

'Oh my God, he has a bomb!'

Reel Bio

DOHEY, Mary

By BOB PENNYCOOK

Mary Dohey won't open her front door to an unrecognized caller. Yet Mary Dohey has just been awarded Canada's highest decoration for bravery.

The Mississauga resident will be presented with the Cross of Valor during a special ceremony in Ottawa early in the new year, for her assistance in foiling an attempted hijacking of an Air Canada flight in 1971.

As the recipient of the medal, Mary becomes the third Canadian, and the only living person, to be so honored.

"I was shocked when I heard the news," said the Air Canada stewardess. "Air Canada called me and asked me to come downtown to have some pictures taken.

"I knew John Arpin (the assistant purser on the flight) was going to receive the Star of Courage, and I thought maybe I would receive the same.

"But when they said I would be awarded with the Cross of Valor, it was just too much."

She was hesitant at first about consenting to an interview, because "I don't feel I should be blowing my own trumpet. What I did, would have been done by anyone else in the same position.

"I asked God to save the people on board that flight" I prayed out loud. So God should be given the credit."

And she is also fiercely protective of her privacy.

But once she consented to the interview, she talked about the incident as though it were a recent happening.

TERRIFYING

"Nothing in your wildest imagination could ever prepare you for such an experience," she said. "It was terrifying.

"My mind was in a turmoil, but I remained outwardly calm, because I knew if I panicked, it would be game over for passengers and crew."

She said she thought she was going to die, but she was too afraid for the safety of the 118 passengers to worry about her own.

"I don't know how the hijacking attempt started,

because I didn't realize it was happening until it was in progress."

The Nov. 12, 1971 flight originated in Vancouver, with a stopover in Calgary before heading to Toronto.

And it was in Calgary that the ordeal began.

"I was in the galley with the curtains drawn, checking my meal supplies and preparing the dinner," said Mary, "trying to hurry because we were late.

"I heard the shuffle of feet past the galley, and knew the passengers were boarding, but other than that, I heard nothing.

"Finally, after rushing, I was so proud of myself. I had the butter on the trays, and the meal was all ready to serve, so I stepped out of the galley to tell Arpin we were ready. Then I heard someone shout, 'sit down'."

There, standing in the lounge, was a man dressed in a long coat, gloves, wearing a black balaclava, pointing a double-barrelled shotgun at Mary's head.

The man was Paul Cini, using the alias Dennis Munroe, who is now serving four concurrent life terms in prison.

NOTE

"I heard Dennis say, 'Take this note to the captain and have him read it to the passengers,'" said Mary. "He also said — you have so many minutes, or she's dead — meaning me."

Mary still has a copy of that note at home, all 506 words of it, beginning with "Welcome aboard the doomsday flight."

Cini placed Mary against a window telling her not to move her head, or she'd be dead.

"I heard paper rattling, and from the corner of my eye, I saw wires sticking out of a package," said Mary. "I immediately thought, 'Oh, my God, he has a bomb'."

Cini then called Mary to sit beside him.

"He told me that if I wanted to die now, I could, but if I wanted to die later, I must sit with the parcel on my lap and hold the wires apart — there were 60 sticks of dynamite in the package.

"I decided I'd die later, so I sat holding the wires apart in one hand."

DYNAMITE

Cini then took a further 10 sticks of dynamite out of his pocket, "and I was sure that we were all going to die," said Mary, "but the most depressing thing was the realization of how sick this man must be."

"For some unknown reason, he then fired a shot in the air. I asked him if he had meant to do that and he said no.

"I then asked if he wanted me to hold his hand to stop it from shaking; and he seemed pleased with the idea."

So Mary sat, "for what seemed like forever", holding Cini's hand in her right hand, and the detonating wires in her left.

Cini told Mary that he had gone to chapel that morning and prayed, and that he had heard voices telling him that if he captured a stewardess, she would panic, and it would be all over.

But Mary didn't panic, she remained outwardly calm throughout the ordeal.

"He also told me that if he wasn't meant to blow up the plane, why was he not stopped at the gate or upon entering the aircraft," said Mary.

While talking with Mary, Cini kept taking a butane lighter from his pocket and passing the flame across the detonating wires.

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MARY DOHEY

"Why those wires never caught fire, I'll never know," said Mary.

GUN AT NECK

She said his mind kept jumping, listing off places where he wanted the plane to land.

"Every once in awhile, He'd get cross at me, and I'd feel the pressure of the gun at my neck," she said. "I don't know which frightened me more, the gun or his mask."

When Cini forced the plane to land at Great Falls, Mont., where he picked up his \$50,000 ransom, Mary persuaded him to let the passengers off.

En route back to Calgary, flight captain Vernon Ehman saw his chance and kicked the shotgun away from Cini, grappled him to the floor, and there, Arpin hit Cini with the flat of a fire axe.

"When it ended, we were all in a state of shock," said Mary. "The eight-hour ordeal seemed like 75 hours. I was afraid to even stay in my room, even though we had police protection."

Although the incident happened four years ago, the memory is very much alive for Mary. "It's something one just can't forget."

It was her compassion for people that kept her calm enough to save those on board that aircraft. And it's that compassion that still keeps her going, in both her jobs.

"I love meeting and talking with the people," said Mary.

Twenty years ago, when she joined the airline, then called Trans Canada Airlines, all stewardesses had to be registered nurses.

"And I still nurse today at St. Joseph's Hospital," she said. "I used to nurse during the day and be a stewardess at night, but let's face it, my dear, I'm not getting any younger, so my nursing is limited to weekends."

Mary Dohey, who still calls Newfoundland her home, modestly said she will be proud to receive the Cross of Valor in Ottawa this coming year.

And she is proud of her cohorts, Arpin, who will receive the Star of Courage, and Captain Ehman, who will be awarded with the Medal of Bravery, the second and third highest awards this country can bestow.