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IN THE 3-D

WASHINGTON TIMES
26 June 1985

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What one terrorist recalled

The lead story in *The Washington Post* of June 15 reported the murder of Robert Stethem, the young Navy petty officer who was killed by the hijackers of TWA Flight 847 and dumped on the tarmac at the Beirut airport. *The Post* said the control tower operator asked, "Isn't it a shame killing an innocent passenger?"

The story then said: "Did you forget the Bir al Abed massacre?" the hijacker replied, referring to the March 8 car bombing in a suburb of Beirut that killed more than 80 Shi'ite Moslems. Shi'ites have accused the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency of being behind the bombing, which the CIA has denied."

What *The Washington Post* didn't remind its readers was that on May 12, 1985, it had carried as its lead story, with a banner headline across the top of Page 1, a report that the March 8 car bombing had been carried out by a counterterrorist unit trained and supported by the CIA.

The story, written by Bob Woodward and Charles Babcock, described it as "a runaway mission" carried out by individuals who acted without CIA authorization. The headline on the story read: "Anti-terrorist Plan Rescinded After Unauthorized Bombing."

While *The Post* story did not itself blame the bombing on the CIA, it described the agency as having "an indirect connection" to it. It is little wonder, then, that the Shi'ites accused the CIA of being behind the bombing, as *The Post* reported on June 15. A month earlier, in the May 12 story, *The Post* had said, "No one publicly has claimed responsibility for the bombing. Some Shi'ites accused the Israelis, who denied any involvement."

Government officials and intelligence experts were appalled by the irresponsibility of *The Post* story charging the CIA with even an indirect connection with the bombing.

One official said: "*The Washington Post* has put the lives of every American in Lebanon in jeopardy. ... I find it utterly contemptible. ... It invites retaliation against every American in Beirut, including women and children. *The Post* did that with foreknowledge of that possibility. They were warned." After the story appeared, the State Department issued an alert to U.S. diplomats abroad warning of new terrorist threats.

Unless the hijackers of TWA 847 and those who planned the operation decide to tell their story, we will never know for sure whether or not this deed was inspired in whole or in part as retribution for the Bir al Abed bombing. But that is certainly what the remark of one of the hijackers after the murder of Mr. Stethem suggests. The hijackers demanded the release of Shi'ite prisoners held by Israel, and it is logical to suppose that this was also one of the motives. But the selection of an American target and the cold-blooded beating and murder of an American serviceman would seem to validate the fears expressed by that government official in the wake of *The Post* story indirectly connecting the CIA to Bir al Abed.

If the nice people who run *The Washington Post* ever think about such things, they must now be wondering, deep down in the innermost reaches of their minds, whether the death of Robert Stethem and the agony of the hostages and their families might have been averted if only they had not published that May 12 story. It appeared only two days after Katharine Graham, the chairman of the board of *The Washington Post Co.*, had defended the publication of such stories.

Responding to a question at the annual shareholders' meeting, Mrs. Graham said: "You really have to tell your readers everything you know that is of valid news interest." No doubt the CIA effort to set up counterterrorist units abroad was of news interest. But wasn't it also of news interest that there are indications that the publication of this

story led to the hijacking and Robert Stethem's death? *The Post* has not told its readers that, and it's safe bet that it never will.

The publication of the CIA story endangered lives. The publication of information about its probable consequences would save lives if it inspired the public to demand that Mrs. Graham and her colleagues behave more responsibly in the future.

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