

Flight



Lieutenant Thomas E. Selfridge died on September 17, 1908. He was a passenger on a demonstration flight with Orville Wright as the pilot. The U.S. Army had offered the Wright brothers a contract to purchase several of their airplanes, called Wright Flyers, if the plane could carry a passenger. Lieutenant Selfridge was an experienced pilot himself and had made several solo flights in military aircraft. During the demonstration flight, the right propeller of the Wright Flyer broke and led to a loss of power, as well as structural damage to the airplane. The craft took a nosedive and crashed. Selfridge had a skull fracture and died. Wright was severely injured and required several weeks' hospitalization. The Army noted the tragedy and went ahead with the formation of the Army air force. Selfridge was the first person to die as a consequence of being a passenger on, rather than a pilot of, an airplane.

In recent weeks a passenger on a United Airlines commercial flight had a cardiac arrest while en route to Los Angeles. The cause of death was determined to be Covid-19 related injuries. The United Airlines flight was temporarily diverted to unload the unfortunate passenger, who was pronounced dead shortly thereafter. Surviving passengers were offered free transfers to other flights if they were uncomfortable continuing on the plane. The media noted the tragedy, and commercial flights continued with no substantial change in schedules or protocols.

That Lieutenant Selfridge's death had no impact on the airline industry, other than to encourage passengers in open cockpits to wear protective headgear, is not surprising. Airplanes became one of the safest modes of conveyance over the century following Selfridge's death. What is surprising is that the Covid-19 related death of an airline passenger more than a century later had no apparent impact on either airline bookings or government policies over the Christmas holiday. In fact, a glance at the map of the United States that tracked flights in the air on December 24, 2020, revealed that the continental U.S. was almost completely obscured by the thousands of airplanes being tracked as they shuttled hundreds of thousands of people to destinations inside and outside our country. Public service announcements broadcast on innumerable televisions at the airports were drowned out by the crowds jostling for choice seats on the aluminum cylinders that would deny them social distancing and uncontaminated air.

What we have learned from the surge in Covid-19 cases and deaths since the Thanksgiving holiday migration is that the thousands of people who got on airplanes or went to crowded worship services or gathered in holiday parties will express shock and dismay that their activities led to their own hospitalizations or the hospitalizations of people they breathed on after their wonderful adventures. What we are witnessing is part natural selection and part murder. Those who put themselves in harm's way diminished the likelihood of their own survival. Those who put themselves in harm's way, survived their contact with Covid-19 unscathed, and passed the virus on to unsuspecting friends, coworkers, and family members are guilty of attempted murder. If they succeeded in infecting a friend, coworker, or family member and that person died from Covid-19, the virus carrier was at least guilty of negligent homicide.

The notion that gathering in great numbers in the midst of a pandemic is an American right as old as the First Amendment is absurd. The First Amendment addresses the right to assembly, but it and the Second Amendment do not condone behavior that results in the death or injury of innocent parties. You have a right to carry a gun, but you have no right to fire it randomly into a crowd. Negligent homicide is not protected

by any of the Amendments.

But what of people crowding into these aluminum cylinders for hours to visit friends and families? Why is it we cannot have a leisurely dinner at our local restaurants or get drunk at our local bars, but we can get a meal or get drunk in the confines of a jet-propelled commissary, elbow to elbow with strangers from every infected corner of the earth? Are there no adults left in regulatory agencies or government offices in general? I heard no complaints about an over-bearing government when virtually every civilian airplane was banned from the skies on 9/11/2001. This ban on air travel was prompted by the deaths of about 3,000 people and concerns for the safety of thousands of others. Covid-19 has killed more than 340,000 people and endangered millions of others. How many must die while in flight or as a consequence of taking a flight before “nonessential” travel is banned?

Our political leaders are quick to point out that the virus and its variants came from outside the U.S. They have rewritten history to suggest that travel restrictions were implemented rapidly after the first outbreaks abroad and enforced aggressively. In fact, any restrictions adopted by our government were inconsistent and ineffectual. Most, if not all, of the Covid-19 entering the U.S. came by air, courtesy of the respiratory tracts of our friends, neighbors, business associates, and family members.

Air travel is increasing as we assume that if the virus has not yet killed us, we must be invincible. Those of us not as confident of our invincibility are pinning our hopes on vaccines that we may get access to over the coming year. Efforts to deliver this vaccine to those willing to take it have been discouraging. Our federal government has failed to deliver once again. Unfortunately, the federal government must serve as the pilot on this mission.

Just as Orville Wright assured Lieutenant Selfridge that the aircraft could lift them up and take them down safely, we have assurances from our government that it will carry us safely to our chosen destinations. Unfortunately, there is money to be made by plane

manufacturers, airlines, hotels, pilots, mechanics, fuel suppliers, etc. if we risk flying, and this inevitably affects the risks governments are willing to take with the lives of its citizens. The voices of lobbyists for Boeing are much louder than those working for the Olive Garden. With Covid-19 in our midst, we are truly no safer on an airliner than Lieutenant Selfridge was on the Wright Flyer. We are all sitting in the passenger seats on a hazardous flight, hoping that the “propellers” on this flight will not break and send us earthward.

Dr. Lechtenberg is an Easton resident who graduated from Tufts University and Tufts Medical School in Massachusetts and subsequently trained at The Mount Sinai Hospital and Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in Manhattan. He worked as a neurologist at several New York Hospitals, including Kings County and The Long Island College Hospital, while maintaining a private practice, teaching at SUNY Downstate Medical School, and publishing 15 books on a variety of medical topics. He worked in drug development in the USA, as well as in England, Germany, and France.