

# Duescher Pulls Plane Out of Dive - Saves 52 Lives

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WASHINGTON (UPI) — This is the story of a plane, a pilot, and a disaster that didn't happen.

Go back to July 12, 1963. Shortly before 11 p.m. (CDT), a United Air Lines Boeing 720 jet commanded by Capt. Lynden E. Duescher was cruising over Nebraska at 35,000 feet.

The flight was number 746, San Francisco to Chicago. The Boeing was one of several planes United had modified for its one-class service — using five-abreast seating and no cabin dividers. Aboard were 53 passengers, the usual cross-section of American social and economic life found in any air liner cabin.

Before leaving San Francisco, Duescher had received a company weather forecast and analysis indicating a mild atmospheric disturbance building up over Nebraska. A firm believer in the airline pilot's creed ("In God we trust — everything else we check"), Duescher turned on his weather - warning radar sometime before entering the suspected area.

Climb Above Storm

Flight 746 was approaching O'Neil, Neb., when Duescher's radar picked up mild turbulence a few miles ahead. With traditional caution, he turned on the seat belt sign. It was a routine and almost automatic act, but it was to prevent injuries in the next few minutes. At the same time, the entire flight deck crew fastened their shoulder harnesses as well as their own seat belts.

"Let's see if we can climb above it," Duescher suggested



DISASTER AVERTED—Lynden E. Duescher is shown here seated at the controls of the plane in which he averted a disaster in an emergency situation last July. He is credited with saving the lives of 53 passengers on a United Air Lines Boeing 720. (UPI)

to his copilot. "Ask ATC (Air Traffic Control) for 41,000." Permission to climb to 41,000

clamping on tortured metal and human bodies alike. The time was 10:55 p.m. (CDT).

At this precise moment, the fate of the 53 passengers hinged on Duescher's instinctive reaction vs. the training that is drummed into the mind and soul of every jet pilot — "You fly 'em by the book, not instinct."

Instinct told him to bring the nose up as quickly as possible. Instinct told him that he had to act fast or the dive might tear off his wings.

But in this instance, instinct was a blood-brother of panic. Duescher did not panic. He knew he lacked control over his elevators. But he also knew he still had plenty of sky between the 720 and the ground. He resisted the human, normal impulse to move the elevators as soon as the dive started. He let the Boeing fall, using wing flaps and spoilers to keep the speed down, hoping to regain control gradually. 20,000. 19,000. 18,000.

#### Returns to Normal

Gingerly and tenderly, he brought the yoke back. The nose came up. At 12,000 feet, flight 720 returned to a normal keel.

In the cabin, there was no outward panic mainly because it was dark outside, giving passengers little with which to relate about the plane's maneuvering. But there still was fear, as Duescher was to find out.

Flight 746 climbed to 41,000 and proceeded to Chicago.

The 53 passengers disembarked. When Duescher left the plane, some of them booed him.

The Federal Aviation Agency, Civil Aeronautics Board, United and Boeing conducted a thorough investigation of flight 746's brush with disaster. Significantly, the incident closely resembled what had led up to the fatal crash of another Boeing 720 in the Florida Everglades earlier this year — a Northwest jet that disintegrated while climbing through severe thunderstorm turbulence.

#### Verdict Unknown

The CAB has not issued a verdict on the Northwest crash. But there is considerable evidence that the plane was caught in a severe updraft, resulting in a stall and structural failure of the elevators. The pilot may have tried to pull up the nose too soon, although that is pure conjecture.

In both cases, the severity of the turbulence — a violent down-

#### Dr. Livingstone's Reply Is Given

NEW YORK (UPI) — "Dr. Livingstone, I presume," said Sir Henry Morgan Stanley when he met Dr. David Livingstone. The greeting has been immortalized in print. But what did Livingstone say in reply? The Coffee Brewing Institute reports he replied, "Just in time for coffee, Stanley."

United since then has changed its operations manual — increasing the turbulence penetration speed enough to prevent a stall even in a severe updraft.

UAL President W. A. Patterson wrote a personal letter to most of the 53 persons who had been aboard flight 746. It began:

"Several weeks ago you were

a passenger on our flight 746 from San Francisco to Chicago. I am sure the experience was frightening to say the least. If we are to be deserving of your confidence, we must be completely frank in providing you with the facts involved in such an incident . . ."

Patterson then went on to relate the circumstances! Speak-

ing of Duescher in particular he added:

"I don't know of any experience where a flight officer kept his head and under such a severe experience had the knowledge of what not to do as well as what to do under such conditions. We can all be grateful to him for the deliberate and cool-headed manner in which

he handled and solved such a critical emergency."

There was one more aftermath to the story of flight 746.

A few weeks ago, Patterson invited Duescher and his crew to lunch. He handed each a check. The exact amount cannot be revealed but it was in five figures.

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