

AirSpace Season 3, Episode 5: Me and the Sky

Intro Music

Matt:

Welcome to AirSpace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. I'm Matt.

Nick:

I'm Nick.

Emily:

And I'm Emily. Broadway is closed through the end of the year, but Broadway fans have probably heard of a woman named Beverley Bass and a show called Come from Away.

It's the story of 38 planes full of passengers in a small town in Canada that took them in when flights were diverted out of U.S. airspace and grounded on September 11th, 2001.

Matt:

The story we have today is about the kindness of that small rural town and the big airport on the edge of the Atlantic that used to be crucial to air travel and the technological advancements that made it less vital.

Nick:

It's also the story about a girl who decided that she was going to be a pilot in an era when that was not the norm. We'll be speaking to retired airline captain, Beverley Bass about her life and career and to the producers of Come from Away about telling this increasingly unconventional story that takes us from Fort Myers, Florida to the glitzy lights of Broadway, coming up next on AirSpace.

Music under and out

Emily:

So Nick, you actually had a chance to talk to Beverley Bass in-person. I was going to say in the flesh, but we do everything remote now.

Nick:

As close to in the flesh, as you can get in the Zoom era. Actually, no, I talked to her on the phone, so it wasn't even Zoom.

Emily:

You didn't even video. Okay.

Nick:

No, no, no, but she was wonderful. She was warm. She was funny. She's a household name today because of the Broadway play that includes her as a character and her experiences on 9/11, but she had an outstanding and remarkable career leading up to that.

Emily:

So early days of Beverley Bass, I mean, some people who take to flying, it's something they come to really late in life, but Beverley wasn't that way. She was really focused on becoming a pilot someday from a very young age.

Nick:

She was yes. From the age of eight.

Audio from Come From Away Jenn Colella singing:

I was eight when told them that I'd be a pilot

Nick:

I believe the story is her aunt would take her to look at airplanes, taking off and landing at the local airport. And she decided that not only did she want to fly because, I mean, you can fly, but she wanted to fly really big planes. So she wanted to fly the kinds of planes that she saw taking off and landing at her local airport. She wanted to fly passenger jets.

And that was at the time something that wasn't really done and she was discouraged from flying by her family not because they didn't think that she could or she should, but because they had a family business where they would raise and show quarter horses and they didn't want her to be distracted.

Beverley Bass (interview):

So when I left for college, when I was 19, I came home after my freshman year from school. And I drove straight to the Fort Myers airport, Page Field, and I signed up for flight lessons. I took my first lesson and when I got home, I walked into my parent's house and I announced to them I would fly for the rest of my life.

Matt:

So it took her a while before she finally got a job flying for a commercial airline. But it's really interesting the type of flying that she did prior to that, I mean, that she was flying for a group of morticians.

Nick:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Matt:

What was that about?

Nick:

She was telling me this story where she had to accrue her hours and she had to fly somebody somewhere. And she came across a group of morticians that frequently needed to fly the recently

deceased to other cities for burial. And that was a really kind of ideal way once you get aside from the haunted airplane possibility.

Once you get past the inherent strangeness of flying alone with a dead body, can you think of a more ideal way for a new pilot to accrue hours? She said that it was great because even though she had to crawl over the bodies to get into the cockpit, the passengers never complained.

All laugh

Beverley Bass (interview):

Now, back then, there were not any women airline pilots. This was late 1971. And I guess I just thought maybe they wouldn't notice that I was a girl, but I was going to fly the biggest airplanes I could fly. And of course, back then, we could not get the military as female pilots. So I focused on heading towards the airlines and I continue the rest of my flying in Fort Worth, getting all for licenses and ratings. And the most important thing is that you build your flight time. You need thousands of hours to get hired by the airlines and I knew that. I also knew that you had to have a college degree. Didn't really matter what your degree was in, but you had to have a degree, so that was my focus.

Matt:

And we keep talking about accruing hours and getting hours because this is something that pilots have to have before they fly these big commercial passenger jets.

Nick:

Yes, that's absolutely true. You have to have a certain number of hours to qualify at various stages and gates of your career. You have to have various hours on various kinds of airplanes.

Matt:

And historically, these hours were relatively easy for men to accrue because they tended to get them through military service and things like that. And so the route to being an airline pilot for a male pilot was relatively straight-forward. But for a woman, Beverley Bass had to be pretty creative.

Nick:

That's absolutely correct. I don't know of any other women pilots of the era that flew dead bodies around Texas. But certainly, the path from pilot training to airline captain is unique for each of these early trailblazers. Because as you said, Matt, the other way to accrue pilot hours is to just become a pilot in the military.

Emily:

So Beverley was also one of the founding members of the International Society Of Women Airline Pilots in 1978. And I think this goes back to what Matt was talking about in that for male pilots to become commercial pilots, you can accrue a lot of those hours during military service. But for women to fly airplanes in the military and accrue the same number of hours, it was just not quite as straight-forward. And so I think there's a lot of trailblazers in a lot of fields who take their path and their experience and sort of turn it around into service for the community.

Nick:

After flying the recently deceased for a while, Beverley moved on to corporate charters, which was a leg up. Certainly, the passengers were more lively, but she ran into an unusual situation being a woman pilot in that era because many CEO's wives expressed doubt about wanting their husbands to fly with a woman pilot of all things.

After the corporate charter gig ... which was great work if you can get it, but remember, her goal from when she was eight years old, was to fly really big planes and CEOs generally traveled in these sleek little affairs. She then got a job as an overnight freight pilot flying the kinds of big vehicles that she wanted to accrue hours on so that she could eventually become an airline pilot, which she did for American airlines in 1976.

Audio from Come From Away Jenn Colella singing:

American Airlines, had the prettiest planes. So I applied as a flight engineer.

Emily:

If you listened to our movie club episodes, a lot of us probably had never heard of Captain Sully until we started reading the newspapers about the Miracle on the Hudson. In the same way, I feel like a lot of us don't know the name of the pilots that fly us around the country. But Beverley, I think for a lot of people who have heard of Beverley Bass know her because of one of the parallel stories that we heard coming out of the day of September 11th.

Audio from Come From Away Jenn Colella singing:

Suddenly I'm flying Paris to Dallas. Across the Atlantic and feeling calm. When suddenly someone on air-to-air traffic says at 8:46 there's been a terrorist action and the one thing I loved more than anything was used as the bomb

Matt:

Right. I think most of us know the stories of at least four planes on 9/11, right? The two planes that hit the World Trade Center, one that went down in the field in Pennsylvania and one that crashed into the Pentagon. But there were hundreds of flights that were actually diverted that day and hundreds of pilots who were up there flying them. And today's story is just one of 200 flights that were diverted to Canada on that day.

Nick (from interview):

Take us through from the moment you first heard that something was wrong to landing at Gander.

Beverley Bass (interview):

We left Paris that morning of 9/11. It was just such a lovely day. So we took off. It was actually a training flight. My co-pilot was on his first trip in the Triple Seven (Boeing 777). We were literally over the middle of the North Atlantic, which is where the flight attendants normally bring lunch to us. And we're sitting there with our feet propped up, eating lunch.

So an airplane that was in front of us, he announced on that frequency that an airplane had hit the World Trade Center. And like many people, gosh, even the newscasters in New York, they said it was

a small airplane. So my copilot and I just kind of talked about it, went back to eating our lunch. And then about 20 minutes later, that same pilot came on and said that the second tower had been hit. And with that came the word, terrorism, and they said it was an airliner. I couldn't even wrap my brain around what that meant as far as terrorism. We did not know the airplanes had been hijacked and we did not know whose airplanes had hit the towers. So at that time, we didn't know that it was American and United.

Shortly after that, they announced that New York's airspace was closed, which didn't really impact us because we don't fly through New York's airspace. We fly westbound through Northern Canada, that down through Chicago and then into Dallas. And then very shortly after that, they announced that all airspace was going to be closed. So with that, we knew that we would be diverting. So we assumed that it would be Toronto, Montreal, you know, one of the larger cities. Again, we heard on that radio transmission that once we reached 50 degrees west longitude, which is a waypoint for us and it also coincides with where we come into contact with Gander control.

We reached 50 degrees west, Gander control called us and said, "Land your airplane immediately in Gander, Newfoundland." Well as airline pilots, we don't get orders. That day, there was no decision to be made. It was an order of land in Gander. So I programmed Gander into the computer and realized I was going to be 7,000 pounds overweight for the landing. You can land the airplane overweight structurally it can handle it. But if you choose to do that, you then have to have a very specific inspection done. And I had to wrestle with the decision, do I hold onto my precious fuel that I may need later on? Or do I go ahead and jettison and get down to my landing weight so I don't have to have an inspection? So I opted to jettison the fuel and we unloaded our fuel. We got on the final approach. And when we were coming over the threshold, all I could see was a sea of airplanes.

I had never seen so many wide-bodies on the ground at one time, ever. I was number 36 out of 38 to land. There were cars lined up on the roads on both sides. It was like everybody in Newfoundland had come out to see the airport, which they practically did. So we landed, we got parked and the Canadian officials came on the airplane and they said, "You will not be getting off until tomorrow." And it was 10 o'clock when we landed. And so we got off about 7:30 the next morning. So we had been on the airplane for 28 hours total.

Musical Audio cast singing:

28 hours. Over an entire day. There was one isle in the middle. Everyone knew every inch of that plane.

Emily:

So just to put this all into perspective, 38 commercial jets ... that's a lot of people, that's something like 7,000 passengers including crew, landing in a town of 9,000 people.

Matt:

Right. Its population almost doubled overnight.

Nick:

So extraordinary day in aviation history, planes have landed safely in Gander. The population of the town has doubled. Some passengers had to spend the night on the airplane and now they deplane and are accepted with extraordinary and indeed noteworthy hospitality by the people of Gander, the town.

Emily:

So I had the opportunity to talk to the producers of this story, Irene Sankoff and David Hein.

Irene Sankoff (interview):

Hi, I'm Irene Sankoff and I'm one of the co-writers of Come from Away.

David Hein:

And I'm David Hein and I'm her husband and the other writer of Come from Away.

Emily:

Who had the idea and actually got a grant from the Canadian government to fund their writing of this production and visited Gander on the ten-year anniversary ceremony to speak to the townspeople and all of the people who sort of came from away. You can't see my air quotes. I'm quoting. "Come from Away."

Emily (from interview):

So how did you end up eventually meeting Beverley? Did you reach out to her? Did she hear about your work?

Irene Sankoff (interview):

Oh no. We definitely reached out to her. The town of Gander had provided a list of people who are willing to talk to the media. And somehow, David had sweet talk us to getting that list and we just started contacting people. And actually, we were talking to Beverley and about, oh, I don't know, an hour and a half in, she says to us, "What's this for?" And we're like, "We're writing a play." And you can kind of see her face. She's like, "Why am I still here?" But she was very gracious. She talked to us for a long time.

David Hein:

I think she thought it was going to be a 15-minute interview. It was in the lobby of the Comfort Inn where she had stayed 10 years earlier. And instead, we talked to her for hours. We couldn't get enough of her. We wanted to write down every detail. And at the end, we were ready to write Beverley Bass, the musical.

Nick:

What they ended up with was not necessarily that far from Beverley Bass, the musical. So let's dive in and kind of unpack Come from Away. Disclaimer, none of your hosts has actually seen the play, but our producer, Jennifer, has and she says, it's wonderful. There's no movie yet. And with Broadway shows closed, we did the next best thing and listened to the soundtrack a lot.

Emily:

They didn't put it on Disney+.

Nick:

It is not on Disney+ yet.

Matt:

Yeah, sorry.

Nick:

I expect it any time now.

Matt:

So let me ask you something because I don't know that much about Gander, but the two of you did interviews for this episode. Maybe you have an idea. So I can imagine that in a town of only 9,000 people, there are not enough hotels to put up 7,000 people who have just arrived. So what was the experience that those people went through and how is that reflected in this musical?

Emily:

Yeah, so one of the things that David and Irene talked about is how the townspeople of Gander really set up makeshift shelters in schools and community halls, community centers, other kinds of public buildings, where they could put people to sleep.

And the way this was portrayed on stage was actually ... I watched a couple of clips from the musical and it was really clever how, having a relatively small cast, they're really able to transform the setting on stage in really clever ways with simply tables and chairs and cots that they sort of cleverly move around the stage that really changed the environment and the atmosphere that each individual musical number is happening in. And I think David and Irene explained it really well.

Irene Sankoff (interview):

That's what's great about making a piece of theater and not a documentary is that we get to amalgamate different characters, different people's experiences and we get to be creative about the way in which we tell it. We don't have to stop and say, "This is this person and this is where they were coming from and this is the plane they were on and this is how long they were on the plane." We get to just cycle through and keep it moving and keep it interesting.

David Hein (interview):

It's surprising how literate the audiences are as well. They come there and almost immediately you can set the rules that there are 12 actors, there are 12 chairs, and we're going to be telling this as a community. And every one of the characters on stage has stories that they tell, but also the audience brings their own story. And so it becomes this theatrical community that's telling the story. So you can watch people in the audience and see them replaying where they were on those days at the same time. It's something that's powerful about that, that they're projecting their imaginations onto the stage and their memories.

Musical Audio (Joel Hatch, Cast):

On the Northeast tip of North America on an Island called Newfoundland, there's an airport. It used to be one of the biggest airports in the world and next to it is a town, called Gander.

Nick:

Gander, it's the star of the show, of *Come from Away*. It is the place where 38 airplanes landed on the morning of 9/11. If you had heard about Gander before today's episode or before the play *Come from Away* became a smash hit, it may have been because you were a pilot.

Emily:

I was going to say congrats to you because I had no idea.

Nick:

It's a small town, it's a big airport and it is important mostly because of where it is. Which is to say, if you are crossing the Atlantic Ocean and you experienced some sort of emergency, the first place you can really land is Gander.

Emily:

Well. And David, one of the producers actually had a, well, more concise way of telling this story than I certainly could. But I had a really hard time picturing how a town of 9,000 people absorbed 38 commercial airline jets, plus 7,000 people. Because coming from a town of 7,000 people that had, I don't know, maybe a fairground and a soccer field, where do you land 38 commercial jets?

So David's story was really enlightening on the history of Gander and why it can actually bring in that many airplanes and why it's so strategically important.

David Hein (interview):

It's this incredible town because it was originally created as an airport.

Irene Sankoff (interview):

Civilian airport.

Emily (from interview):

Really?

David Hein:

Yeah, so people came from all over in the middle of nowhere to this high, flat place where the winds were good and they built one of the largest airports in the world. It eventually became the place where allied aircraft were sent over to England to fight World War II. And then next to that giant airport, they started to build a town. They created this beautiful small town and all of the street names are named after famous aviators, Earhart, Rickenbacker. There's so many. You can just wander around the town and Google the names and find out these incredible aviation stories.

And so it became, after the war, this stopover place. Every single plane that crossed the Atlantic had to refuel there and that included celebrity planes, obviously. And there was this sense of the world would stop there. It was known as the crossroads of the world and they had a little bar on the airport and the locals would come down to meet anyone who stopped by. And they have pictures there in the airport of incredibly famous people. The Queen came there. Fidel Castro came there and they taught him how to sled. He had never gone sledding before, so they took him out sledding. And there was a

sense of just hanging out with people from around the world and welcoming them, whether they were famous or just random people who stopped by there and making friends with them. And then they developed jet engines and no one needed to stop to refuel anymore. And this airport, which had been integral to the war, which had welcomed so many people, suddenly was empty...And obviously, it still had a purpose, there's military planes that still go through there. There's a lot of parcel delivery planes that go there. And there's still obviously passenger planes, but the number of people just dropped significantly. It's like the world started just flying over them. Aviation people, anyone in the business, knows that Gander is where you stop if there's an incident of air rage, if there's a mechanical emergency and it's also the alternate stop for the space shuttle to land.

Emily:

What?

David Hein:

Yeah, because the tarmac is so long to support all of those allied aircraft, it's a spot for the space shuttle to land. So it's this incredible place that the world stopped coming to, until 9/11.

Musical Audio (cast singing:

You are here, at the start of a moment on the edge of the world where the river meets the sea. Here at the edge of the Atlantic on an island in between there and here. (fades under)

Emily:

This is a story of extraordinary kindness and hospitality at a moment when ... I mean, at least in my personal history, this is one of the worst moments I've experienced in our nation's history.

However, we would be remiss if we didn't mention that a lot of this hospitality did not extend to those passengers who were people of color. And especially now, we cannot move forward talking about extraordinary kindness that doesn't extend to everybody. However, all of these themes can not be treated with all the attention they deserve in a 90-minute production.

Nick:

And there's one particular instance towards the end of the play that happens to one of these characters, Ali, where he is strip-searched before he's allowed on his return flight because the other passengers feel uncomfortable. And that was a reflection of something that did actually happen in real life and is a part of Beverley's story,

Beverley Bass (interview):

Six o'clock in the morning, we're about ready to go. My flight attendant came to me and said that there were two guys that seemed suspicious to them. And the passengers were concerned about it as were they. And my lead flight attendant said, "I'm not getting on the airplane with those guys." And I'm like, "Oh my God, how am I just now learning about this?"

So I went and got the head of security and I got the RCMP and they walked with me down to the holding pen where all my passengers were. We pointed out the two guys and they took them into a private room. And they said that they were going to have to search them. And I said, "Well, that's fine." I said, "But I have to be in that room." I said, "It's not that I want to be, but I have to be because I cannot

legitimately go back to my flight attendants and say that everything is okay unless I saw with my own eyes." So I physically went through their carry-ons, took out every single item, looked at it and then they were strip-searched. So I told the flight attendants. I said, "We're okay. The guys checked out fine."

Emily:

And I think just listening to the retelling of this awful moment is a reminder of all the amplified xenophobia and racism that happened immediately following 9/11 that people are still experiencing today.

Musical transition

Nick:

This play has resonated so well with so many. Speaking to Beverley, I asked about seeing the play for the first time. And she said that she and her husband probably missed about 75 percent of the play the first time that they saw it and she's since seen it, by the way, 158 times. But she missed a large percentage of the production the first time she saw it because she was experiencing some of those emotions for the very first time.

Beverley Bass (interview):

We were three rows back dead center. And with Jenn Colella rolls her chair out and picks up the phone and says ...

Musical Audio Jenn Colella singing:

No, I'm fine Tom, I'm fine

Beverley Bass (interview):

"Hi, Tom. I'm fine," my husband buried his head in his hands and I'm not sure we saw 75 percent of the show. It was the first realization that I had of how difficult that day was for my husband.

Nick:

And you got to think about being a pilot on that day. First reaching your loved one to say, "It wasn't me."

Matt:

I think when these sort of traumatic events happen in our lives, we don't necessarily feel what's going on until later. That's part of the reason why PTSD and these other things are issues is because the emotional response is sometimes delayed by the fact that your brain has to switch into a sort of survival mode in those moments.

Nick:

Yeah. And Beverley has a really great story about the first time that she really let herself feel emotion following 9/11. Because of course, when she first hears the news, she's got an incredibly important responsibility to land her plane and her passengers. Then, she's got this responsibility to her passengers that's portrayed in the play, in *Come from Away*, and then she's got to get her passengers home. And

there's a really great story about the first time that the enormity of the thing actually lands on her. But it's in the middle of a story about something that's portrayed in the play that doesn't maybe do as much justice to real life as the celebratory spirit of the rest of *Come from Away*.

Beverley Bass (interview):

So the flight home was uneventful. It's a long flight, probably about six hours. And we landed in Dallas. And as I told you before, I had held it together so beautifully. But when I'm landing and I am rolling in on the runway, for whatever reason, I turned my head to the right. And they had draped ... Oh, it's still hard for me to even tell you this. They had draped an American flag between our two terminals. It was the biggest flag I had ever seen in my life. And I will tell you that that that was the first time that I broke down. So when I was taxiing in to the gate, yes, tears were running down my face and it was because of that American flag.

So anyway, we get off the airplane. Our families met us with balloons and flowers and everything. And then when I walked out of the terminal, I saw those two guys standing on the curb, waiting for their ride. And I ran up to them and I apologized. I said, "I just want to tell you I am so sorry that that happened, but I want to thank you for the way that you handled it." And they'd looked at me and said, "Don't you worry about a thing. Under the circumstances, we totally understand."

And it really doesn't convey that in the musical, but it made me feel so good.

Emily:

After five days in Gander, planes were allowed to put their passengers back on board and fly to their final destination. But there were repercussions, as we all remember, to the airline industry and how flying on airplanes changed dramatically after 9/11. And in a lot of ways, this is what's been called the lost decade.

Nick:

Right. So we know that, exuberant musicals notwithstanding, there were long-lasting repercussions from 9/11, especially within the airline industry or particularly felt in the airline industry. There was the lost decade where airlines simply did not hire new airline pilots and air ridership went way down and that kind of affected the next rising generation of pilots. We do know, from speaking to Beverley, that that is something that she took really seriously when she created an organization to help mentor women in aviation, for instance.

So she did take early retirement, which is something that was sort of characteristic of a lot of senior flight personnel in that stage of their career so that they could free up those seats to a rising generation. And one of the things that Beverley shared with us is that when her daughter was growing up, she wanted to be a pilot. She talked about being a pilot all the time. but Beverley said that when she got back home after 9/11, her daughter never mentioned becoming a pilot again. And it was kind of indicative of this lost decade mentality that was very central to her life, that her daughter seemingly did not want to be a pilot and did not want to follow in her footsteps after all of the fear and upheaval of that day.

Although it took several years. But when her daughter was in college, she suddenly started talking about wanting to be a pilot again. She actually did go through flight training and is now a professional pilot and her mother could not be more proud that her daughter followed in her footsteps. So Beverley is still flying and so now is the second generation.

Exit Music up and under

Matt:

AirSpace is from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. You can follow us on Twitter or Instagram, @airspacepod. AirSpace is produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart, mixed by Tarek Fouda. Special thanks to Andrew Fletcher. Distributed by PRX.

Music under and out

Beverley Bass (interview):

One day when she was about three years old, we were driving down the street and she's in the backseat in her car seat. And she said, "Mom," she said, "Can boys be pilots too?" And I realized how skewed her mind was because so many of my girlfriends were pilots, so she just thought that's what girls did. They were pilots.

Audio logo:

From PRX.