

FATEFUL FLIGHT/Eternally Grateful

A man, Eddie, in his late 20's to early 30's sits on the sideline. He wears a dark suit of vintage 1937..... a white shirt, necktie and heavy overcoat, with a silk scarf around his neck. He looks well-to-do.

Eddie - The call came into the Burbank Tower at 7:50 PM. It was the pilot of flight #85 from San Francisco, due to land in a few minutes. The SOS is mistakenly called on the wrong frequency, so the words are garbled with static. What the controllers hear is

“****lost in mountains * blown off course.●●. heavy rain.●● thick fog.”

The voice then becomes more panicked oh my God. Finally, there is just static. A shroud of dread drops on the stricken listeners. Due to the darkness and foul weather, it is deemed useless to call out search parties. However, some 30 miles away in Santa Paula, a professional pilot hears the call of distress on his ham radio. He is Marshall Dickenson.

Familiar with the rough terrain, he thinks he knows where the plane went down. With his brother Ralph, they make preparations to leave at first light.

Rain is still falling when the brothers fly out of this very airport. Hugging the northern slopes, they approach where old Highway 99 crosses over into the San Fernando Valley. Pilot Dickenson begins circling over the forested ridge line. That's where they spot the wide swath of sheared-off fir trees. Circling back, they see the mangled wings and two engines jammed into the gouged out, saddened earth. But where is the missing fuselage?

(Eddie jumps up and shouts.....)

EDDIE: - I'll tell you where it is! It's lying at the bottom of a deep canyon. They can't find it because after the smash-up it slid 100 feet down a steep cliff and came to rest under a canopy of trees. I know, because I'm on that plane with my beautiful wife, Deidra...

(Deidra smiles at the audience.)

My darling Deidra. (Eddie puts his arm around her) We were married just six weeks ago and were celebrating our first Christmas in San Francisco.

Deidra: - We were planning to greet 1937 at "The Top of the Mark", that marvelous roof-top ballroom at the Mark Hopkins Hotel.

Eddie: - Then that morningno,.... I guess it was the morning before...I receive a wire about an emergency meeting at my office the next day..... well, that's Monday, isn't it?

Anyhow, I just had to be there and planned to fly home. When I told Deidra, she was very upset.

Deidra: - Well of course I was upset! He knew that I was afraid of flying which was why he had never seen me travel by airplane. And on top of that, a few nights before, I woke up screaming from a nightmare! I dreamt that we were killed in a plane crash. Eddie offered to take us back home by train but I knew how important that meeting was for his career and I didn't want to take the train home alone so I swallowed my fears and agreed to fly back with him.

Eddie: - We boarded the plane that afternoon....and watched the sun set over the Pacific. I assured Deidra it was going to be a wonderful flight because the clear skies guaranteed it. She did her best to smile. I knew she was already nervous

because she grabbed my hand and never let go. After we passed the few lights of Bakersfield, the stewardess announced that the captain requested we fasten our seatbelts. There was turbulent weather over the mountains due to a winter storm. Deidra's grip tightened like a vice, and I suggested that perhaps a glass of sherry would calm her nerves. When the stewardess handed Deidra the glass, she assured her that we would be landing shortly. The sherry worked and my darling slipped into a fitful sleep, her head resting on my shoulder.

Through the window I saw the rain was coming down and that we were flying in a dense fog. (He becomes more and more agitated) suddenly the plane jerked and a loud scraping, scratching sound against the bottom made a ghastly, jarring roar.

Deidra: - (grips Eddie's arm as if reliving the event) Eddie, what's happening?

Eddie: - She griped my arm like a tourniquet.

Deidra: - It was mayhem in slow motion.

Eddie: - The cabin went dark.

Deidra: - A woman was screaming...or was that me?

Eddie: - Men cursed. The stewardess yelled "Please, everyone keep calm!"

Deidra: - (stepping forward as though she can see the crash before her) Then there was a horrendous, deafening crush. Our forward motion abruptly stopped. And it became deathly quiet.

(They are both now calm)

Eddie: - You know, when you die there is this..... "dead"time. Well, of course. YOU!! don't know, and I didn't either until then I mean, now it takes a while before you realize you're dead.

Deidra: - I was standing next to Eddie and still holding his arm. I was wearing my mink coat.

Eddie: - And she looked gorgeous. I looked down to see that I was wearing my heavy overcoat. We looked at each other and smiled as if nothing had happened.

Deidra: - We're in the cabin, enveloped in an eerie mist. We hear or see none of the other passengers or crew. Through the dawning light an unclear mass of something appears.

Eddie: - Deidra releases my arm and walks towards it.

Deidra: - That's when I went bonkers. I screamed at Eddie, we're DEAD! Here are our bodies! You killed us in this damned airplane!

Eddie: - I dashed over to her and tried to take her in my arms to comfort her.

Deidra: - But all I could do was snarl at him "DON'T touch me! Don't ever touch me again. I hate what you've done to us!" And then I vanished... into thin air. I watched in awe, as the spirits of the other dead passengers were also freed from their dead remains. As the cluster of ethereal spirits was being drawn upward -- on their way to - I assumed -- Heaven, I started to follow them. I was floating up through the clouds alongside the other spirits when I hit an invisible barrier. As I watched the others ascend above me, I heard a great voice, like a clap of thunder, bellow, "No! You are not ready to move on. Not until you learn the meaning of gratitude". I must admit that the word itself was foreign in my vocabulary. I was born into a privileged family, and some would say that I was a little spoiled. **(Eddie gives her a look)** Okay. I was a lot spoiled.

Eddie: - I'm stuck here wandering this plane until Deidra forgives me.

Deidra: - And I'm stuck here until I can show some gratitude. I don't know how I can be grateful for being dead so I guess I'll be here for awhile.

Eddie: - Hey babe, the two heroic pilots who found our crashed plane were Ralph Dickenson and his brother Marshall. Maybe if you showed them gratitude that would be enough.

Deidra: - Great. OK so now how can I find them?

Eddie: - I heard they came from the Santa Paula Airport. The pilot keeps his plane over there at the airport.

Deidra: - Well why didn't you say that sooner? Thank you, Eddie!

(beat)

Eddie: - Hey babe, I don't think I've ever heard you say those two words before in my whole life. Thank you. Two simple, but very important words.

Deidra: - So I guess we'll keep hanging around Santa Paula until we can find those men and I can say those two words to both of them. Not just for me, but also for all the passengers and crew of the doomed United flight 34.

(She looks past the group)

I see another group coming. I hope they're with them. As much as I like Santa Paula, we really need to move on. But before we can do that, I need to tell the Dickenson's how eternally grateful I am for what they did for all of us - and our families on that fateful flight. (Pauses in thought) Eternally grateful. That's what I am alright - until I find them anyway. Eternally grateful.

Eddie: - Yeah! That's what **we** are, eternally grateful. Come on babe, let's go ask those folks over there.