

The Plane, The Plane

By Reg P. Wydeven
July 10, 2010

‘Snakes on a Plane’ is a cheesy movie that lives up to its name. While it certainly didn’t win any Oscars, it was an action-packed entertaining flick. Samuel L. Jackson plays FBI agent Neville Flynn who is tasked with protecting a key witness who is testifying against a mobster in his murder trial. Flynn must escort the witness on the red-eye Pacific Air Flight 121 from Hawaii to Los Angeles to the trial.

Little do they know that the mobster loaded hundreds of different species of snakes on the flight with a time operated device to release them with the intent of crashing the plane. The action ensues when the snakes get loose and Neville and the passengers have to fight for their lives.

While the deadly snakes made good cinema, the U.S. Department of Transportation is considering a proposal to ban another deadly item from flights: peanuts.

The DOT is introducing new provisions for improving air travel, and one of the measures is possibly banning packets of peanuts to accommodate passengers with nut allergies. According to the proposal, “The Air Carrier Access Act prohibits discrimination by U.S. and foreign air carriers against individuals with disabilities.” Under the Act, airline passengers with severe allergies to peanuts have a qualifying disability.

From the time I was in first grade through my senior year of high school, every day that my mom packed a lunch for me it had a peanut butter sandwich in it. I love peanut butter. However, since my wife and son both have severe peanut allergies, I haven’t had a peanut butter sandwich for well over a decade.

Seeing my son go into anaphylactic shock after having an allergic reaction was terrifying, and jabbing him with an epi-pen was worse. I don’t even want to think about that happening in a giant steel tube at 30,000 feet.

While I never want to restrict anyone’s rights or deprive anyone of their freedoms, peanuts are one of the only airborne food allergies that don’t even require contact or ingestion to be fatal. Peanut and tree nut allergies are the leading cause of fatal and near fatal food-allergic reactions. According to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, about 1% of people are allergic to peanuts or tree nuts.

When we flew to Florida two years ago, the airline was very accommodating by not serving peanuts and the flight attendant even made a pre-flight announcement that one of the passengers had severe peanut allergies. Thirty seconds later the man sitting next to my son opened a granola bar packed with peanuts. Thankfully my wife and daughter were sitting a dozen rows behind us, so my kids swapped seats. However, for the rest of the flight I was in a complete panic that the re-circulated air would waft the peanuts to the back of the plane.

The DOT is actually inviting public comments about dealing with peanuts. Possibilities include banning peanuts outright, providing a peanut-free flight when requested in advance, installing a peanut-free buffer zone around a passenger or doing nothing.

Ten years ago the DOT tried to issue similar guidelines for airlines to create peanut-free zones, but Congress wouldn’t proceed without a scientific study. Scientifically, I think pretzels sound like a great alternative.