

Infants in the Sky: Nick Comande Changes Airline's Policy

Editor's Note:

In the summer of 2000, readers of *PERSPECTIVE* were introduced to Nick Comande ('81 history) and his passion for mountain climbing. He made seven climbs, reaching the summits of Mount Kilimanjaro (19,340 ft., Tanzania), Mount Elbrus (18,510 ft., Russia), and Mount Vinson (16,067 ft., Antarctica). During five of his climbs Comande raised more than \$40,000 for charitable organizations including the American Cancer Society, the American Diabetes Association and the Muscular Dystrophy Association. You can find the story online at <http://www.uwp.edu/news/perspective/alum-success.cfm> (then select "Nick Comande"). He has not climbed since 1995, but has authored a book, "Climbing for Causes: A Personal Story," available online at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and AuthorHouse.

As a paramedic and firefighter for the past 25 years in Racine, Wis., Nick Comande knows all about safety. As a husband and father, Comande tries to create a safe environment for his family whenever and wherever possible – even at 30,000 feet. Which is how he got involved with the airline industry and its safety regulations.

"After our daughter (Rachel) was born, and knowing that we would eventually be taking her with us on vacation, I was looking through a baby magazine and found the Baby B'air safety vest," Comande said. "It's so simple ... the vest goes around the child and there's a loop on the back that goes through the parent's seat belt.

The manufacturer claims the vest helps prevent injuries to infants and small children traveling with their parents on airplanes. Because the child is secured to the parent's seat belt, a quick drop in altitude due to turbulence will not allow the child to fly out of the parent's control.



On the Comandes' first trip to Florida with their daughter, Rachel was wrapped in a blanket, so Midwest Airlines flight attendants were not aware that she was wearing the vest. On the flight back, however, a flight attendant told the Comandes they could not use the vest because it was not approved by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Comande showed the flight attendant the FAA-approval label on the vest.

"The attendant replied, 'You're right, it is FAA approved, but we don't approve it,'" Comande said.

When Comande returned home, he called the manufacturer to explain what had happened. Greg Nieberding, president of Baby B'air, said that some airlines had approved the vest for in-flight use. Others, like Midwest, had not. Nieberding offered to refund Comande's money.

In Comande's mind, however, the issue was not about money – it was about safety.

"I said, 'I'll tell you what, you keep your money and I'll convert Midwest.' And (Nieberding) laughed. He said, 'You're not going to convince an airline to change one of its safety regulations.' It took me 18 months, but I did it." Comande said.

In addition to writing letters and making phone calls, Comande purchased Midwest Airlines stock so he could attend a shareholders meeting and speak to what he believed were the benefits of Baby B'air.

"I presented my case – child safety – and they said they were changing the policy

and they did," Comande said. "I went

back the following year to thank them in public so they could add that to their public records.

"Every time I fly with them, I ask the flight attendant if they allow vests like this. If they say no, I ask if they are absolutely sure.... I tell them to check their flight manual. When they come back they usually say, 'How do you know that's there?' Because I'm the person that got it changed."

Comande is quick to point out that he enjoys flying Midwest Airlines, and that the carrier was very cooperative during his attempt to change the policy.

"I worked with Chris White (vice president of safety and regulatory compliance). Midwest was extremely cooperative in every way, shape or form and I give them a lot of credit," Comande said. "They listened to everything I said. Whether it was good, bad or indifferent, they listened – they looked at the big picture and they finally came around and said, 'You're right and we'll change our policies.'"

The safety vests are popular around the world. Current FAA regulations prohibit the use of the safety vests, belts, or car seats during taxi, takeoff and landing.