NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

NEWSDAY, SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2001

On First Flight Out

United passengers still tense after attack

By Sumathi Reddy
and Joe Haberstroh
STAFF WRITERS

The United Airlines ground crew stood on pavement washed with rain and waved goodbye Friday to Flight 897, one of the first passenger planes to leave New York since hijackers slammed jumbo jets into the World Trade Center.

Minutes later, at 3:22 p.m., passengers sat hushed as the engines of the Los Angeles-bound Boeing 767 roared and the half-empty aircraft lifted into a sky smudged with smoke ascending from the gash in the Manhattan skyline.

"I can assure you, this will be a safe trip," announced one of the flight attendants. "God Bless America."

Her remark was met with silence. The atmosphere inside the cabin was subdued. Hardly a murmur arose, even when it was made clear that there would be no charge on Flight 897 for at least two alcoholic drinks. Most of the passengers were from California. They said they were simply glad to be getting out of town at last.

"I just want to get home to my own bed," said Sindy Hawke, of Santa Monica. "I saw one of the worst things in the world, and I'm kind of numb."

Inside the terminal, the passengers had faced the tightened security promised earlier this week by the Federal Aviation Administration.

"If you have a knife or a blade, put it in the luggage you are going to check in," workers told travelers even before they entered the United terminal.

Only ticketed passengers were allowed inside the building. United limited passengers to one carry-on bag. Luggage to be checked-in was slid through X-ray machines.

Guards electronically frisked every passenger with metal-detecting wands even after they had passed through the walk-through security checkpoints. Among those searched was 4-year-old Emily Kugler.

"Do what Daddy's doing," said her father, Garry, a writer from Los Angeles. He spread his feet a bit as the security guard waved the wand over him. Emily did the same with a giggle.

Kugler and the other passengers said they supported the new, tougher security measures.

"When you're doing a body-scan of a 4-year-old, it looks kind of ridiculous," Kugler said. "But, when you think of it, it was ridiculous that a plane got driven into the World Trade Center."

Once at the departure gate, many passengers seemed to be selected at random for yet another wand-search. A few more were asked to open up their carry-ons again.

By the time the passengers filed aboard the jet, the flight had been rescheduled from 1:30 p.m. to 2:30, then to 3:30.

passengers of Flight 897 heard soothing messages from the pilot. "You know it is going to be safe, with the security measures you have seen outside," Capt. Jim Lattimer said.

Sometimes oddly, the flight blended the routines of American air travel with changes tied to the extraordinary events of a few days before. Flight attendants delivered the safety-procedure speech as they wore small, paper American flags pinned to their uniforms with black ribbons. They offered an almost reassuring but familiar-sounding meal option: chicken with noodles or tortellini. But when the sleeves of plasticware arrived, they contained no knives.

The mood onboard lightened as the jet began its descent into the Los Angeles basin. Laughter punctuated conversations, and when the plane touched down at Los Angeles International Airport at 8:44 p.m., passengers applauded.

"We made it!" one man said.

CITY_21MC100_011829412

NYC-WTC_000412154