Gary Winston

The first indication might have been the faint odor of burning rubber or cardboard. The boxes and bubble wrap in which the expired oxygen generators had been packed were probably the first victims of the fire and the large airplane tire probably second as the intense and unknown fire continued to grow in size and intensity. The temperature inside the passenger cabin slowly started to build, but was probably shrugged off as just one of those annoying things about flying.

This was probably a time when the passengers towards the front of the aircraft were perhaps uncomfortable, not yet scared, but alive. But unbeknownst to them, an out-of-control acetylene torch had ignited inside a cargo hold just under their feet.

The sound of the exploding tire below them changed everything. Smoke began to rise and curve up the rounded sides of the interior walls, then from the middle of the aisle itself. This occurred towards the front of the plane while the people in the rear might have even been unaware. But even that changed as the floor began to melt under the feet of the passengers in rows 4 through 12.

This was probably a time of concern and bewilderment, some movement towards the rear of the aircraft to escape the meting floor and fire in the front, but most of the passengers were still alive.

Finally, the flames themselves shot up through the hole in the floor, scorching the interior of the cabin. By this time, the smoke inside the cabin must have been black as coal, and poisonous. The lucky ones were those that died quickly from breathing deeply the embers of the burning aircraft. They were spared the horror that was still to follow.

One passenger, however, seated in the front of the aircraft, wasn’t able to flee. He was physically challenged and, as was ValuJet’s custom, assigned to the seat in the front. A courageous flight attendant refused to leave his side, choosing to help this stranger, rather than try to save herself.