

Smoke, an awful noise and fear on Flight 1499

By **GEOFF BERG**

AT 8 p.m. on Nov. 24, 1993, my Continental Airlines flight lumbered into the air, packed to the rafters on the busiest travel day of the year. I was in the middle seat of the emergency row.

Flight 1499 was on its way from Houston, where I attend law school, to Tucson, where I was to spend Thanksgiving with my girlfriend, Gabrielle.

Flying had never been an easy experience for me, until the months preceding this flight; I had somehow learned to relax. On this night, I even ventured to the restroom while the plane was climbing and the "fasten seat belt" sign was still on.

As I unlocked the door to exit the lavatory, I heard an awful noise. The reassuring hum of the engines was interrupted by a grinding sound of failure: the plane shook violently. Stewardesses ran up the aisle with the drink cart. I followed quickly, back to seat 16B.

It sounded as if a wrench had been thrown into a metal fan set to high speed. The plane quickly lost altitude. Stewardesses screamed at the passengers to put on their seat belts.

The cabin filled with smoke and people began to cough. It was hard to see up the aisle and even harder to breathe. I worried that even if we did make it to the ground in one piece, we would die of smoke inhalation.

Addressing the passengers sitting in the two emergency rows, a stewardess said, "When we get on the ground, if you hear 'Easy Victor,' re-move the emergency doors, pass them to the row

Berg is a third-year student at the University of Houston Law Center.

behind you and get out. Those on the aisle must stay and help the others out before leaving." Hearing that I would be one of the first off the plane, I felt a sense of guilty relief.

Despite the danger, I saw none of the reaction I would have expected. No one screamed. No one ran up and down the aisle yelling, "We're all going to die!" (although most of us thought it).

Instead, some people were calm, almost serene. Some threw up. But most prayed, begging, "Please, God, please. . . ."

I turned to the woman sitting to my right and asked, "What religion are you?" — not a question I would normally ask. "None, really," was her response. She looked calm, almost relaxed, except for the way she was gripping the handle on the emergency door.

"I'm a Christian, though," she said, "and I know God won't take me away from my daughter now." I thought she was selfish for tempting the fates by daring them to kill her and the rest of us with her.

I was 24 and had never really thought about death. I had done nothing. Left nothing. I would die in a plane crash and there would be nothing left of me. I did not want to die.

Things got quiet. The smoke thinned. I leaned forward and said the Shema, the holiest Jewish prayer. I said it twice.

The stewardess came back and told us that we were going to try and land in Austin. We were making steep dives and sharp turns. Another

stewardess was barking orders: "Remove all pens and pencils from your pockets!"

We landed flat, front and back wheels touching down simultaneously, going fast enough to take off. By then the smoke had just about cleared. People applauded, but I knew better. We were just on the ground, not out of the woods. We came to a stop on the runway and were surrounded by firetrucks and men dressed from head to toe in silver fire suits. They inspected the still smoking engine.

Word came from the cockpit that the fire seemed to be out and we were going to taxi to the gate. We moved toward the terminal.

Suddenly the plane stopped and the lights and engine were turned off. One of the stewardesses called out from up front, "There's a fuel leak! Everyone out! Don't open the side doors! Leave all of your bags here! Out the front!"

Everyone stood up, knowing that the danger had re-emerged. The plane could explode. We stood in the aisle, exchanging looks of shock and fear. Standing there was strange, I thought. If someone were just looking in, it would all appear perfectly normal — passengers waiting to get off an airplane, waiting for the line to move.

Finally, I made my way to the front. Both doors were open and I was directed to the yellow chute on my right. I slid down, ran toward the terminal and caught up with the man who had been sitting to my left. He seemed to be about my age, and just as terrified on the way down.

"Were we just in a plane crash?" I asked, and saw in his eyes glazed emptiness as he tried, but could not answer.