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Looking Back at the Anger

EXCERPTED

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CAIRO—He was the hostage spokesman who wouldn't clam up, but now, seated in a chair by the videocassette player in his living room, his pajama-clad daughter curled sleepily in his lap, Allyn B. Conwell is as silent as a sphinx.

His even features betray no emotion as his fingers toy with the buttons of the remote control. Fast forward, reverse, play. He might be watching the latest episode of "Dallas."

The angry voice coming from the video player, however, belongs to Peter Hill, an ex-hostage of TWA Flight 847 and one of many, on the plane and off, who found Allyn Conwell a little hard to take:

"I just couldn't *conceive* of such naiveté," Hill is saying to an interviewer, his eyes wide and watery, his voice choking with rage, "that a man of this *intelligence* could be so completely *duped!* This man walked off the plane in Damascus with the goddam Koran under his arm, twirling his prayer

beads! I said, 'Listen, are you going to carry them into the goddam *White House?*'"

Conwell straightens his legs, draws on his cigarette and exhales: "He gets upset, doesn't he?"

Sometimes he calls it "the deal," other times it's "the thing," but only rarely does Conwell refer to his ordeal as the hijacking. Settled with his family in Cairo now, transferred by his company from Oman shortly after his release, he has begun to review the hours of network news coverage taped by friends, his travelogue of a 17-day journey from anonymity to a kind of fame and back again.

He reads the English-language Egyptian Gazette for bulletins about the remaining American hostages. There are six now, including U.S. Embassy employe William Buckley, whose execution was claimed but unconfirmed this past week. The week also saw the kidnaping of four Soviet citizens, one of whom was executed early last week. Both groups are being held by fundamentalist Moslem terrorist factions.

"When I read about them all, I feel I'm still a hostage in many ways," Conwell says. "It bothers me, knowing the fears they must have. When we were in Beirut somebody . . . asked me if I was prepared for a long siege. I was not prepared, emotionally or financially. As it goes on, a resignation sets in, you think, 'I may never get out.' And then I guess you begin to accept that you may be doomed."

The tapes bring it all back: TWA pilot John Testrake, leaning out the cockpit window, a gun barrel tickling his temple; the body of murdered Navy diver Robert Stethem slumped on the tarmac; the bizarre press conferences. Iran revisited: Yellow ribbons, songs about "chicken Shiites" and, because these hostages were tourists from Harrisburg, Pa., and Norfolk and Algonquin, Ill., a feeling that someone had declared open season on Americans overseas. Conwell, thrust by his fellow hostages into the middle of the mess, quickly and inevitably became part of the story.

"Here it is again," he says, pushing the play button, and in the Conwell family room on Lebanon Street, as the air conditioner hums and his Greek-born wife Olga clears the plat-

ters of fried chicken and green salad from the table, the hijacking home movie rolls:

Scene 1, Conwell at the Beirut press conference beseeching the president: "A rescue operation would only cause, in our estimation, additional unneeded and unwanted deaths among innocent people."

Cut to Conwell interviewed by ABC in Beirut: "We find that many in our group have a profound sympathy for the cause, for the reasons the Amal people have for saying, 'Israel, free my people.'"

Conwell expressing "genuine affection" for his Amal militia captors and saying there was "absolute parity" between Lebanese detainees in Israel's Atlit prison (the last of whom have been released) and the hostages.

Conwell, before leaving Beirut, urging Americans to keep their yellow ribbons up until Israel has released all 735 Lebanese.

And last, Conwell at Andrews Air Force base, silent, as the hostages' statement is read by Testrake because Conwell, by various accounts,

was asked or volunteered to step down as hostage spokesman because of "concern" about some of his statements.

Concern is a polite way of describing the wrath that Conwell provoked. Like a lightning rod, he drew the public's outrage and the ire of armchair quarterbacks.

"An energetic collaborator," wrote George Will, "... a megaphone for the terrorists and a tutor to the world on the fine points of Israel's failings under international law."

"Anchor of the terrorism show," wrote Charles Krauthammer after Conwell was quoted as being "distressed" at the president's efforts to link the release of the TWA hostages with the other Americans held in Beirut. "In similar circumstances, any of us might step over the body of another American to climb out of our prison. But is it heroism?"

Even George Bush, Conwell says, was quoted as saying he had "grave concern" about some hostage statements. (A Bush spokesman says the vice president qualified the remark to say that no one could know the strain under which the hostages had been placed.)

He says he asked to see the other American hostages during his own captivity, but says the Amal militiamen refused, insisting they had no leverage with the fundamentalist Islamic Jihad. The Jihad began kidnaping Americans as much as 16 months ago to force the release of 17 Shiites jailed in Kuwait for bombings there.

He didn't realize he'd offended

anyone until he met with CIA and State Department officials at the hospital in Wiesbaden, West Germany: "They told me to keep my mouth shut, let them crucify me and just fade back into the Middle East."

"Ambassador Oakley [Robert B. Oakley, director of the Office of Combating Terrorism at the State Department] took me aside and said, 'Son, this is going to happen and you'd better shut your mouth or it's going to get worse.' I was not in a patient mood at the time, I really had just about run out of patience, but I probably would have had a tendency to do that if I hadn't received as much slander as I did.

"I had people imply that I make my living selling things in the Mid-

dle East and that's why I said what I did, which is hogwash. So I thought about it . . . and I decided the hell with it. I decided the time I have, I'll just tell the truth, and if people like it great, if they don't like it that's pretty tough, but it's the only thing I can do, the only thing I will do. If I get beat up, shot or tarred and feathered, or if somebody beats me a halo out of brass, so be it."

He felt martyred, and was so moved by a gift from a Houston television station—a gauzy videotape of scenes from the hijacking, the funeral of slain Navy diver Robert Stethem, the homecoming—that he "cried like a baby."

"It was tears of appreciation that somebody realized I'm not a traitor. I'd begun to feel that there were some pretty big guns out shooting for Allyn Conwell. I felt almost like a man without a country for a few days there when I first got back and heard the things that were being said. People said there was a vote on the airplane and the hostages didn't want me as their spokesman. That's a lie, and it distresses me.

"It still distresses me for anyone to even imply that I'm un-American, because I'm not. I'm more American than almost anyone else I know."

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Lebanon's civil war was the last thing on his mind as he boarded TWA Flight 847 in Athens early June 14, and for all he knew then, Hezbollah, the name of the radical Shiite Moslem group responsible for the initial hijacking, was the name of a board game. He'd been up "partying and drinking" at the Athens Hilton with friends the night before and he was tired and eager to rejoin his wife and children. He found his seat quickly and fell asleep.

"When I woke up, everyone had their hands in the air and I leaned over and asked the guy next to me what was going on." He spent much of the next four days on the plane with his head between his knees,

trying to breathe in the stifling heat, passing in and out of consciousness, the latter being preferable because it made the time pass.

He was seated toward the back of the plane when the hijackers murdered Robert Stethem toward the front. He says he didn't realize there'd been an execution until the next day. "I felt remorse for Robby, and dread and great fear. They [the hijackers] said their plan was to kill us one by one, and I assumed that to be true."

His fellow hostages tapped him as spokesman in the first few days, after he argued against a request from a Lebanese television station for individual interviews. He and several other hostages say they were angry then and remain angry now at what they saw as the "hang-tough" attitude of the U.S. and Israeli governments:

"When we were sitting in Beirut wondering what our fate would be, we could see a total stalemate," he says. "The Israelis were sitting back and saying, this is not our deal, and the U.S. was clearly stating they were not going to negotiate with terrorists. I'm convinced the Amal had nothing to do with [the hijacking], but the president was in essence calling them terrorists and so for a while there they had no one to negotiate with."

The television coverage swung the crisis, he says. "Hell, let's face it, we as hostages did capitalize on the media . . . had there been a news blackout I'm convinced we'd still be sitting there or very much dead. We made a conscious decision to appeal to the American people so Israel would say, 'Well, we're screwing up . . .'"

He wasn't the only hostage to express sympathy for the Shiite Moslems, but he continues to be the most audible, just as he continues to condemn the original hijackers.

"I said on television in Beirut and I will say tomorrow that those men . . . the thieves, murderers or barbarians who hijacked the plane, Hezbollah or whatever they are, have to be caught, prosecuted and punished, in that order. There was never any doubt in my mind about that."

"What created the confusion was my saying, yes I did have sympathy for the Lebanese people, because my God, they were in the same situation that our families were in back in the States, members of their families held illegally in a foreign country.

"You go through a whole range of emotions that were foreign to me. I understand now, and if someone stole my family, and took them to Israel, or Washington or Mexico, I'd take on God himself to get them back."

The Koran Conwell carried off the plane was a gift from his Amal guards. About half the hostages received them. "I appreciated it, it was a nice thought. And I carried it with me because it was one of the very few possessions I had at the time."

Didn't he know carrying that book would be like waving a red flag at those who thought he'd been too cooperative in Beirut? "No," he says, sounding puzzled, "no, not at all. It never crossed my mind."

The only time he seems bitter is when he talks about how the White House treated him on the way home: "There was a little guy from the White House, I can't remember his name, but he said, 'If Conwell has to talk, there will be no speech.'"

It was the State Department's Oakley, he says, who suggested Testrake as the new spokesman. Conwell says he went along on the condition that it be understood he had voluntarily stepped aside, and says he is convinced that reports he'd been ousted by the hostages came from the White House.

The White House and Oakley have no comment, but several of the hostages say there was no vote and no discussion of replacing Conwell.

Was he taken in by the Amal? "I don't think I bought their line," he says. "I've stated on several occasions I'm very convinced they were capitalizing on the situation, obviously they were, and I really can't blame them for that. I think after the situation developed they probably did do the right thing for themselves and for their cause. They certainly did get the message across that they are part of the conflict in Lebanon and whether that's good or bad I really don't know or care."

The hijacking and the days of captivity have receded from his thoughts. When pressed he can recall the awful smell in the hostage apartment after days with a broken commode. He remembers Lebanese women in the building next door throwing flowers to the Americans, and the young Amal guards who wanted to know which hostages were single. "I don't blame them," Conwell says. "If I had a sister in Lebanon, I'd want to get her out of there, too."

He never dreams about Beirut; in fact, he can't remember having any dreams since his release. Other thoughts intrude: "Before it seems like I was spending a hell of a lot of time consumed only with my work,

trying to make money, get ahead, be a success, all the things that can almost become an obsession. I still want those things, but I'm not willing to sacrifice my marriage or my family."

And one other thing:

"There was only one thing about it that I guess I could say I enjoyed. In a crisis people tend to gravitate to people of their own level, and for a few days I tended to gravitate toward Father [James W.] McLaughlin, and he became close to me. We never discussed it, but I felt a very strong need and love for that man that you normally don't find . . . I loved him because when I felt like crying, like panicking, and when I felt terrified, he was there, very serene and at peace, and we could talk and I could tell him that I felt like crying. There was nothing hidden, no hidden emotions, and you can't do that when you're out in civilization, in business. Most people find that very difficult to do with spouses or children. I don't know where else you can find that."

He has not tried to contact any of the other hostages.

"I would like to see some of the people again," he says slowly, his voice dropping until he can barely be heard at all. "When our release was imminent, well, people have a tendency to go around happy, including myself, and shake hands and say 'Golly, I want to see you again.' I intentionally fought that impulse because I realized it was created falsely, and perhaps I've been more inhibited about contacting people I do think a tremendous amount of."

"I guess I think friendships do need to be built on something more than common hostage background. My close friendships are very, very few in number. Very few people really know Allyn Conwell. Including Allyn Conwell."