

A famous pilot, a hit musical and a story of resilience

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Beverley Bass, a trailblazing pilot who made history as American's first female captain at age 34, is used to having her career in the limelight. But in recent years, a time from her life has taken center stage, literally. Beverley is among several people whose story is featured in "Come From Away" — the hit Broadway musical about what transpired when 38 planes were unexpectedly diverted to the small town of Gander, Newfoundland, following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Actress Jenn Colella poses with Beverley Bass before a viewing of "Come From Away" in Gander, Newfoundland, in Oct. 2016.

Welcome to the Rock

Beverley remembers that fateful day starting like many others. She was captain of an American DFW-bound flight from Paris. Their Boeing 777 was halfway over the north Atlantic when she heard on the cockpit radio that a plane had hit one of the World Trade Center towers.

"We thought it was a small airplane," she recalled. "We were surprised because the weather was good in New York City." Shortly after, news came through that another plane hit the second tower. "With that came the word terrorism," said Beverley. "It was almost a foreign word to us at the time."

The FAA immediately closed United States airspace. Beverley continued flying westbound, planning for a diversion. She soon came into contact with Canadian air traffic control, which ordered the aircraft to land in Gander, Newfoundland, where it became the 36th of 38 diverted planes.

"I'm looking around thinking, 'Where am I going to park this thing?' because the airplanes are lined up like sardines,

nose to tail, on runways, on taxis, in the terminal area,” recalled Beverley. As a result of the detour, almost 7,000 passengers — and 19 animals — descended on the small northeastern town, nearly doubling its population. Outside the aircraft windows, cars were lined up as far as the passengers could see. The town hadn’t seen that many airplanes since World War II, when Gander served as a thriving military base. Residents had come from all over to see what was happening.

The “Plane People”

Upon landing, passengers were told they wouldn’t be able to leave the aircraft until the following day to allow for customs and security to get set up. In the meantime, most of those onboard had little to no news of what was happening in the U.S. There was no access to TV or internet, and few had cell phones at that time.

It was a long night for passengers aboard Beverley’s flight: They would spend 28 hours total on the plane. But the kindness of the town’s residents got them through.

“Gander was so unbelievable,” said Beverley. “They delivered everything they could to the airplanes — diapers, formula, nicotine patches. Obviously they couldn’t cater the airplanes, but they did deliver whatever they could throughout the night.”

While those on the planes were sleeping, residents of Gander stayed up all night making preparations for their unexpected guests. In the morning, Beverley remembers walking through the airport’s small terminal and seeing tables upon tables set up with food.

American Airlines flight 49 deplanes in Gander on the morning of Sept. 12, 2001.

“That was my first realization of what an unusual place we had landed in,” she said. The generosity of their Canadian hosts didn’t stop there. The stranded passengers had no other means of transportation to get back to the U.S., and, unbeknownst to them, it would be several days before the airspace was reopened and flights could depart. But the Gander residents opened their arms and hearts. Perfect strangers invited people into their homes, providing them with warm meals, clothes and beds. Schools were converted into shelters, restaurants donated food and store owners gave supplies freely. Phones and computer centers were also set up for people to contact loved ones.

During one of the darkest times in history, the residents of Gander were there to comfort the passengers, who would soon become their lifelong friends and honorary Newfoundlanders. The town even gave their guests a nickname: the plane people.

“I just couldn’t believe that the citizens of such a small, remote, desolate town could provide so generously to the thousands of people who showed up in a three-hour time frame,” said Beverley.

Making of a musical

On the morning of Sept. 15, Beverley was finally cleared to board her aircraft and transport her original passengers to DFW. But Gander never really left them.

Many returned to the small town on the 10th anniversary of the attacks. Also present for the occasion were husband and wife Irene Sankoff and David Hein, who were working on a musical about the events of those four days in Gander. The duo interviewed locals and returning passengers, including Beverley, who spoke to the couple for four hours.

“Oddly enough, with 38 widebodies and three pilots to every airplane, I was the only returning pilot,” said Beverley. As a result, a character based off Beverley, played by actress Jenn Colella, has a prominent role in the musical. A four-and-a-half minute song called “Me and the Sky” about her career and passion for aviation (see A Pioneer Pilot) is nearly verbatim from Beverley’s interview.

In the summer of 2015, Beverley got a call asking if she’d like to attend the world premier opening of “Come From Away” in La Jolla, California. She went to the event with her husband and daughter but knew very little of the show and had no idea how big of a role her part would be. The production hit close to home. Five minutes in, her husband, Tom, broke down in tears.

“What I never knew was how hard that day was for him — it was the unknown. He didn’t know where I was; he didn’t know anything,” said Beverley. “Honestly, I think we missed 75 percent of the first show. Our heads were just buried in our hands.” It would take watching it a few more times before she could make it through the show without getting choked up.

Now, Beverley has seen the musical a whopping 67 times, traveling to its runs in Seattle, Washington, D.C., Toronto, Gander (for a special viewing for those it was written about) and ultimately Broadway, where it opened in March and has become a box office success. Beverley has even formed a very close friendship with Jenn, who earned a Tony Award nomination for best featured actress in a musical for her role. On the musical’s closing night in Seattle, Beverley presented Jenn with the flight jacket, wings and service pin she was wearing on 9/11.

Other characters in “Come From Away” are mostly based on real people from Irene and David’s interviews. However, Beverley says the musical isn’t really about her or the other passengers, but rather the gift Gander gave them during those dark times.

“I always wanted the world to know about the generosity and kindness bestowed upon us during our stay in Gander,” she said. “The musical is finally making that happen by playing to 8,500 people each week. To say I am

proud of the story is a true understatement. Another thing that makes it so incredibly special is that it is a true story that offers closure to the many who were so closely affected by that terrible tragedy.”

A Pioneer Pilot

Even before an actress played her in a Broadway musical, Beverley was well-known in aviation history for her lifetime of accomplishments.

Since she was a little girl, Beverley had a fascination with flying. “My mother always reminded me of pushing me in a baby stroller, and I’d hear an airplane and see an airplane and start kicking my legs,” she said.

When she was 16, Beverley begged her dad for flying lessons, but he wanted her to focus on the horses they raised and showed in their hometown of Fort Myers, Florida. In the summer of 1971, after her first year of college at Texas Christian University (TCU), Beverley enrolled in flying lessons back in Fort Myers. “I literally came down from my first lesson, and I walked in the door and told my parents that was it: I was going to fly for the rest of my life,” she said.

At the time, there were few female pilots and none for a commercial airline, but that didn’t stop her. When she returned to TCU, she continued flight lessons at Meacham Airport in Fort Worth.

At 21, Beverley got her true start in flying with a rather unusual gig — transporting remains with a mortician in Fort Worth. She flew bodies to their final resting places in a single-engine 1953 Beechcraft Bonanza. “It could only fit one body at a time, not in a casket, but on a stretcher covered with a sheet,” she said. “I had to climb over their face to get to the pilot seat.” While not an appealing job for most, Beverley was happy to have any job that paid her to fly and gave her the chance to build flying time.

But Beverley had bigger dreams.

In 1973, Frontier hired the first female pilot, which began opening doors for more women in commercial aviation, though change was slow. But in 1976, Beverley’s dreams came true when she was hired as American’s third female pilot.

“Most of the cockpits that I walked into had never flown with a female pilot, and certainly we [female pilots] all felt the burden of proving ourselves,” she remembered. “We just wanted to fly airplanes, and the most important thing was to be accepted.”

Undoubtedly, she achieved that respect. In 1986, at age 34 and just one day short of her 10th anniversary with American, Bass became the first female captain for the airline. Just weeks later, she helped break ground yet again as the captain of the first all-female flight crew. The seven-person crew included First Officer Terry Claridge, Flight

Engineer Tracy Prior and four female flight attendants.

Beverley exits a B727 in 1986, the year she became American's first female captain.

Beverley went on to have many more firsts with American — including becoming the first female pilot to fly the then-brand new B777 in 1998. “Many of the female pilots [on social media] thank me profusely for paving the way for them,” she said. But she is quick to note that her continued achievements were something of a domino effect. She rose through the ranks like any pilot would, based on her seniority with the airline. It just happened that each move was a milestone, she said.

In 1989, Beverley married Tom Stawicki, who at the time worked in the investment division of American. They have a son, Taylor, and daughter, Paige, who is now a pilot for a private jet company. Beverley retired in 2008, at 56, with 32 years at American. But, she said, “My heart and soul is still with this company. It always will be.”