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SURGERY AT 33,000 FEET

NOTES FROM THE TRAVEL FILE

“Americans are rather like bad Bulgarian wine: they don’t travel well”

- Bernard Falk. British writer

Well the suggestion of the week has to be this: If you find yourself in need of serious surgery at 33,000 feet, best fly British Airways Hong Kong to Heathrow and try to make certain that Professor Angus Wallace is booked on the same flight. A Ms. Paula Dixon got in a rather serious motorcycle accident on the same day she was to make the flight to London. Unaware that she had suffered serious internal injuries, she boarded the plane.

As the plane was climbing, the ascent brought on some symptoms which included difficulty breathing. Soon afterwards, Ms. Dixon’s lung coplapsed.

There were two doctors on board. Professor Wallace had to, shall we say, improvise. He used Evian water, a pair of scissors, some tubeing, and a collection of gadgets borrowed from passengers. The lead flight attendant created a hospital operating room “as best we could” and the good doctor set out to operate. He had determined that to attempt to land the plane could be fatal since the altitude change would create another set of complications.

The doctor got a lot of credit as well he should. But the BA flight attendants were calmly magnificent, from all accounts. It reminds us that flight attendants are trained to react to extremely stressful situations. Their training does involve safety training that ranges from medical emergengies to terrorist actions. Serving peanuts and drinks is not what their profession is really about.

Ms. Dixon is doing well. Dr. Wallace says it was no big deal. “We just made do with what we had”.

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