

Small Things Matter (Butterknife and Boxcutters, 2009)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner, WLRH Radio Huntsville, AL USA

In a Huntsville commemoration of the tragedies of 9/11, one of the articles quoted several transcriptions of telephone messages that came from United Flight 93, before its crash in Pennsylvania:

"They're going to kill us anyway, so we might as well die fighting."

"I love Emmy. Take care of her."

"Babe, my plane's been hijacked."

"Huh? Stop joking."

"No Babe, I wouldn't joke like that. I love you. Tell the boys I love them."

"Sweetie, pick up the phone if you can hear me. (pause) Okay, I love you. There's a little problem with the plane. I'm fine and comfortable for now..."

This one is my favorite: "The others and myself have voted to attack the terrorists. I have my butter knife from breakfast."

That's wonderful. Two points: first, he affirms solidarity with the plan: "The others and myself have voted..." It's voted, so you've got to go along with it. The people have spoken: that frightened, virtually defenseless little group of involuntary resisters have been chosen by fate to be our first line of defense against a fearsome enemy... and majority rules.

But second, the butter knife! Precautions against terrorism have taken all our sharp implements from us before we board, and all they give you with your meals is cutlery so flimsy it won't dent your bacon, so all there is to repel boarders is the butter knife from breakfast! But you do what you can, with what you've got to work with, even a flimsy plastic knife.

Here's the important thing: It worked! We'll never know the full story of that first battle of World War 3, thirty thousand feet above Pennsylvania; no one alive can tell us how it was planned, what strategies were chosen, how it was carried out, who led the charge. But this we know: it worked. The plane-turned-missile was diverted from its target, and plunged to earth short of its goal.

When this story is told to future generations, remember to tell about the Breakfast Butterknife against the Boxcutters. Unfair odds, little chance of success, highly unlikely outcome, all the rest: tell that. But tell that it worked, somehow... or it helped something else work, and that's very close to the same thing.