

Aloha Flight 243's miraculous landing left an indelible mark

I have a great fondness for Aloha Airlines, even though it went out of business 13 years ago. I admired its founders and had many friends who worked there.

Last week I was reminded of Aloha Flight 243, when part of the fuselage of the plane ripped off due to metal fatigue on April 28, 1988.

A flight attendant in the aisle, Clarabelle Ho Lansing, was swept out of the massive hole in the plane and never found.

An anonymous post on the internet described the co-pilot, Mimi Tompkins, saying that "her blazing red hair turned white within two weeks. She turned to motivational speaking afterward, and dyed her hair back to red, while keeping one long patch of gray in the front to show the effects of how the mental trauma manifested itself physically."

I could see the plane in my mind, after it landed on Maui, but some of the details were blurry. I decided to look into the event and found an Associated Press interview with Tompkins.

Bob Schornstheimer was captain of the now-infamous Flight 243 from Hilo to Honolulu, and Madeline "Mimi" Tompkins was his first officer. Eighty-nine passengers and six crew were aboard.

Tompkins was piloting the fateful flight, and was just reaching up to switch to autopilot as the aircraft reached 24,000 feet and maximum pressurization, when she said she felt her hand just jerk back. "I remember hearing a ripping sound," she recalled.

"I will hear that sound forever. It was like a sardine can opening, but multiplied a million times." Both Tompkins and the captain were in shock for about 15 seconds, she said, enough time for the plane to lose 1,500 feet in altitude.

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Once they snapped out of it, it was another five minutes before either realized the left engine had stopped. "We were too busy flying the plane, trying not to lose altitude. It was too noisy in the cockpit to hear each other, and we communicated through hand signals."

The plane was passing Makena on Maui and turned to land at Kahului, which brought out all its emergency equipment.

Tompkins looked back and saw the tail oscillating in the opposite direction of the cockpit, the Associated Press reported, and the floor moving in waves. That was the first time she thought

they might not make it.

One passenger, Eric Becklin of Honolulu, told the Maui News he was sitting near the back of the aircraft when "all of a sudden, I heard a loud noise, a bang, but not an explosion, and felt a strong pressure change.

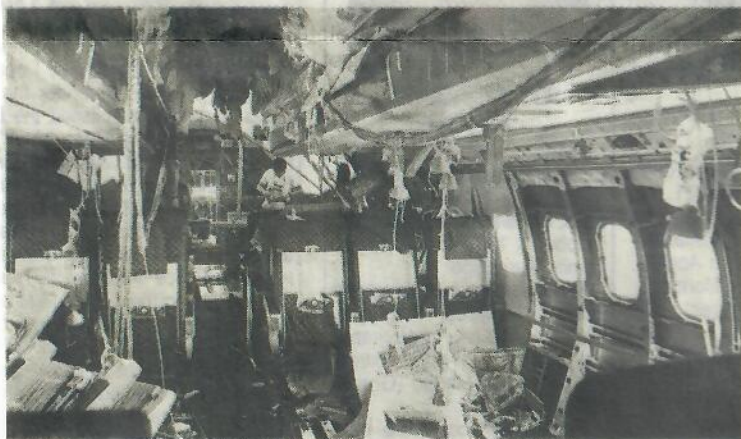
"I looked up front and saw the front top of the airplane disintegrating, just going apart, pieces of it flying away. It started with a hole about a yard wide, and it just kept coming apart.

"I thought it was going to fall apart before he could land it," Becklin said. "I felt an incredible sadness that I wouldn't see my family again, but the next instant, all of the people in the back of the plane looked at each other and there was this incredible wave of hope as the plane continued forward.

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Aloha Airlines Flight 243, above, lost the top front part of its fuselage on April 28, 1988. At left, a worker inspects the front portion of the plane's interior.

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We all started talking instantly, babbling, that the pilot was going to be able to land the plane."

Tompkins insisted that the real hero of the catastrophe was Schornstheimer. She was just doing her job, she said.

That job included dealing with multiple malfunctions, including structural failure, landing gear indicator failure, communications failure and loss of power to one of the Boeing 737-297's two engines, while trying to help the captain keep the plane from breaking in half, and land the damaged craft in the space of 13 minutes.

Preparation

What saved the crew and passengers from certain death, Tompkins said, was the fact that both she and the captain were prepared.

Tompkins had been preparing for months for her captain's test and had memorized nearly every checklist used in flying, not just those required for the exam, she said.

"I couldn't have been more prepared if they had called me the night before and said, 'Mimi, tomorrow the fuselage is going to rip off your plane, so get ready.'

"Since I had memorized all those lists, there was no hesitation in my reactions."



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Madeline "Mimi" Tompkins

*First officer, Aloha Airlines
Flight 243*



ALOHA AIRLINES / 1979

Two minutes before touchdown, indicators told the crew that they had no nose landing gear.

The co-pilot feared that the cockpit would break off on landing. The control tower told the crew that the nose gear was extended only 30 seconds before the plane touched down.

"The captain made the most beautiful landing I had ever seen," Tompkins said.

Maui had only a few ambulances back then, but tour companies helped transport

injured passengers to the hospital.

Litigation

My friend, retired attorney Willson Moore, told me he got a call from Aloha Airlines' insurer within a few days, asking him to defend Aloha Airlines in expected passenger lawsuits resulting from the incident.

"By 1988, my trial practice with my law firm, which is now Rush Moore LLP, was almost exclusively aviation, representing the pilot, airline company or part manufacturer, whichever was sued for causing an aircraft accident.

"The cause was metal fatigue, which started near the aircraft door, then propagated towards the rear of the fuselage, literally peeling off a huge portion of the aluminum shell of the cabin."

This was not an unknown phenomenon in the aircraft industry, Moore said. "In World War II the Brits early had identified metal fatigue in their fighter aircraft after extensive service and in which frequent rapid descents and climbs in aerial combat were common."

The prevention was stronger metal aircraft frames and also frequent X-ray inspections for early detection of sometimes microscopic metal cracks.

Boeing had never anticipated that multiple daily short-haul flights up to pressurization altitude, descending and landing would eventually cause

cracks in the metal.

"My favorite aviation accident investigator was Perry Brown," Moore continued. "Because aviation defense was such a specialized field and there were very few of us in Honolulu trying aviation defense cases (three to four lawyers), everyone identified Perry with me.

"After Aloha 243 successfully landed at Kahului Airport, Mimi Tompkins shakily made it down to the tarmac where she suddenly spotted disembarking Perry Brown, who was a passenger on 243 coming from Hilo on another case.

"Upon seeing Perry, Mimi exclaimed, 'How in hell did Willie Moore find out about this so soon?'"

There was only one fatality, and that was the Aloha flight attendant Clarabelle Lansing. "Since her wrongful death claim was covered by her separate workers' compensation insurance, she was not a part of our lawsuit.

"As I recall, some 10-15 passengers filed suit against Aloha and Boeing. Most of them had amazingly minor injuries — a couple of bone fractures and serious cuts from flying debris. Most recited fright and fear for their lives as their major claim.

"I told the attorneys for those, 'Don't forget, we landed you safely and without loss of life!'"

Moore doesn't remember the specifics, but believes all the passengers reached a settlement in the five-figure

range. Three years later Tompkins and Schornstheimer also settled lawsuits.

Fault

Boeing and Aloha argued about which was at fault. "After many months my research and court arguments finally persuaded Boeing that the major cause of the Aloha 243 incident was Boeing not recognizing the extent to which their aircraft would be used so frequently in short-haul ascents and descents," Moore said.

Aloha, however, was slow to forgive Boeing for trying to heap blame on them and, for quite a while, bought no more Boeing aircraft, instead preferring BAC 111s made by the British Aircraft Corp. for their interisland fleet.

The Boeing 737, named Queen Liliuokalani, never flew again. It was scrapped on Maui.

Both pilots remained with Aloha Airlines. Schornstheimer, now 75, retired in August 2005. Madeline Tompkins remained a captain of the airline's Boeing 737-700 aircraft until the airline ceased operations, then flew with Hawaiian Airlines. She is 69 today.

Both pilots were honored in 1988 with Superior Airman Awards by the Air Line Pilots Association.

"The lesson we all learned is life is very short," Tompkins concludes. "You have to be prepared. Do all the things you want to do, and say all the things you want to say to those you love."

Schornstheimer agrees.

"Life is precious, and we need to remember that," he said. "Considering what many folks have been through this past year, I'm doing well. I am grateful to all those caring for others, in and out of hospitals, and to those who developed, manufacture, ship, and administer the vaccines."

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