

Passenger Helps Land 737 After Pilot Suffers Heart Attack

Imagine that you are on an airplane. You are returning home from a nice visit with family. After the plane is high in the air, you hear a voice over the loudspeaker. The voice asks a question that nobody on the plane wants to hear:

"Does anyone know how to fly a plane?"

That's what happened to Mark Gongol recently. He was on United Flight 1637 with his wife and daughters when he heard that question being asked.



Gongol didn't panic. Luckily for, his family, and the rest of the 155 passengers and six crew members on the plane, Mark Gongol is a captain in the U.S. Air Force. He is also an experienced pilot.

"Over the public address system, a flight attendant asked if there was a doctor on board the plane," Gongol said. "A few more calls went out for medical professionals, and the flight attendants were all hurrying to first class with their beverage carts and a first-aid kit."

After that, an even scarier call went out over the loudspeaker:

"Are there any pilots on board, please ring your call button."

Gongol is an experienced B-1B Lancer pilot, so he immediately rang his call button. He walked up to the flight deck and saw that flight attendants and two passenger nurses were tending to the pilot. The pilot was sweaty and disoriented, and Gongol guessed that the pilot had experienced a heart attack.

"After they moved the pilot, I was asked by the first officer, 'are you a pilot,' which was quickly followed with 'what do you fly,'" Gongol said. "I knew she was in a serious situation and that question gave her five seconds to judge if I would be useful. I also had about five seconds to assess her, 'was she panicking, or was she OK to fly the aircraft?' We both finished our silent assessments, she made the right judgment and told me to close the door and have a seat."

Gongol talked through a myriad of issues with his new co-pilot, like cabin pressure, communicating with air traffic control, and their approach to the runway. According to Gongol, at about 500 feet above the ground, the co-pilot hand-flew the plane to a safe touchdown in Omaha, Nebraska.

Once she landed, there was one more surprise for Gongol: the co-pilot asked him if he knew where to taxi, as she was unfamiliar with the Omaha airport.

"Surprisingly, taxiing was the most stressful part of the day for the first officer," Gongol said. "She had never taxied a 737 before, and the ATC had no idea that the pilot was the reason for the emergency. We had to make a quick decision that her switching to the pilot's seat and taxiing the aircraft without the training was necessary to save the captain's life."

Gongol and the co-pilot brought the plane to a safe stop. Soon, the passengers were all safely off of the plane. The captain, who had experienced a heart attack, is now recovering.

Gongol says that he merely assisted in the operation that day, and that he wasn't the hero at all. But if not for Gongol and the co-pilot's quick thinking and skill, United Flight 1637 could have been a major disaster.