

“IT WAS TERRIFYING. I THOUGHT THIS WAS IT.”

RICHELLE KEEPMAN of Oconomowoc, Wis., who sat near the man accused of trying to blow up the plane



J.P. KARAS/Associated Press

A Delta-Northwest plane sits on the runway at Detroit Metro Airport on Friday after a Nigerian man allegedly tried to ignite explosives on board in what federal officials say was an attempted act of terrorism.

FEDS: TERROR FOILED ON FLIGHT TO DETROIT

A POP, THEN A FIRE:
Sound ‘like a firecracker in a pillowcase’

FLIERS FIGHT BACK:
Suspect — leg burned — is subdued by passengers

‘CONNECT THE DOTS’:
Hoekstra urges Obama to combat looming threat



WILLIAM ARCHIE/Detroit Free Press

Zan Jafry, left, helps his father, Syed Jafry, with his coat after arriving Friday from Amsterdam on a Delta Airlines flight at Metro Airport. A senior U.S. counterterrorism official says a passenger attempted to blow up the plane but the explosive device failed.

Passengers rally to halt terrorism attack

Travelers reconstruct bits of frightening Christmas flight

By NAOMI R. PATTON
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

A loud pop.
Most of the passengers on Northwest Airlines Flight 253 seated near seat 19A seemed to hear it. A single, loud pop — like

a firecracker — 10 minutes before the flight landed.

“I heard the pop and then the next thing you know fire ...people running out of their seats,” said Syed Jafry of Holland, Ohio, was one of the first passengers off the plane, seated a few rows in front of the suspect.

“It was a fire, it wasn’t just a firecracker, it was a fire,” Calvin Kakar, of New York,

said. He was seated a few rows in front of the man, a Nigerian national, now in federal custody after trying to set off some sort of explosive device. “We heard a pop and the next thing you know it was a fire.”

One by one, the passengers deplaned Friday with similar and various bits of the story. By all accounts, the suspect was im-

See **AIRPLANE**, PAGE 4A

Nigerian man is accused of trying to blow up airliner

By JOE SWICKARD
and NAOMI R. PATTON
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

A terror suspect who claimed to have al-Qaida connections could face charges as soon as today for attempting to blow up a Delta-Northwest flight as it was landing at Detroit Metro Airport on Friday, law enforcement officials said.

Officials identified the suspect as Umar Farouk Abdul Mutallab, 23, a Nigerian national. It was unclear Friday why he allegedly wanted to attack the flight, arriving from Amsterdam. Passengers subdued him as he allegedly tried to detonate an explosive device that failed.

Many questions may be answered if charges are brought, one official said. The official added it’s possible that Mutallab, who was burned by flames from the device as passengers tackled him, could be arraigned in a hospital setting, depending on the extent of his injuries.

U.S. Rep. Peter King, a New York Republican and ranking GOP member of the House Homeland Security Committee, said the flight began in Nigeria and went through Am-

Inside

- Security experts: Beef up screening procedures now. 3A
- Incident reminiscent of the 2001 shoe bomber. 3A



LATEST COVERAGE ONLINE

sterdam en route to Detroit with 278 passengers aboard.

The Airbus 330 landed at Detroit Metro about noon. There were no major passenger injuries.

Many on board were unaware of what had occurred at the front of the plane — learning about the episode only after they had left the aircraft and were questioned by FBI agents.

Others had a bird’s-eye view of the suspect as he was subdued while trying to light what some thought was a firecracker.

“It was terrifying,” said Richelle Keepman of Oconomowoc, Wis., who sat just rows in front of the suspect.

She said she thought she was going to die when she saw the flames and commotion. “I thought this was it,” she said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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33

High

24

Low

Snow is back

A few flakes could stick around. **FORECAST, 2A**

Index

Bridge7B

Classified6B

Comics14A

Corrections..2A

Deaths13A

Editorials...15A

Horoscope .11A

Life9A

Lottery.....2A

Metro8A

Movies12A

Names11A

Puzzles7B

Sports.....18

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Metro

GREEN ACRES

Activist wants Detroit to test co-op farming

An acclaimed New York City activist hopes to launch a nationwide worker-owned urban agriculture cooperative with Detroit as its pilot city. Majora Carter, a MacArthur genius grant winner and environmental activist in her native south Bronx, visited Detroit recently. **2A**

Nation+World

HEALTH INSURANCE

Senate bill represents big boost for insurers

Health insurers get some big presents in the Senate’s health overhaul bill — about 20 million new customers and no competition from a new government plan. Taking advantage might take some time, though. The bill imposes hefty new taxes and coverage rules that will pinch insurers. **6A**

Sports

DREW SHARP

Referee to make history at Pizza Bowl

Sarah Thomas, 36, charts a new path this afternoon at Ford Field in Detroit. She’ll be the first woman to officiate a college football bowl game — the Little Caesars Pizza Bowl. “It was a little uncomfortable at first,” Thomas said, “because you don’t really want to make it a big deal.” **1B**

COVER STORY TERROR ABOARD DETROIT FLIGHT



Jessica Griffith, 17, of Pontiac waits Friday for her father Richard Griffith to arrive on Flight 253 coming from Amsterdam. Friends and relatives waited much of the day as federal officials investigated.



Family and friends wait Friday at Detroit Metro Airport for passengers arriving on Flight 253 coming from Amsterdam. The reunions were delayed by a failed terrorist attack.

AIRPLANE: Passengers ban together to thwart terrorism

FROM PAGE 1A

mediately tackled by at least one man, and several other passengers ran towards him immediately trying to put the fire out.

In this post 9/11 era, the passengers were quick to respond to the impending threat.

"We were able to take care of it in no time," Jafry said, calling it a "little bit of commotion" for about 10-15 minutes.

Iliana Schilke of Livonia said she saw a man, who was apparently burned in the process, jump over his seat to get to the suspect.

"Smoke, flames, yelling and screaming," is the way Schilke, seated a couple rows behind the suspect, described the scene. Passengers yelled for water, flight attendants ran to get the fire extinguisher and the fire was soon doused.

"It was scary when it happened," she said.

Jasmin Samimi, of Findlay, Ohio, said she saw the suspect taken in a chokehold by a passenger to the front of the plane.

Veena Saigl, of Ann Arbor, also said she saw "a sturdy guy put a lock on his head."

"His pants were down," Saigl added, about the suspect, calling the incident less scary and more frustrating and unorganized once passengers were allowed off the plane.

As the incident unfolded, passengers thought their lives were in danger.

"It was terrifying. I thought this was it," said Richelle Keepman of Oconomowoc, Wis., who sat just sitting rows in front of the suspect. She said she thought she was going to die



Photos by WILLIAM ARCHIE/Detroit Free Press

Dawn Griffith, 42, of Pontiac holds on to her husband, Richard Griffith, after his arrival on Flight 253 from Amsterdam at Detroit Metro Airport on Friday. Richard Griffith said he was unaware of the incident until departing the plane. He said he was sitting in the back of the plane.

when she saw the flames.

Jasmin Samimi, returning from a trip to Ethiopia, said she was able to send a text to her mother, Jeannia Samimi, that there was a fire on the plane.

"Then," Jeannia Samimi said, "It's like silence." The pas-

sengers said they were told to turn off their cell phones.

More than one person, like Keepman, saw another passenger taping the incident with a video camera.

"We just saw a man filming it and heard screaming," said

Keepman, who was seated in the back of the plane and didn't see the incident occur.

Michigan native Melinda Dennis was sitting in the first row of first class when the suspect was placed in a seat across the aisle from her.

"He didn't say anything," said Dennis, who lives in Europe and was connecting to a flight to Arizona. "He was burned very severely on his leg ... He was very calm and didn't show any reaction to pain."

Agent Donald Dawkins,

spokesman with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives in Detroit, said the bureau's K9 unit searched passenger's bags and luggage once they got off the plane. No other explosives or contraband were found in the suspect's luggage or any other passenger's.

Meanwhile, the passengers' family and friends anxiously waited in the McNamara Terminal International Arrivals lobby. A television tuned to CNN provided them with the only information about the incident they would get for most of the day.

By 1 p.m., Dawn Griffith, her daughter Jessica, both of Pontiac, and dozens of others waiting saw a man handcuffed to a stretcher with bandaged hands wheeled by medical personnel go past them.

"He went right by me," Jessica Griffith said.

"He was very young looking," Dawn Griffith added.

Griffith said her husband, Richard Griffith, a contractor returning from Iraq called her around 12:20 p.m. to tell her he was about to get off the plane.

"I'll see you in a minute," he said. That was the last time she talked to him before he walked out of customs to greet her and their daughter around 5:30 p.m.

Jafry, Kakar and Richard Griffith all lauded their fellow passengers, the flight crew and law enforcement agents for how they handled the incident.

"It was the time to be proud to be an American for sure," Jafry said.

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