

District Lodge 142

FLIGHT ATTENDANTS

International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers



Heroism on Flight 1404

How competence and courage saved lives in Denver accident

On Dec. 20, 2008, at Denver International Airport, Continental Flight 1404 received clearance from the tower to depart runway 34 Right en route to Houston's George Bush Intercontinental Airport.

The 737 lined up with runway 34 Right and poured on the power, plowing through the cold, gusty crosswind. The passengers, many on the way to see family for the holidays, sat back in their seats, anticipating the sudden quiet from the rumbling landing gear as they lifted from the earth.

Unfortunately, on this plane, their anticipations were not to be fulfilled.

Barreling down the runway at 130 mph, the plane suddenly jerked and veered to the left. The pilot and co-pilot applied hard-right rudder to stop the skid, but the plane didn't respond. The pilot leaned on the nose gear steering tiller, desperately trying to get the plane to turn back to the right, but again, nothing happened.

The aircraft left the runway and bounced across turf and a parallel taxiway. The pilots cut the engines and applied full-reverse thrust to stop the plane. Vaulting a service road, the plane careened off a shallow embankment and into a 40-foot ravine.

Upon impact, the left engine was wrenched from the airframe and the right side of the plane was suddenly bathed in fire. The aircraft skidded down the embankment, its fuselage cracked and wings drooping, with toxic black smoke pouring from the flames. The entire incident took only a few seconds.

Inside the plane, Lead Flight Attendant Regina Wessler, Flight Attendants Pam Howard and Al Felipe, and two off-duty Continental pilots sprang into action, clearing passengers from the burning plane. They knew they had only seconds to do so before the entire cabin became a blast furnace.

"Pam saw passengers rushing the doors and shouted 'Back up!' until she could make sure the doors were safe to open," DL 142 Safety Representative D'Lisa Killebrew said. "She called the In-Flight Department to report the



Flight attendants on Continental Flight 1404 performed an essential role in saving the lives of passengers and crew. Pool photo/AP

District hails Flight 1404 attendants

At its annual convention in October, District Lodge 142 will honor the union flight attendants who helped evacuate Continental Flight 1404 after it crashed on takeoff at Denver International Airport in December.

All 115 people aboard survived the crash, due in part to the efforts of DL 142 members Regina Wessler, Pam Howard and Al Felipe.

"These flight attendants are heroes," DL 142 President Tom Higginbotham said. "They are a shining example of the quality of members we have in our union. We are proud

of their competence, bravery and selflessness."

Continental Flight 1404 was bound for Houston's George Bush Intercontinental Airport when it veered off the runway during takeoff and crashed into a ravine (see story at left). The burning airplane was quickly evacuated and only 38 people were injured. As of this printing, all injured passengers are expected to recover fully.

The cause of the crash is still unknown. A National Transportation Safety Board investigation is ongoing.

crash before the fire trucks were even rolling."

As the right side of the plane burned, the bulkheads and overhead racks began to warp. The co-pilot helped get the critically injured pilot out of the cockpit and into the cabin.

Emergency exit row passengers opened the over-wing exits and began to help people out of the plane. The passengers, seeing another way out, rushed to and quickly blocked the emergency exits. The off-duty pilots and flight attendants directed the panicked passengers toward the front and rear main doors, alleviating the bottleneck.

With the escape slides extended, the flight attendants managed to get everyone off the plane before the overhead bins and luggage began to burn and melt onto the seats.

"It never occurred to Pam to get off the plane," Killebrew said.

"She was so focused on getting everyone out of the plane that the off-duty pilots had to shout at her to get out."

All 110 passengers and five crew members escaped and survived the crash. Thirty-eight were injured, a few of them critically. The pilot was one of the most extensively injured victims with multiple back fractures. At the time of this printing, the pilot is on the way toward a full recovery.

The National Transportation Safety Board has not yet determined the cause of the crash. One theory suggested that the left main landing gear wheels locked up during takeoff. That notion, however, was dispelled after the tires were examined and no bald spots were found on the left main tires.

Wind shear has not yet been ruled out as a cause and wind data are still being compiled.

The plane was written off as a total loss, but the safety technology it employed and the quick actions of its crew meant that the most important cargo of Continental flight 1404 — the passengers — were offloaded quickly with few injuries.

'She was so focused on getting everyone out of the plane that the off-duty pilots had to shout at her to get out.'