I wasn't sure if I should answer it like a radio or a telephone. I went with, "United 815, go

ahead”, and heard, “This is Special Agent Jones of the FBI. This is a conference call. Please verify your situation and describe the device.” Oh brother, here we go...

Everyone that thought they were an important United Airlines manager was on this call and kept demanding information and, of course, told us what they thought about things in general, us in particular, and what we should do. Agent Jones finally angrily interrupted and said, “Everybody shut up! I’ll do all the talking and if I want you to say something, I’ll make that clear!” Ah, some leadership in the war room.

Believing there would be less heat with the device than with the FBI, I volunteered to go downstairs, and the captain got into the left seat in his jammies. Over the next few hours, he skillfully directed our crew of sixteen in the necessary preparations to bring this situation to a safe conclusion.

We three wide-awake pilots felt it was not a bomb and likely really was just a lost music player. Yet, we had no choice but to assume this was real. Maybe it contained C4 plastic explosives or was a relay to the big one downstairs. So, Captain Bill kept the FBI and his entourage informed and dodged thunderstorms while the other bunkie played pilot-not-flying duties and I went downstairs to implement our plan. We let the flying FO sleep so someone would be fresh and awake for the landing. I suggested we descend a flight level or two so we could raise the cabin altitude in case we had an explosion. A lower differential pressure might not cause as much damage. We had enough fuel to do that. We got ATC clearance to descend and our cabin altitude was soon above 9,000 feet, just under the mask and warning siren limit. We didn’t want to risk a descent and landing until we had a fully implemented plan in place. We were past Fiji and nearing Noumea by then but continuing to Sydney made the most sense. They had a class A fire department with plenty of crash trucks and a 5-star FBI rated bomb squad.

The plan was to move said device from the forward galley to door 4R, our Least Risk Bomb Location (LRBL). My seniority granted me the title of *Matre d’ la Bombe* and the flight attendants ran interference with the passengers, most of whom were sleeping or at least simply blearily watching a movie or leafing through magazines.

“Nothin’ to see here, folks...”, I mumbled, as I nonchalantly eased past drowsy passengers while carrying a towel-bedazzled device on a serving tray. I tried whistling and looking up, wistfully, toward the overhead bins. It was as if I was carrying a midnight snack for the person in seat 99Z, personally delivered by a wandering genuine pilot. Three FAs executed a distraction maneuver undulating aft down the left aisle, much like the fairies in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, while carrying random objects to make anyone wonder what in tarnation they were doing. In a well-executed pic play, I slipped down the right aisle, device-laden serving tray in hand, right behind another FA who was simply looking like she was stretching her legs and trying to kill time. She also stared wistfully at overhead bins. I felt like my name was Puck and my leading-edge FA

was Titania or maybe some other freaky forest sprite hopped up on pansy juice. Not many people noticed our dual conga lines of elvish creatures.

Once in the back, we asked maybe fifteen to twenty passengers to move forward to “better seats” while we worked on a “slight issue”. Our issues were notably always “slight”. Those passengers were too sleepy to care and quickly complied. I didn’t want to beat the captain’s proper PA announcement, yet to come.

We built an impressive castle of seat cushions, blankets, trays, pillows, seat belt extenders, rope, and anything else that was soft, warm, fuzzy, or could connect our art nouveau potpourri masterpiece. It was floor to ceiling and encompassed several now fully occupied and padded seat rows. I stood back and marveled at our creation of performance art by a handful of flight attendants, moi, and two volunteer passengers whose suspicions had become aroused. Most of us were smiling while quietly working our magic. We were happy in our work in a *River Kwai* sort of way. I intentionally wore a Cheshire Cat grin to keep emotions disarmed. That was easy because I thought this was likely an exercise of ludicrous uncontrolled angst. Still, it could be real...

Before we finished our creation at door 4R, the captain made his announcement. I don’t recall what he said but it was pure silver-tongued magic. He made everyone feel good about what could be their impending doom. I should have written it down so it could be placed into the FOM for all to utilize in critical moments. Most folks were pretty sedate about the situation, at least outwardly. Captain Bill said some passengers in the rear of the airplane would be moved forward by our flight attendants. They heartily volunteered and were standing up before the captain finished his announcement. I love enthusiasm.

A few hours later, all of us were in our uniforms and making our descent to Kingsford Smith International Airport in Sydney. Numerous announcements had been made to put all at ease. An emergency was declared hours ago, and all parties involved, on the ground and in the air, had their assignments. The flying FO was fresh and up to speed on our situation. I sat in the jump seat and manually controlled the cabin so as to keep minimum differential pressure and had us depressurized by 9,000 feet. We all had assigned duties should the worst occur. In spite of some confidence in our assumption that this was not a bomb, we couldn’t help but wonder if our next breath would be our last. Likely not, yet still...

But all was normal. I later learned that downstairs in the main cabin, the purser was leading some kind of prayer session and singing church-camp songs with whomever wished to participate. Whatever works.... I wondered what her landing announcement was like. She later told us that we pilots were at the top of her prayer list which somehow made us feel rather good.

Sydney tower had us land on a different runway than was currently active. As dawn creased the yawning face of the eastern sky above the Tasman Sea, our eighteen wheels gently kissed the concrete, we rolled to the end, and pulled onto the apron. The ground handlers immediately rolled up air stairs so all of the left side exits could be used

for egress without popping slides. We had decided that if the device did not blow by the time we set the parking brake, it was not likely to blow at all. We didn't need broken ankles from slide evacuations if not necessary. Still, a quick getaway seemed like a good idea and the FBI agreed.

The flying pilots shut down the engines and we bunkies went downstairs to help get everyone off. They exited pretty quickly, no doubt due to proper motivation and superior voice commands. Those FAs can really scream when required, but today's exit was not quite as urgent as during annual recurrent training. "Release your seatbelts and get going - Don't dawdle-Don't push anyone- Keep it moving- Don't kick that old lady!" did project urgency without the need to trample the backs of mothers and infants. Three hundred people got off in under four minutes. Wearing heavy duty space suits, the 5-star rated Sydney bomb squad quickly came aboard before we could leave. I showed them our castle of cushions and gave them the coordinates of the device. They told us to get out and they'd handle the rest. Would there be a smoking crater on that apron?

The passengers boarded buses, sans luggage, and were taken to the terminal for customs and security debriefings. We crew members soon followed. Baggage processing and delivery took quite a while – a really long while. The press had a two-hour advance notice about us, but we did an end run around the phalanx of paparazzi. Any landing you can sprint away from is a good one.

Unusual skills were used or learned that night. The nice FBI man told us to keep an open mic on the Sat Phone all the way to landing and evacuation. They wanted to hear the explosion and screaming if it came. It didn't. We made worldwide news, but it became just another war story in the bar, soon to be forgotten.⁵ Even the news organizations lost interest in our Unabomber threat within a day or two.

Later, we learned it really was just a poorly repaired Walkman, accidentally dropped by a swing shift cabin cleaner earning minimum wage.

Said Walkman was summarily executed by the 5-star rated Sydney bomb squad to leave no lingering doubts. The firing squad was held out of sight of the three hundred evacuees. They never told us where the body was buried. I'll bet the cabin cleaner always wondered what became of his music device. If he ever found out the truth, a federal judge had to have been involved.

Our bus ride away from the airport frenzy was a welcome relief, that is until we got a message for us via the driver's radio. A voice crackled, "Ask the flight attendants if they were aware a passenger was left behind on the plane." The purser jumped up and raced forward to the radio. We all stared at each other, blankly, with feelings of dread. "Who is the passenger?", she asked in a panicked voice.

"This guy says he's some kind of rabbi...a really big fellow." We all burst out laughing and the purser had to take a moment to compose herself. He was fine, by the way, and had been watching the bomb squad working the problem. He was being taken to the

terminal now. We all started to relax a bit but could not wipe the smiles away for some time.

Normally, after this long all-nighter, everyone in the crew headed straight to bed upon checking in at the downtown hotel. Not this time. Captain Bill recommended a breakfast debriefing and being too wired to sleep, we pilots eagerly agreed. Over eggs, pancakes, and some kind of tropical fruit, the captain told me to write the Captain's Report and make darned sure it was from a minimalist perspective. He told me to state, "We had a problem. We followed SOP. We solved said problem. The end! Never say more than needed. And don't talk to any darned reporters if they show up." He paid the breakfast bill so who was I to argue.

I returned to my room and flipped on the TV. Yumpin' Yiminy! We're the lead story! My mother will know and go into apoplexy on the other side of the world. She's a news junky and knew everything that was fit to print before anybody else did. In a panic, I got the AT&T credit calling card out of my wallet and looked up how to make international calls. It was much simpler to use that Sat Phone. It took me an eternity, but it finally started ringing.

She answered and, with controlled calm. I said, "Mom, I don't want you to worry. We had a problem on our flight to Sydney, but everything is fine." It was late afternoon there and she matter-of-factly replied, "Oh, dear. What happened?" I envisioned her filing her nails.

I gently continued, "We had a bomb threat, and we might be on the news. There was NOT a bomb." I wasn't sure yet, but this was a time when a little lie was for the greater good.

About to indulge in a juicy news story, Mom came back with a perked-up voice, "Oh yes, it's just coming on TV now! ... Oh, my! ... Oh, My Lord! ... HIMMEL!!" That's Swedish for "Heavens!" Whew, I just made it.

I then called my wife and got her calmed down which was not as tricky a proposition as dealing with the woman who gave me life- and if I don't watch my Ps and Qs - death. I'm lucky that my wife has a much better grasp of reality than my mother. Ahh, I could finally get into the rack, an actual bed, for much needed shut eye. My Adrenaline Low warning light had illuminated.

I usually started my second morning in Sydney with a morning run across the Sydney Bridge, past the Opera House, and then along the scenic harbor. It was a great way to add endorphins, decompress, and reorient myself to daytime ops. The coastal New South Wales weather was reliably nice, and it was always a different season than at home. Ferries crisscrossed *Sydney Harbour* and I often hopped one to go sight-seeing. The salt air was a fine elixir for the soul.

That next morning, I completed this running ritual, felt reenergized and at peace, then headed to the City Extra Café at the Circular Quay for a good Aussie breakfast. It was

conveniently located near the Manley ferry terminal. I enjoyed my eggs, rasher of bacon, baked tomatoes, and toast with Vegemite while reading the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Yep, we made the headlines – above the fold. It was an interesting read that continued for quite a few column-inches and with several pictures. The reporter got most of the story correct. He made it sound like we created world peace. That's so much better than being accused of crimes against humanity. It's not unlike the dichotomy of Great Scientific Achievement vs. Terrible Engineering Failure, something which angers all engineers, my planned profession in my college days. Today, we were on the good side of this debate.

I turned several *Morning Herald* pages to find the story continuation. One look and I blasted spittle across the table! Oh No! My newfound feeling of peacefulness – gone in a flash! Our rabbi in Business Class was interviewed! But his story wasn't what I expected to emanate from his lips. He was not overlooked during our hasty exit because he told our purser he couldn't walk down the stairs. Someone told him they'd send a cargo lift device to get him. It didn't happen right away, and I think the ball got dropped on this request. He sat there for quite a while and watched the bomb squad do their thing – all rather fascinating. Before they departed with the device, the bomb squad called again and got the cargo lift and a motorized wheelchair for him. The rabbi finally got to Customs maybe an hour after the others. Incredibly, he told the reporters the crew had done a wonderful job getting everyone safely to their destination and on time, too. Watching the bomb squad was particularly interesting. The rabbi, actual or not, had a huge smile in the news photo, as if he had just gotten off of the best E-coupon ride in Disneyland. I'd have never guessed.... Maybe it was the Purser's prayer meeting and hootenanny – a mysterious and magnificent merger of at least two faiths while under duress.

The next afternoon, our crew bus conversations included all sixteen of us and were more lively than typical on the long drive to Kingsford Smith to start our return leg to LAX. Unexpected emotions often overwhelm the minds of people following a stressful anxiety-laden situation. Complete mental breakdowns can occur with inherent manic outbursts of tears and moans at unpredictable intervals. In our case, we couldn't keep from laughing every few minutes. It was the perfect emotional release.

In Sydney operations, there were more suits milling around than usual. I had that Captains Report ready for all the executives that lined up to take a gander, but they didn't learn much from it, as per captain's orders. There were handshakes, back slaps, and smiles the likes of which I'd not seen on company property for a decade. For some reason, this brought to mind that scene in *Catch 22*, when all the flight crews were presented Air Medals for deliberately pickling their bombs into the Med. The company culture was different at these far-flung outposts. We escaped the office chaos and went to the plane to get the preflight going.

Before long, the Australia General Manager for United showed up in the cockpit with both hands carrying some heavy stuff. In those days, she was Anne Keating, the petite

baby sister of the sitting prime minister of Australia, Paul Keating.⁶ She was well liked, and we'd seen her, at times, in the past. Today she was ecstatic. She told us the PR from our incident was incredibly good for United and couldn't thank us enough for a job well done. She had six-packs of the finest Aussie beer she could find. One six-pack for each of the four pilots. Dang, so there are perks for pilots, after all! Anne soon moved onward and upward as a senior executive at several major Australian corporations, leaving UAL in her rear-view mirror.⁷ Anne earned a top spot for most in-demand executive in the corporate world of Australia due to a line-in-the sand ethics stand she took against corruption. She did well as a board member and eventually as a CEO and she didn't declare bankruptcy to do so. We were sorry when Anne left United. She delivered excellent beer.

Our return to LA was uneventful and boring, just like we hoped. It turned out that I hadn't lied to my mother. Yet there were some lingering questions. I never did learn who paid for the 4-hour Satellite Phone call, but it wasn't me. Who the heck was in charge of inspecting our aircraft before we departed LAX? And what would happen during the two remaining days on the Unabomber's six-day clock?

Once safely at home, I recalled the 1994 movie *Speed* about a bomb that armed when a bus went above 50 mph and would explode if it slowed down. Extrapolating variables in my horribly fatigued mind, I was no longer sure it was such a good idea to change cabin pressure two thousand miles from Sydney. If pressure goes up, does altitude go up or down? I couldn't make that calculation until I had eight hours of sleep.

About nine months later, on 3 April 1996, the FBI identified the Unabomber as Ted Kaczynski and arrested him following a raid on his remote Montana cabin. Ted was a brilliant mathematician and had been a professor at one time. This seemingly brilliant mad scientist couldn't wrap his head around government conspiracies manifested in uncontrolled industrialization, technology, their university enablers, and the snail-mail service which somehow drove him insane and into off-grid isolation. Mr. Unabomber, a notable influencer of the Oklahoma City bomber, is now serving eight life sentences without parole at Colorado Supermax.

Ted Kaczynski did not place that "device" we found on our way to Sydney that night. It was simply his sick sense of humor that got to us. In the military, we called it psychological warfare ops (Psy Ops). It could also be called the Twilight Zone. It seems to me that, not just Rod Sterling, but also Mel Brooks, Lewis Carroll, and Gene Roddenberry were involved. Whacked-out Ted had been messing with our minds all along. I think he was a scab.

So, a rabbi, a purser, and Ted Kaczynski walk into a bar. Not a cheap sleazy bar, but one that cost \$200 million and goes amazingly fast. The rabbi says to the bartender...

ENDNOTES: Did you think I made all this stuff up? Well, maybe just a little:

¹ United Flight 815, 27 June 1995, LAX-SEA; ID-823/27. Captain Bill and First Officers Paul, Rick, and Gary. I think Rick was the other bunkie. Purser's name not remembered but I have a physical description. On behalf of sixteen crewmembers, I hope the statutes of limitations have run out after twenty-five years. If not, then I'll claim the Unabomber wrote this.

² "West Coast Under Unabomber Alert", *Chicago Tribune*, 29 June 1995, (<https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1995-06-29-9506290240-story.html>) : accessed 5 October 2020.)

³ "Ted Kaczynski", aka The Unabomber, *Wikipedia.org*, (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ted_Kaczynski) : accessed 5 October 2020.)

⁴ "Walkman", *Wikipedia.org*, (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walkman>) : accessed 5 Oct 2020.) If you're too young to recall these devices, they were cutting edge audio technology in 1980s and 1990s. Now their greatest use is for museum displays and target practice.

⁵ "Bomb scare was false alarm on Sydney flight", *UPI*, 28 Jun 1995, (<https://www.upi.com/Archives/1995/06/28/Bomb-scare-was-false-alarm-on-Sydney-flight/1781804312000/>) : accessed 5 October 2020.)

⁶ "Being Anne Keating", *Financial Review*, 29 January 2002, (<https://www.afr.com/politics/being-anne-keating-20020125-j6zow>) : accessed 5 October 2020.)

⁷ "Anne Keating joins board of GI Dynamics", *Herald Sun*, 12 September 2011, (<https://www.heraldsun.com.au/business/the-day-a-former-pms-sister-took-on-a-former-pms-son/news-story/6ee9eeb2cf3d6ab7d656922397a8c0ce?sv=d512b5ecf430821c45528e1f2fd10f17&nk=c41209f28ad5d6e52470720cd46c1c8b-1601668330>) : accessed 5 Oct 2020.)