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Flight attendant Amy Sweeney called ground staff after American Airlines Flight 11 was hijacked on Sept. 11. (ABCNEWS.com)

Calm Before the Crash

Flight 11 Crew Sent Key Details Before Hitting the Twin Towers

July 18 — On the morning of Sept. 11, American Airlines ground manager Michael Woodward received a phone call that immediately got his full attention.

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"Listen, and listen to me very carefully. I'm on Flight 11. The airplane has been hijacked," said the voice on the other end. The caller was Amy Sweeney, a flight attendant on board American Airlines Flight 11, which had just been hijacked on its way from Boston to Los Angeles.

Over the next 25 minutes, Sweeney, a 13-year veteran with the airline, calmly relayed information to Woodward that would later be crucial in helping the FBI identify the men who hijacked the plane and flew it into the north tower of the World Trade Center.

Another flight attendant, Betty Ong, who had been with American Airlines for 14 years, also called colleagues on the ground.

Seat Numbers Identified Hijackers

Flight 11 had taken off from Boston's Logan Airport at 7:59 a.m., with a light load of 81 passengers. There were 11 crew on board: a captain, a first officer, and nine flight attendants.

A few minutes into the flight, five men got up from their seats and made their way to the cockpit, soon taking control of the plane.

Sweeney and Ong were in the coach section of the plane. Using crew telephones, they made the calls to their colleagues on the ground, Sweeney to Woodward, a flight services manager at Logan Airport, and Ong to the airline's reservations line.

Woodward said Sweeney spoke "very, very calmly... in a way which was quick but calm." She gave him the seat numbers for four of the five hijackers, allowing airline staff to pull up their names, phone numbers, addresses — and even credit card numbers — on the reservations computer. One of the names that came up was Mohamed Atta, the man the FBI would later identify as the leader of all 19 of the Sept. 11 hijackers.

Sweeney told Woodward the hijackers seemed to be of Middle Eastern descent and said they had gone into the cockpit with a bomb with yellow wires attached.

She said they had stabbed the two first-class flight attendants, Barbara Arestegui and Karen Martin, whose station at the front of the plane likely made them the first crew members to confront the hijackers. She said they had also slashed the throat of a business class passenger, who was bleeding severely.

The flight attendants gave the injured people oxygen, and made an announcement over the PA system asking if there was a doctor or nurse on board. Sweeney told Woodward the passengers in the coach section were calm and that they believed there was some type of medical emergency at the front of the plane.

Flight Attendants Gathered Information

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Betty Ong (ABCNEWS.com)

Ong's call came through to Vanessa Minter, an agent at the airline's reservation center in Raleigh, N.C. Minter conferenced in Nydia Gonzales, whose responsibilities include dealing with security issues.

Ong told the two women the hijackers had sprayed something in the first-class cabin to keep people out of the front of the plane. The two women could hear that other flight attendants were going back and forth in the coach section to relay information to Ong. "There was total teamwork," said Gonzales. Ong said the hijackers had not made any demands.

The first four minutes of Ong's call were recorded, but the FBI has not released the tape to the public. Sweeney's phone call was not recorded, but Woodward took notes that would later become crucial to the FBI's investigation. Without Sweeney's calm reporting, the plane might have crashed with no one certain the man in charge was tied to al Qaeda.

'Rapid Descent'

About 15 minutes after the women first called, the plane suddenly lurched, tilting all the way to one side, then becoming horizontal again. Ong said the plane was flying erratically, and Sweeney said it had begun a rapid descent. "For a flight attendant to say rapid descent, it's rapid and it's quick. We don't use those terms very loosely," said Woodward.

They were now nearing New York and the World Trade Center, but on board the plane it was quiet. "You didn't hear hysteria in the background. You didn't hear people screaming," said Minter.

Woodward asked Sweeney to look out of the window and see if she could tell what was going on. "I see the water. I see the buildings. I see buildings," she told him.

On the line to Raleigh, Ong said over and over again, "Pray for us. Pray for us." Gonzales and Minter assured her they were praying.

Sweeney told Woodward the plane was flying very low. Then, he said, "She took a very slow, deep breath and then just said, 'Oh, my God!' Very slowly, very calmly, very quietly. It wasn't in panic."

Those were the last words Woodward heard. "Seconds later," he said, "there was a very, very loud static on the other end."

While Woodward was still holding the telephone, hoping Sweeney would come through, his operational manager came into the room and said that a plane had just crashed into the World Trade Center.

Woodward did not make the connection immediately. "I almost at that point said, 'Not now, we have a serious situation here,'" he said. But moments later, he realized that Sweeney's flight was the one that hit the World Trade Center.

Professionalism and Courage

The ground staff who spoke to the two flight attendants were astonished by their professionalism and courage.

Gonzales and Minter said Ong showed no fear at all during the 25-minute conversation. "It was never about 'Help me, pray for me,'" said Gonzales. "It was about 'Pray for us, help us.' That's a totally selfless person." ■

A Madeline "Amy" Sweeney Memorial Golf Classic to benefit the families of Sept. 11, 2001 will be held on Friday, Sept. 20 and Saturday, Sept. 21, 2002 in Lynnfield, Mass. The proceeds will go to families being assisted by the Massachusetts 9/11 Fund, Inc. (www.massfund.org). For more information, please contact The Madeline A. Sweeney Foundation at 978-688-4292 or via email at masgolftee@yahoo.com.

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