

## Family Circle Magazine

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Folks, this is your captain. We're having a problem with an indicator light. Since we're so near Newfoundland, we're going to land in Gander and have it checked out before continuing on to Atlanta. The words barely registered as Shirley Brooks-Jones snuggled deeper into her seat aboard Delta flight 15, midpoint between Frankfurt, Germany and Atlanta, Ga., and tried to finish her nap. Returning from an international meeting for the People to People Student Ambassador program, Shirley, 65, figured the stop would be just a brief detour. But as the plane descended and Shirley glimpsed the scene below, she snapped awake. Plane after plane lined the runways, bearing the names of dozens of airlines. Air France, British Air. Alitalia. TWA, Aer Lingus. USAir. This was no mere indicator light problem. Something was very wrong. Twice a year, Tony Aiello and his wife Liz, both television reporters in New York City, vacation in Italy. They always have a great time, but this year's trip had been extra special. Maybe it was the knowledge it might be their last for a while -- the two were finally ready to start a family -- or maybe it was just the golden beauty of autumn in Tuscany. They'd ended their vacation with three nights in Milan before boarding Continental flight 45 for Newark. Around noon, after a smooth, uneventful trip, the captain's voice came over the loudspeaker. There's been a slight change in plans. We're being diverted. Tony, 38, and Liz, 39, looked at each other, their reporter's instincts kicking in. "There's nothing wrong with the plane, Liz," Tony said. "I bet it's a security issue." "Yeah," she agreed. "Maybe a bomb threat someone finds credible." Tony tried the plane's phone, but it didn't work. Then the jet banked during its approach to Gander and the Ailleos glimpsed the jammed runways. The crowds clinging to the chain-link fence surrounding the airport, staring at the beached planes as if they were some exotic zoo animals. The armed police patrolling the tarmac between the planes. "I don't know what happened," Tony said to Liz. "But it's the biggest story of the year." When Jackie Pinto, 42, heard the captain announce a flight diversion for

Continental flight 45, she felt angry and frustrated. For months, she'd read about overcrowded airports and overworked air controllers. Now, on the tail end of a much-awaited hiking trip to Italy -- which had been just perfect -- it seemed her luck was running out. "You can bet I'm going to get my money back for this ticket," Pinto, an advertising executive for Chanel, Inc., in New York City, told the woman behind her. Then the captain announced the plan would land in Gander, Newfoundland in Canada. "Canada, cool," Jackie said, her anger dissipating as quickly as it'd come. "This will be a story to tell people." It was just past noon Newfoundland time -- about 10:30 a.m. New York time -- and Salvation Army Major Lloyd George had just finished the pastoral care committee meeting at the nursing home in Lewisporte, about 40 miles northwest of the Gander airport, when his cell phone rang. He answered, listened for a minute, then abruptly stood. Everyone stared at him, wondering why this normally calm man suddenly looked as if he were about to jump out the window. The answer came immediately. "There's been an emergency in the States. They need our town." The town. Not a church, a school or a few motel rooms in this small village of 4,000 that encircles Little Burnt Bay like scattered pearls. But the entire town. It was September 11, and hijacked airplanes had just smashed into the World Trade Centers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., a fourth slamming into a field in western Pennsylvania. For the first time in history, the United States closed its borders to air traffic. As soon as Gander International Airport president and CEO Gary Vey heard the news that golden morning, he immediately knew the airport would be involved. "Anything that affects the aviation world affects Gander," he says. For Gander, a tiny speck in central Newfoundland, 1,908 miles from Shannon, Ireland, and 1,100 miles from New York City, had long served first a refueling station, then as a safe harbor, for planes flying to and from Europe. Today, with one of the world's longest runways, it was the aviation world's version of a "halfway house." If America's airports were closed, the planes would come to Gander. Come they did. Between 9:30 a.m. and 12:09 p.m. that day, 39 planes with 10,000 passengers and crew landed in Gander, doubling the town's population in less than three hours. While the airport

was prepared for emergency landings and even plane crashes, it was not prepared to feed, house and entertain thousands of people for what could be days. "We knew what to do if the planes crashed," Vey said. "We never dreamed we'd be called upon to entertain children and feed families." So the calls went out in a great rippling wave from Gander to the small seaside communities of central Newfoundland. We need beds, food, clothing. We need help. And the people of Newfoundland, known for centuries for their hospitality, rallied. --- Lewisporte, population 4,000, serves as the shopping and recreational center for dozens of tiny hamlets within a 60-mile radius. A town of metal corrugated buildings, small, ranch houses and worn Cape Cods, with one main street and no stop lights, it boasts a Kentucky Fried Chicken and a McDonald's, both of which close before midnight. Several hardware, furniture and food stores keep the town's commercial machinery humming, while a newly refurbished marina provides hope for its fledgling tourist industry. It has a three-store "mall," a six-lane bowling alley, a tiny Chinese take out, and a pub in the two-story Brittany Inn motel (with 34 rooms). But no emergency plan. Lewisporte Mayor Bill Hooper was working in the small printing business he owns next to his house when he learned of the terrorist attacks. Almost immediately, one of his three cell phones rang. "How many can you take?" asked the Gander Salvation Army official. "I'll get back to you," Hooper said, then put out an appeal over the local radio station. "And people just swarmed," he recalls. For while Lewisporte may not have an emergency plan, it does have a powerful contingent of churches and social clubs. Six churches serve this small town, their parking lots full every Sunday. The Lewisporte Kinsmen and Lions' clubs raise thousands a year for town projects and charities with moose burger sales, fish fries, and fees from renting their small metal buildings for weddings and parties. Together, they drive the spiritual and social life of the town in much the same way the shops drive its economic engine. From as far away as the fishing village of Twillingate, 60 miles north, came truckloads of bedding and food. Women simmered giant pots of soup, slapped together dozens of sandwiches, started cookies and pies baking. Residents and store owners emptied shelves, cupboards and closets of

shampoo, toothpaste, new toothbrushes, hair brushes, diapers. Schools closed, and bus drivers, striking for job security, laid down their pickets and came in to transport passengers from Gander to Lewisporte. By 5 p.m., the town had enough bedding, food and toiletries for 1,200 people. "We're ready," Hooper told Gander officials. "Send 'em on." ----- Aboard Continental Flight 45, passengers whipped out their cell phones the second the engines stopped. Tony's phone didn't work, but the woman behind him got a signal. "Don't worry, we're fine," he heard her say. Then she gasped. He turned around to see her face white with shock. "What happened?" he asked, gently putting his hand on her shoulder. So she told him. The plane filled with gasps and tears as word spread about the attacks in America. The captain shared what little information he had, but by and large, the 130 passengers and crew were cut off from any news. For the next 22 hours, as they waited their turn to deplane, this disparate group of people - several of whom didn't even speak English -- traded rumors and facts like baseball cards. They devoured any food left in the cabin, swapped names, emails and vacation pictures, watched the in-flight movies over and over again, and waited. And waited. For Gander airport was in the midst of the biggest security threat of its history. Since no one knew if there were any additional terrorists, every passenger and crew member had to be screened before leaving the airport. Faxes, e-mails and cell phone calls streamed in from the FAA, CIA, and FBI, searching for high-ranking military and government officials aboard the planes, warning of passengers who fit terrorist profiles, sending what felt like minute-by-minute security updates as to how to handle the passengers. "It was crazy, but exciting at the same time," recalls Vey. Finally, around 12:30 p.m., Wednesday, Sept. 12, the passengers on flight 45 disembarked. Like everyone else, they were allowed to take only their carry-on bags. Their luggage would remain on board. The crew -- like all crew members from the stranded planes -- were dispatched to hotel rooms to insure they were well rested when the time came to fly again. And the passengers -- along with those from Delta flights 15 and 129, and USAir flight 3 - 773 in all -- boarded bright yellow school buses for Lewisporte. Among them were Joanne and John Keller, both 66, returning from

a vacation in Ireland to Conyers, Ga. As they passed through security after spending 24 hours aboard grounded Delta flight 129, officials found the two-inch penknife Joanne carried everywhere with her, a legacy from her long-dead father. It had been legal when she boarded the plane for Ireland so many days ago. But now the world had changed. "You won't be able to take that back on board with you when you leave," the security guard warned. Lloyd George, standing nearby, heard every word. "Here," he said, handing the Kellers his card. "I'll be happy to take it and mail it back to you after you're safely home." The fabled Newfie kindness had begun. At first, the town's residents stood ready to take the plane people into their homes. But airport authorities wanted to keep passengers together as much as possible. When word came the planes could leave, they would have just an hour to gather everyone together. So the town threw open its places of worship and social gathering. In the Lion's Club building, about the size of a small school gym, mats from the middle school next door provided a soft perimeter about the scarred wooden floor for sleeping, while tables for meals filled the center. At the Philadelphia Pentecostal church, parishioners turned the teal-carpeted sanctuary with its tan-cushioned pews into a dormitory and the social hall into the dining center. They emptied the small Sunday school rooms of desks and chairs and created private rooms for families with children. Meanwhile, at St. Mathews United Church, the Salvation Army Church, the Calypso Center and the Kinsmen Community Club, army cots and piles of quilts and blankets provided hundreds of makeshift beds. The first buses arrived around 11 a.m. Wednesday. Passengers wanted two things: a phone and a television. No problem, Bill Hooper told them. Local phone and cable company employees had wired all shelters for cable TV and extra phone lines. CNN was on every television. For the first time, the passengers saw the images that had so horrified the rest of the world. The plane hitting the second tower. The collapse of first one, then the other tower. The screaming, soot-covered people running from a billowing cloud of dust and ash, the bodies falling like confetti. "There was silence," recalls Don Cullen, 69, of St. Louis, Mo., who, with his wife Betty, was returning from Ireland on Delta flight 129. "Over 100

people just stood in a big semi-circle and watched. We just couldn't believe it." "My brain just couldn't process it," recalled Shirley. "It was like I was seeing previews of a movie." At the Lion's Club, Thelma Hooper, the mayor's wife, watched as one young woman slipped to the floor in grief after watching the hideous images. Thelma put her arms around the girl and just held her. "That's OK," she soothed. "You just cry as long as you want to. You're here with friends."

Indeed they were. During the next three warm, sunny days, as the "plane people" ventured into the town and got to know each other as well as their hosts, they learned what friendship truly meant. It seemed the townspeople had thought of everything. From tampons for the women to diapers and toys for the children. They delivered boxes of underwear and pajamas for the stranded passengers to sort through and served hot, sit-down meals three times a day. Bacon, eggs and French toast in the morning, steak and mashed potatoes in the evening. One night, the plane people feasted on a jiggs dinner, the Newfoundland version of corned beef and cabbage. In every church and social hall, the coffee and tea pots steamed all day, while bowls of fresh fruit, and platters of home-baked cookies, cakes and homemade candy seemed to magically replenish themselves. Although a few hotel rooms remained when she arrived in town, Jackie Pinto never thought of renting one. "I felt to go to a hotel would be a slap in the face for these people who had turned themselves inside out for us." Residents brought elderly people too frail to sleep on the floor into their own homes, and invited many others in for hot showers. Thelma Hooper, worried when she saw Shirley trying to sleep across three chairs, brought her and two other women back to the Hooper house for a good night's sleep and a home-cooked breakfast, before whisking them off for some shopping. When passengers kept asking where they were, high school teacher Kerry Langdon hung maps of the world, so they could pinpoint Newfoundland, the easternmost spot of land in North America. When another passenger pined for her dog, Major George brought his dog in to comfort her. When Tony Aieleo wished aloud for another television set so he could watch the network he worked for, Lloyd George brought his own from home and hooked it up to the cable

outlet. When Joanne and John Keller happened upon a garage sale at Elizabeth Walters' house, Elizabeth refused to let Joanne pay for anything she bought. Later that evening, she turned up at the Kinsmen Center and brought the Kellers home with her. She lighted a fire, brought a stool for Joanne's aching feet, and served the couple homemade scones and hot tea. "It was an instance of how good people can be," says Joanne. "Particularly in relation to how bad people can be." The entire town turned out to help, going without sleep for four days, fitting volunteering in with their regular jobs. The town doctors and nurses closed the local clinic to be on 24-hour call for the plane people. The pharmacists filled prescriptions for free. Firemen spent late night hours standing guard, not so much to protect the passengers (there is little, if any, crime in Lewisporte), but to be available in case anyone needed anything. Even months after the event, passengers on the four Lewisporte flights still have a difficult time putting into words how much those kindnesses meant. "Every time we turned around, the Newfies were giving us another reason to smile," said Tony. "Short of being home at such a terrible time, we were in the best place I can imagine. We felt safe. Cared for. Genuinely welcomed. And you could just tell the Newfoundlanders were genuinely grieving for what had happened to our country." You couldn't walk down the road without two or three people stopping to offer you a ride, or direct you to their house for a hot shower. "Any other place, I would be concerned about a stranger offering me a ride, for fear I'd wind up with my face on a milk carton the next day," says Kellee Ryan, 35, a computer specialist from Akron, Ohio who was on Delta flight 129. But not in Lewisporte. "It was part 'Leave It to Beaver,' part 'Fargo, North Dakota,' " says Jackie Pinto of the town where no one locks their doors or their cars, where traffic jams occur only when a moose wanders into the street. "The people were so pure." "No matter where you sat on the plane, from first class to way in the back of coach, we were all treated like family," Kellee says. Amazingly, the treatment they received affected the plane people as well, Jackie said, painting them with the same patina of patience and kindness as the Lewisporters. "It's as if the more love we were given, the more we were able to give," she says. "We

were being treated so well it brought out the best in everybody else and then just snowballed." In fact, despite the image of the whining, demanding Americans, people throughout Newfoundland who cared for the plane people reported no problems. "You would have been proud of your countrymen," Bill Hooper said.

The passengers spent their days walking along the harbor, watching CNN, shopping in the small stores of "downtown" Lewisporte, or taking harbor tours on fishing vessels (always with cell phone in tow). They e-mailed home from the middle and high school computer labs, and played board games and ping-pong and volleyball in the middle school gym. And they shopped, pumping an estimated \$100,000 into the local economy, providing a much-needed boost to this region where unemployment hovers about 16%. Nights, the Newfoundlanders entertained their guests with folk songs and poems, karaoke and story telling. They surprised one honeymooning couple with a cake and flowers. Once, two stranded professional musicians repaid the kindnesses with impromptu violin and piano concerts. Another memorable evening, a select group of plane people were "screeched-in," the traditional means of turning an "off-islander" into a Newfie. It involves a taste of Newfoundland's own special brand of rum called Screech (the plane people used juice), kissing a cod (yes, an actual dead fish), eating peppermint candy (recall the fish) and talking like a Newfie (a lilting mesh of Scottish and Irish accents). "We tried to keep them occupied so their minds weren't always focused on home," said Marlene George, also a major in the Salvation Army. At times, it was hard to tell who was having more fun -- the plane people or the Newfoundlanders. "It brought the community together," said Kerry Langdon of those four days. "I've lived here my whole life and I thought I knew everyone in town," said Bill Hooper. "But until September 11, there were a lot of people I didn't know." Still, they shake off suggestions they did anything out of the ordinary. "It's just part of our nature to do things like that," says Shawn Woodford, who edits the weekly newspaper. "To be asked why you do it is hard to answer. There's no reason not to do it. Those people needed someone; we had the ability to do something." Giving is a big part of Newfoundlander's lives. Although the province is the poorest in Canada, it has



the highest rate of charitable giving per capita in the country. "We've had a lot of tragedy in our history," explains Bill Hooper. "We made our living on the sea, and many families lost fathers, so the community rallied around families and helped raise the children." The isolation that comes of living on an island is also part of it, says Shawn. "We haven't had as many mainland ideals in terms of not trusting people. We have strong, strong hospitality here. You know your neighbor and your neighbor knows the next guy. Everyone is so tight knit you can't lose those connections." Even when Newfies move away -as they often do to find work - they stick together, with hundreds of Newfoundland clubs around the world.

Lloyd George describes the experience this way: "It helped us look inward, and find inner strength in ourselves. It helped us realize we're so blessed, and sometimes when you're blessed, you become complacent. But when you see something happen like this happen, it gives you a greater appreciation of who we are and where we live." ---- Finally, around 2 a.m. Saturday morning, word came that the planes were leaving. The weather was dark and dreary, the first day of rain since the planes landed. Aboard Delta flight 15 (now renamed Delta 9581), however, the atmosphere was partylike. Passengers who'd stayed at different sites greeted each other like long-lost relatives. Those who'd stayed together laughed again over their experiences. "It was with real mixed emotions we were leaving," recalls Shirley. "We were all smiling, saying how great it had been, and weren't we sad about going home." By 2:25 p.m., to loud applause, the plane was airborne. Shirley unbuckled her seatbelt and wandered up and down the aisles. She saw Dr. Robert Ferguson, a George obstetrician. "Where were you?" she asked. Turned out he'd stayed at the Brittany Inn. "You missed the best experience of all," she told him. Together, they talked about repaying their hosts, and Ferguson suggested a scholarship fund for a high school student. They started passing a sign up sheet through the plane, but quickly realized they'd land before they reached everyone. "Do you think the crew would read it aloud?" Shirley asked. "Nah," said Ferguson. "They'll never do that." But when Shirley explained what she wanted to do, the flight attendant got tears in her eyes. She asked the captain, who granted permission

immediately. "But you should make the announcement," she told Shirley. So Shirley, nervously clutching a page of scribbled notes, stood at the front of the plane and looked out at the curious passengers-now-close-friends. "We may be down," she said after explaining the plan, "but good eventually overtakes evil." And in Lewisporte, she said, "we've seen the best of the good." By the time the Delta flight landed in Atlanta, passengers had pledged \$15,000. By Thanksgiving, that figure topped \$35,000. But it was by no means the only money flooding into Lewisporte. More than \$6,000 was donated to the Kinsmen club, several thousand more to the Calypso and Lions clubs, and to local churches. Barely a day goes by that Mayor Hooper doesn't open a letter or card containing a check. But more than the money, have come the thank yous. Through hundreds of e-mails, letters, cards, and drawings, they've flooded into not only Lewisporte, but Gander and the other surrounding towns that hosted the "plane people." Pictures and cards line the walls in the Gander town hall, while several web sites offer thousands of thank yous. Jackie Pinto's message, posted on the web site [www.thankstogander.de](http://www.thankstogander.de), sums up many of the sentiments: "At least once a day, our 'experience' comes up in conversation and I am asked to tell the story. I start out enthusiastically, but after a minute or two I start saying, 'You wouldn't believe it, you wouldn't believe it. And then I just quit because I cannot find the words to convey the feeling . . . I wish I could somehow gather the emotion we felt. A combination of fright, fatigue, generosity, kindness, unselfishness, humor. . .so much more. . . and put it in a bottle. I would open the bottle whenever anyone wanted to hear the story and tell them to breathe in deeply. It would be a much better world."