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FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS STAFF

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SUBJECT TWA Flight 847

TED KOPPEL: TWA Flight 847. What were the stories behind the stories you saw?

CAPTAIN JOHN TESTRAKE: We must land at Beirut. No alternative.

REPORTER: TWA Flight 847 flew over the Lebanese capital and, like before, Captain John Testrake had to plead with the tower for permission to land.

CAPTAIN TESTRAKE: We have no choice.

REPORTER: There was a message from the plane, which is still sitting on the tarmac, a message to the control tower saying, "There is a white Land Rover approaching our craft. Get it away or we're doing to shoot."

REPORTER: Many people in America are calling for some kind of rescue operation or some kind of retaliation. Do you have any thoughts on that?

MAN: I think that we'd all be dead men if they did.

REPORTER: Militia duty is not a skill or a job. It is a life. And it is never too early for a Shiite to begin.

REPORTER: Photographers and reporters pushed to get their first glimpse of five of the passengers. Amal militiamen, guns drawn, led the five out of the room.

REPORTER: They poured lots of Pepsi and they cut a cake that they made the minute the hostages walked in. It was really

strange.

REPORTER: In some ways, their departure looked more like a convoy going to war. Heavily armed Druze and Amal militiamen, along with crack Syrian Army troops, escorted the Americans out of Beirut and on to the road to Damascus, a journey that took just over 3 1/2 hours, the trip to freedom they'd been praying for for 17 days.

KOPPEL: Good evening. I'm Ted Koppel. And this is Nightline.

From London, Paris, Rome, and New York, we'll be joined live tonight by the ABC News correspondents and producers who covered the hostage story in Beirut. They'll give us some insight into how the story was covered.

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KOPPEL: Forget for a moment the substance of what you see and hear on television. The state of television technology these days is so high, so refined that we have become totally accustomed to seeing events in the most remote and dangerous corners of the world transmitted into our living rooms, kitchens and bedrooms literally at the speed of light. We're not only accustomed to it, we take it for granted.

Whether it is always appropriate is a subject we will take up on another night. What we are going to talk about this evening is whether it is all as easy as it looks. Indeed, it is not. But what goes into the collection of those images and the gathering of the news that accompanies them is what we'll be talking about for the remainder of this broadcast with the men and women who made it happen for ABC News in Beirut.

Joining us now live in our London Bureau, correspondent Charles Glass and producer Derwin Johnson; in our Paris Bureau, correspondent Don Kladstrup; in our Rome Bureau, producer Chris Harper; and in our New York studios, correspondent Betsy Aaron and producer Ray Nunn.

And Charles Glass, I want to begin with you and begin with what has become, I suppose, the most famous image of these entire past 17 days, and that is the image of you standing there beneath the cockpit of that aircraft -- I don't know whether you or whether a soundman was holding that long boom microphone and talking to Captain Testrake, and then the rest of the crew.

Give us a little bit of background. How did that come about? How did you get to be standing on the tarmac there?

CHARLES GLASS: Well, Ted, two days before that interview -- that interview was on Wednesday. On the Monday morning I had gone over to Nabih Berri's office to speak to him about what was going on on the plane. At that time we still believed that all of the passengers were on that Boeing 727 on the tarmac. Berri then revealed that, in fact, during the course of the night, during several hours when all of the journalists at the airport had been taken away by Amal during the night, all of the passengers had been taken off the plane. So he told me that they were all in good health and being taken care of, being protected by Amal. And I got a commitment from him then to allow us to see some of the hostages, because I said it wasn't good enough for us just to take his word for that they were being well treated or to take his word for that they were indeed in custody, and not in that of the hijackers'.

So, with that commitment, we then had to pursue him and his security office and his press office almost hourly, because it's not good enough in Beirut when you're working with a militia just to get the word of one man, because they tend to forget. So we pursued it, as I said, almost hourly, and we finally got a commitment on Tuesday night for a meeting at the airport at 9:30 in the morning with an Amal official.

We didn't know which hostages we were going to see. We didn't know if the airport was simply going to be a rendezvous point and then we would then go somewhere into the Southern suburbs where the passengers were being held. But we finally met up at the airport, we got into a Land Rover. Derwin Johnson, our crew, Steven N. Cochran, and our radio correspondent there, Julie Flynt, we all got into a Land Rover at the airport and drove out to the tarmac, got out of it, and at gunpoint did that interview.

KOPPEL: Let me turn to your colleague Derwin Johnson there, who was producer for much of what came out.

And Derwin, forgive me for mispronouncing your name a moment ago.

The mere getting around in Beirut has got to be one of the most extraordinarily -- well, it's obviously dangerous, but it's got to be one of the most extraordinarily confusing assignments that you've ever been on. How do you know where to send people? How do you know what to cover, what to ignore? Whom do you listen to, whom do you ignore?

DERWIN JOHNSON: Well, it's sort of a Catch-22 situation. You listen to everyone, and at the same time you have to take that with a grain of salt and try and cipher between all the information you get. And you don't ignore anything. It's a new situation in which information is coming to you from all

directions. And we try and cover it that way. On any given day, our crews will go to five, six, seven locations. And I'm talking about three and four crews jockeying around Beirut, which in itself is dangerous. But we're there to cover the story and we have to get out and do it.

KOPPEL: Now tell me, quite literally, how do you send them? Do you assign people in the morning? Did you all get together and decide who was going to go where?

JOHNSON: Yes, we did. We'd had meetings nightly, and from there we decide which crew would go where, depending on information that we had gotten. And crews would go out. It would be a driver, a two-man camera team, and a correspondent and producer.

KOPPEL: Chris Harper, you, like Charles Glass, have spent a great deal of time in Beirut before. To what degree was taht helpful?

CHRIS HARPER: Well, Ted, I think we had a lot of people who had been to Beirut before: Ray Nunn, Derwin Johnson, Charles Glass, our radio correspondent. I think that that's what helped us a great deal covering this story. We had maintained our contacts with Amal. We had maintained our understanding of what was going on, as well as anyone can understand what's going on in Beirut. And I think that was actually critical in terms of our understanding of the story and what was going on vis-a-vis the hostages, vis-a-vis Amal, vis-a-vis the Administration, and also the issue of the prisoners held in Israeli prisons. I think it helped us a lot.

KOPPEL: Ray Nunn, how do you walk that fine line between being understanding and seeming to be sympathetic -- because if you don't seem to be at least partially sympathetic, then you're putting yourself at an enormous disadvantage, possibly even in a dangerous position -- and crossing the line and no longer being objective about a story, when you deal with people who quite literally are waving guns around?

RAY NUNN: I think the most important thing is to -- where we draw the line is the notion that we're receptive, and that's it, and that's what they expect of us. Quite frankly, all of the people that we've dealt with understand that it is not in their best interest, if they really want to get their story out, to try to make us toe their line or speak their line.

As Derwin pointed out earlier, the object is to bring in as much information as you can. That has always been the story since I've been going into Beirut, since 1982, and to let everybody know.

And it works for you both ways. If you let everybody know that you're talking to all sources, they're going to come clean with you, more likely than not. And that's what we try to do. You go to them and you say, "Hey, look. This is what I've got from this source. What can you give me? Bounce this off of me." And then we'd go back at the end of the day, and Chris and Derwin and the correspondents, and we'd talk about the amount of information we had, where it was coming from. And then we'd decide on what would be the course of action for the following day.

KOPPEL: All right, folks, we're going to take a break. When we come back I want to talk to Don Kladstrup and Betsy Aaron about the problem of not being used for propaganda purposes.

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PETER HILL: Our treatment has been fine. We really haven't been abused. It's not like we're staying at the Ritz, mind you. But for all intents and purposes, and under the circumstances, we're being reasonably treated.

I'm so angry and frustrated that, personally, I'd like to get even. They're animals, absolute animals. I wasn't taken in by their garbage they tried to indoctrinate us with. And my instincts tell me that they are bastards, and the only thing they respect is strength.

KOPPEL: Let me turn right away to Don Kladstrup.

Don, I assume you could hear that cut from Peter Hill. Those two cuts, actually, once when he was still in captivity, and then, of course, the day when he arrived back here at the United States. And it raises a question that has been raised a great deal over the last few days, and that is, when you shove a microphone in a man's face and he is under the threat of a gun, one has to assume that he's going to say things that the hostage-takers want him to say.

Now, what is your responsibility as a journalist, then, and how do you handle that?

DON KLADSTRUP: It's difficult. I'd add just one thing to what the gentleman said before. They may be animals, but they're also, an awful lot of them, very young kids, uneducated. Not stupid, not dumb, but unsophisticated. And what they respond to when they point the guns at you, when they point their guns at us, is, oh, in reaction to, say, their village or their home having been shelled, destroyed by the U.S.S. New Jersey, things like that.

Being used? I found that at many times these people

were camera-shy. They didn't want us around. There were several occasions when Israeli gunboats would move too close to the coastline and the boys would move their big guns out to the sands of the beach or the cliffs and start taking potshots, trying to blow the boat out of the water. We'd want to get pictures. We'd do our best. We'd move toward the guns with our cameras, and they'd shoo us away. We'd explain to them, "Look, we're trying to explain to the American audience what's going on here." They would point their guns and say, you know, "Get back."

I remember one day we approached too close and they pointed right at us and threatened to shoot. It happened many times that way.

Yes, we may have been used. But as I said before, I think there's a degree of camera-shyness there that I didn't anticipate.

KOPPEL: Betsy Aaron, I want to pick up on a point that Don just made, and that is the level of sophistication. He made the point that many of these people are youngsters and not very sophisticated. The argument could be made, and indeed has been made, that some of the older members of Amal, for example, are very sophisticated and knew precisely what they were doing and set up some of these interview opportunities precisely because they knew that the message that would go back would be the kind of message that they wanted to convey at this time.

How do you handle that?

BETSY AARON: I don't think it was that clear-cut, Ted. I think our problem was that if you run into someone who speaks fairly good English, you assume they understand what you are doing and that their message is clear.

I don't think their message was clear. They didn't know how to use us. I think they got burned because they didn't know how to use the media and try to get their points across.

And I think we knew exactly what was going on, from beginning to end. We wanted to see those hostages as much as they wanted to show them. I think we got the better end of the deal.

KOPPEL: Charles Glass, if anyone got a lot of interviews with the hostages and got them at the earliest possible point, it was you. You must have agonized over this a little bit.

And in fact, Derwin, if you want to get in on this, the two of you must have discussed it.

Your thoughts as you were considering whether or not to do it. For example, I know that in that famous interview that you did at the seaside restaurant with several of the hostages, you indicated to them that you knew they might be under pressure. Would you tell us about that?

GLASS: Well, Ted, when arrived at that restaurant I didn't know which hostages I was going to meet, or even whether or not they'd be there. But I arrived, they were sitting at a large outdoor table with several Amal militiamen. I went and sat down next to them and I asked our cameraman, [unintelligible], not to take out his camera yet.

I sat down and talked to Allyn Conwell, Father James McLaughlin and Ralf Traugott. I said, "Listen, listen carefully," and I spoke very softly and couldn't be overheard by the Amal people there. I said, "I've come to interview you, but we don't have to do this interview. If you simply blink, I will put down our camera and we will go away. I don't want Amal to use this for its propaganda purposes, and I don't want to endanger you in any way."

So they talked among themselves, the three of them, for about 10-15 minutes, deciding whether or not it would be in their advantage to speak to us. And we could easily have said our camera was broken and we were unable to do the interview. At the end of the conversation they decided it would be in their own interest, one, to reassure their families that they were still alive, two, to tell people that they were being well-treated, and that it would be important to put their points across through us.

So they had the opportunity not to be interviewed, but they took the opportunity to be interviewed. And I emphasized and they emphasized that they didn't want it to be used for any Amal propaganda points.

KOPPEL: Derwin -- yeah, go ahead.

HARPER: Ted, this is Chris Harper in Rome.

A similar situation happened in what we call the last supper, when 32 of the 39 hostages met for a final dinner at our hotel in [unintelligible]. Betsy Aaron, Ray Nunn and I wanted to make sure that we did not force the cameras on these people. If they simply wanted to have dinner and not have us around, we wanted to give them that option. At the same time, if they wanted to deliver a message to their family or make some sort of statement, we said, "We will not get in your way. We'll set up a camera location, and we will not bother you."

Many of them chose to make a statement so that their families would know that they were in fact okay.

AARON: Right after the dinner, that looked very strained, but at least you saw smiles on the faces, the militiamen took Ralf Traugott over to the Commodore Hotel, where the rest of the press was staying, and they forced him to do interviews individually with all the other networks and with all the newspaper people. He was very tired. They kept him up until eight in the morning. He kept saying, "I want to go to bed. I've had enough." They kept him there.

If there was any indication that these people were either having a relaxing time or enjoying this, that was not true.

KOPPEL: Ray Nunn, give me your analysis of what you think Amal was trying to accomplish, because they did, in fact, give a lot of access to the media to the hostages?

NUNN: I think it's very important to realize that what we had was a convergence of common interests. On our part, getting the story out, the most important story and major concern of the public being what was the condition, what is the condition of the hostages.

In terms of the hostages, yeah, they wanted to let their folk, their relatives, their friends back home know that they were well.

And quite frankly, we have to admit that Amal, I think, realized it was in their best interest to get it out to the rest of the world, and especially to the folk in Washington, that these people are alive, they're well. And each day that they could get that message out, they thought it was important. Each day that we could get it out, we also thought it was important. And I can't -- and so it was in everybody's interest to get the message out.

I don't think it was a matter of use on our part. I think we did what we had to do. Our most important job in terms of getting the key element out, which is where are the hostages today, what do we know about them?

And one other point which I really want to hone in on is everybody asks about why they came to us. I think if you go back and look at the tape of that first news conference and the madness, the feeding frenzy that was the press trying to get their first glimpse, here was not Amal, not very sophisticated, but smart enough to know that that kind of situation was not smart, it was not conducive to the kind of image they wanted to get across. Indeed, it was dangerous.

There were moments when we thought that some reporters,

especially one French photographer, we thought he was going to be killed because of his actions.

So, if you're sitting in their place you want to get the image out of these hostages. What do you do? Well, what you probably do is try to find the most controlled situation. The most controlled situation, quite frankly, was to come to ABC because we were away from the rest of the pack. And that meant that they could approach us and they could talk to us; and that, indeed, in the final analysis, they could bring them over and not worry about the press going into a feeding frenzy.

AARON: And not only that...

KOPPEL: Hold on just a second, Betsy, because I just want to follow up, and then we're going to take a break, and I'll come back to you after the break.

When you say "away from the pack," you mean, physically, your hotel was separate?

NUNN: Our hotel was separate. It was about a -- depending on what time of day, it was a 15-to-20-minute drive late at night. In the daytime it could take you 30 minutes. We were a long way away from the rest of the guys, and that worked in our favor.

KOPPEL: Go ahead, Betsy. Make your point.

AARON: Not only that, very important, we had people on the ground in Beirut who had worked there for years. You cannot ignore someone named Julie Flynt, who lives in Beirut, works for ABC. There are no shortcuts in getting a story. They're going to turn to people they know and trust. And that's, I think, why they came to ABC.

KOPPEL: All right. We're going to take a break.

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ALLYN CONWELL: We simply say if any country is holding people illegally, be it Lebanon here, or be it Israel there, or be it America across the seas, let's let innocent and free peoples go home.

I'm personally very concerned about it. And I think that most of the men here that were victims of this thing would be very concerned about the perception of fraternization with the enemy, so to speak.

KOPPEL: There again you have that distinction, sometimes sharp, sometimes not so sharp, between what people say,

obviously, when they're being held hostage and what they say once they're free again.

But most specifically, I would like you all to focus on this extraordinary man Allyn Conwell, who was very much at the center of this hostage drama. And I'd like your perceptions of him.

Betsy Aaron?

AARON: At first I thought that he was bending over backwards, he was going too far because he wanted his people, meaning the hostages, to have their say. By the last dinner at the Summerland Hotel, I'd changed my mind. I don't think he was suffering from Stockholm syndrome. I think he knew exactly what he was doing and that his words maybe a little too politic. I don't believe he was taken in for a minute.

KOPPEL: Tell me now, Charles Glass, there was that one extraordinary scene where we saw getting into a Mercedes and he drove off with one of the hijackers, or not the hijackers, but one of the Amal militiamen sitting in the car next to him. It was a really bizarre scene amid a number of very bizarre scenes over the past 17 days.

What role was he playing? And when it was said that he was elected, how was he elected? Do you happen to know?

GLASS: Well, first, he was elected on that night before the press conference, when the Red Cross was allowed to see all the hostages together, all except the crew, who were on the plane. But Conwell saw all of the people and they chose him as their spokesman.

KOPPEL: How?

GLASS: I don't know. He didn't say whether there was a voice vote or a short ballot or by consensus.

KOPPEL: They weren't all together, were they, at any time?

GLASS: Yes, they were all brought together that night before by the Red Cross.

KOPPEL: Ahh, I see.

GLASS: And that's how he was chosen.

Beyond that, his getting into the Mercedes, he told me after that, in Frankfurt, that he was as surprised by that as

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anyone else. But just that the man who was guarding him, a security chief of Amal called Akal Hamia (?), simply got in on the passenger side and said, "You drive." He said he didn't think he had much choice. He didn't mind driving. He didn't mind being a passenger.

Conwell, I thought, was a very interesting and very articulate man who was able to voice the views of a lot, if not all, but a lot of the hostages. And also, I think to say he was simply suffering from Stockholm syndrome, whether he was identifying with his captors, is to denigrate the man, and also not to understand the position that he was in. He found himself in the position of agreeing with the demands of the people who were holding him. Now, he felt that those people, the Amal people, had in fact saved his life. So he was grateful to them, because they had told him that the original hijackers had intended to kill every single American on that plane, to drive around all of the airports of the Middle East, kill an American at each airport, drop a body on the tarmac, and fly on. So he felt that Nabih Berri's intervention had saved his life. And he also believed that their demand to get their people, their 766, as it then was, prisoners out of Israel was a just demand and that it was something that they were entitled to had there never been a hijacking.

So I think that if the Amal people had been making an unreasonable demand -- say, if they had been asking for all child molesters in the world to be let out of prison, or something equally absurd -- that he then wouldn't have identified with it. But since the demands seemed reasonable to him, and under international law a perfectly legal demand, even if the means for achieving it weren't right, that they sympathized with that.

KOPPEL: Don Kladstrup, any observation? He had presented himself as representing the views of -- and at one point I think he said not only the majority, but he thought all of the others, that they had become rather sympathetic to the demands of the hijackers. To what degree do we now know, or did we then know, that that was or was not the case?

KLADSTRUP: Well, I think we realized that he had been in contact with most of the hostages. I think that the important point here is that this was only 17 days. Time enough, certainly, to be killed, but to be brow-beaten or brainwashed or develop Stockholm syndrome, I doubt it.

As Charles Glass pointed out, he and others had a chance to blink if they didn't want to talk to us. They didn't do that. My impression is that they said exactly what they wanted to say and that they were not coerced into making statements that were pro-Amal or pro-their-policy.

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NUNN: Can I say one point on Conwell?

KOPPEL: Go ahead, Ray.

NUNN: And that is, is that when you listen to Conwell, at various point he would say, well, he was in agreement, for instance, with the demand to bring the Lebanese detainees out of Atlit. In the same interview he would turn around and say that he supported the President's position on combatting terrorism.

Here was a man who was a very sophisticated man sending us several different signals. And I think we have to realize that he was smart enough to do that, and just not simply focus on the notion that he was perhaps brainwashed. He wa sending out several signals in every interview he did.

Also, we must point out the fact that in two key interviews, he shied away from the cameras. When Derwin did the major interview with the ten that night, he sat away and did not want to be interviewed.

And one other final point about Conwell. He was the man with the greatest sophistication and the most knowledge about the Middle East. And I think that played a large role, a part in the role that he played.

AARON: Also, Ted...

KOPPEL: Go ahead, Betsy, quickly, please.

AARON: I think that he understood, or he believed that Nabih Berri had nothing to do with the initial hijacking. So it was easier for him to be kinder to the people he was dealing with at the time he was appearing on television.

KOPPEL: Okay. We are going to take a break....

Let me pose to you all now the question I'm going to be asking when we come back. It has nothing to do with what has preceded all of this. But Beirut, at least as far as we are concerned, is now an uncovered city once again. And the question becomes, now that this crisis is over, to what degree do we have a responsibility to cover that, knowing the dangers that exist there?

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KOPPEL: Let me jump to Don Kladstrup again and ask you the question of here is what ostensibly becomes now almost an uncoverable city, Beirut, now that the hostage crisis is over. Explain that to us, would you?

KLADSTRUP: Well, most of the news media have withdrawn their personnel from there because it's too dangerous. I find it very sad. The day the hostages left there was a tremendous vacuum. The streets were empty, the hostages had gone home, and the news media were packing their bags. It's as if the world had packed its bags and left and allowed Lebanon once again to begin killing itself in private.

I think we ought to be there. We have no American presence there, really. The Americans have left. But I think the Lebanese people are important too, and I think we ought to pay more attention to it.

KOPPEL: Ray Nunn, what does it say about our perception of what happens in Beirut that as long as the Americans are there, we cover it and we cover it to a fare-thee-well, and now it becomes the tree falling in the forest with no one there to hear it?

NUNN: I think it suggests our naivete, our refusal to accept the reality that we made a sizable investment in this part of the world -- in that part of the world, an investment that we're likely to repeat someplace else. And we've got to be awfully careful. We've got to be sure we understand. And to this date, I'm reminded of what Conwell said. On that plane there were people who had never heard of Beirut when they landed.

KOPPEL: Derwin Johnson, any thoughts about why it was that during these 17 days -- it was almost as though during the course of this hijacking it was all -- I mean the world press was safeguarded in Beirut. Did you ever have the sense that you were in real danger while this thing was in progress?

JOHNSON: No, I didn't. I've become very familiar with Beirut, living there almost four years, or just over three years. And it's a story, in my opinion, that we have nurtured, that we have been there throughout. And I think we've gained the trust of the militiamen there. It does something to them inside, as well as us, as journalists, to be with them day-in, day-out when the bombs are falling, as well as when there is something like a hostage situation. I think that's where ABC did do as well as it did, is by just having that trust from these guys seeing us come in there and work.

Charles has lived there a number of years. We have Julie Flynt, whose continuous presence has proved very fruitful for ABC. And myself, along with everyone else that was on our team. And I think it means a world of difference.

KOPPEL: Betsy Aaron, you've been in and out of Lebanon many times. Your closing thoughts on these past 17 days and on now.

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AARON: I'm very sad about what's happened now. I remember my President, President Reagan, telling me that if Lebanon falls, we are going to be in trouble in the Middle East. We sent the Marines in there. We lost a lot of lives. And now we're pulling out as if Lebanon doesn't mean anything.

I think when we go back we're going to find Lebanon closer in philosophy to Iran. We ought to pay attention. We ought to see what's going on there. We have an interest. And we're kidding ourselves if we pull out, close the door, and think it's not going to affect us.

KOPPEL: Charles Glass, your final thoughts.

GLASS: Ted, on the hostage story specifically, that story isn't over, and it won't be over until the 735 remaining prisoners in Israel come home.

KOPPEL: And the seven, I think we should all point out.

GLASS: And I was just about to say that, one of whom is a very close friend of mine, Terry Anderson of the Associated Press, seven Americans who have been kidnapped over the last two years in Beirut and are believed to be held in the Bekaa Valley.

KOPPEL: And the French, and the Englishman. I mean there are, what, a total of 12 who are still in there?

GLASS: That's right, 12 Europeans. And of course there are also, on all sides in Lebanon, about 3000 missing Lebanese who have been kidnapped and are presumed dead. There's that story.

There's also the story of an ongoing conflict between Syria and Israel, which plays itself out in Lebanon; an ongoing story of conflict between Syria and the PLO, which plays itself out in Lebanon; between Iran and Iraq, which plays itself out in Lebanon. Lebanon is a battleground for almost every conflict in the Middle East. And for us to ignore it is for us to ignore the whole Middle East. And I think we should go back regularly to tell the American people what is happening there. It is very important for us to know.

KOPPEL: All of you, I know it is somewhat parochial, it is certainly self-serving, but allow me to say in front of all our viewers we're all enormously proud of everything that all of you did. It was a difficult assignment. You did it extraordinarily well.

Thank you, all, very much indeed.