

FLYING THE FRIENDLY SKIES--WITH A CANINE IN CARGO

By Kathy J. Lang

If the airlines gave frequent flyer miles for my dogs' air travel, I'd be able to travel 'round the world for free by now. Alas, most airlines treat our canines with the same disregard as they treat our luggage. Over the years I've had some pretty close calls, but thank goodness, nothing has occurred (at least that I know of) to my dogs. I hope that by sharing my close encounters with you, and some valuable tips I've picked up along the way, to save you from otherwise avoidable problems.

My first flight with a dog was in the early 1980s. I was flying with a group from Seattle to Tempe, Arizona, for a German Shepherd National Specialty. The GSDs in our group arrived in good condition. I'm still not sure what happened to my dog on the way home, however. He was returning to Seattle with a friend because I was flying on to the midwest to visit relatives. When my husband met the friend at the airport to pick up our dog, he was shocked to find the wire windows on the crate had been totally bent in. Fortunately, they had not broken free, but they were severely dented and the crate was pretty beaten up. The dog was visibly shaken, but otherwise healthy. My guess is the crate was either dropped, something fell on it, or the cargo load shifted in the hold.

In the last four or five years I've averaged four cross-country trips a year with two dogs. Here are some of our experiences:

A couple of years ago we were scheduled out of Seattle on a non-stop flight to Newark. The plan was scheduled to depart about 1:00 pm. It was a warm summer day, temperatures in the 80s. As usual, I waited in the terminal to watch the dogs loaded before I boarded. There were, so I did. We sat on the plane for 10 minutes or so, with no indication that a departure was imminent. Knowing that the cargo hold had already been sealed, I informed the nearest flight attendant that I had dogs on board, in the hold and I was concerned about the heat. She informed the cockpit, who told the ground crew to get the doors open. Had I not been on top of the situation, I doubt that anyone would have considered the dogs.

We spent the next three hours on and off that plane. There was a minor mechanical problem that the airline was certain could be fixed. Every half hour or so we were told it would just be another 30 to 45 minutes. I made certain the cargo doors were open, and watched as the ground crew went into the hold once an hour to check on the dogs. At 4 pm we were addressed by an airline supervisor who told us the plane was fixed, but they were waiting for an FAA rep to arrive to sign off on the repairs. In the meantime, we were given three options: 1) get off the plane and re-route to Newark with two stops; 2) get off the plane take the same flight tomorrow; or 3) continue to sit tight because they were absolutely certain we'd be off the ground in just 30 minutes.

A few people disembarked, but most of us continued to sit tight. I had no choice because I had to get back to teach at a camp. In the end, we did finally depart five and a half hours late. The

ground crew had kept an eye on the dogs (I know, because I kept an eye on them). And more than once, the flight attendants themselves went down below to check on the dogs for me. We arrived in Newark at 2 am. The dogs had been crated for 14 hours, but thank goodness, were none the worse for wear.

A few months ago, flying Seattle to Chicago non-stop, I had a very strange experience. One large carrier has two flights on this route, one departing just five minutes after the other. One flies a MD-80 and the other a stretch 727. I had purposely booked the -80 flight for the dog's comfort and my own. I'll take the wide-body jets over the narrow ones any day. We get to the airport, I check the dogs and dash to the gate in plenty of time. An hour before departure time, the gate announcer informs us the other flight has been canceled and those passengers will be joining us on our plane. However, there are now too many passengers for the -80 so we'll give free round-trip tickets to anyone willing to take a voluntary bump and wait for the next flight 3 hours later.

Since I'm meeting Diane Bauman in Chicago, enroute to a camp in Iowa, I certainly couldn't take the bump. So I waited. Pre-boarding came, as did all the other boarding calls. We're now at final boarding and the gate attendant is getting testy because I'm not boarding. Finally the dogs arrive at the ramp; however, there are 3 others plus my 2. I'm mildly concerned, but continue to watch. I see the 3 other dogs go up. I'm picking up my bag and ready to board when they pick up my first crate. Thank goodness I was still there when they sat my crate back on the truck and drove it and my second dog away.

I ran to the gate attendant, saying "They just drove away with my dogs. I'm not going without my dogs!"

His response was not to worry. The plane was too full, and my dogs would be shipped on the next flight. They'd arrive 3 hours later. I said, "No they won't." I went into the whole diatribe about being a professional trainer enroute to a seminar and I had to have my dogs with me. I also added, "Who makes the decision, any way, whose dogs get bumped? Why can't you bump two of the other dogs?"

The gate attendant realized I was serious and dialed up the ground supervisor, yelling at them to "Get Lang's dogs back on that plane and take 2 others off." He then instructed me to get on board. I refused. He told me I either got on now or they were leaving without me.

I asked "How do I know my dogs will be put on this plane?"

"You have to trust me," was his reply.

"When I've trusted airline personnel before I've had problems!" was my retort. We went round and round for a few minutes as I tried to buy time, hoping my dogs would show up. Finally, I decided to board, and my last words to him were, "If my dogs are not in Chicago when I arrive, there are going to be major problems."

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I boarded and immediately told the first flight attendant to let the cockpit know what was going on and I wanted to be advised when my dogs were on. She bristled, but headed forward. I then ran over to the passenger seated above the cargo door and explained my plight and asked her to watch for 2 crates with red stripes. The flight attendants insisted I be seated (obviously the plane was full so I couldn't find a nearby empty seat) so we could push back immediately. My persistence paid off. A few seconds later the passenger hollered, "Your dogs are on" and the flight attendant confirmed the same thing. Twenty-five minutes late, we took off with me and my dogs aboard.

That's the longest I've managed to delay a plane, so far. I refuse to board unless I see my dogs loaded. Unfortunately, there are a few gates at a few airports where I can't physically see that happen. In those cases, I watch the trucks around the plane for crates and I get the gate supervisor to call down and verify when my dogs are on. Even though I make this request to the gate manager, I do the same thing to the flight services manager and the cockpit, if I can get there.

Once in Chicago, during a 90 minute plane change on the way home from Orlando, I waited for Tristan to be put on board. I could see the cargo hold, and final boarding came and went. No dog. I had been in touch with the gate attendant, who had made several calls downstairs. During the first two calls, I was told the dog was downstairs and would be loaded soon. No hurry, just relax lady. At final boarding, the gate attendant told me they couldn't find my dog...they thought maybe he went to San Francisco by mistake. I was livid. I ranted and raved and told them I wasn't going anywhere until they traced my dog. Finally, they sent a groundsperson up into the hold and guess what. There was Tristan, the whole time. Blatantly against all regulations, he had been transferred as soon as we had landed, and they left him sit in the hold. Fortunately, he arrived safe and sound.

Every time I have a major problem, I take detailed notes as events unfold. I carry a notebook and write down names, titles and times. Once home, I write a lengthy letter to the customer relations manager of the airline, being as objective, factual and non-emotional as possible. So far every letter has resulted in a prompt reply and some type of voucher for future travel with that carrier.

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