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COVER STORY

Terror Aboard Flight 847

Muslim hijackers hold Americans hostage on a murderous journey

Millions around the world watched their television sets or listened to their radios as the horrific drama unfolded. "He has pulled a hand-grenade pin and is ready to blow up the aircraft if he has to. We must, I repeat, we must land at Beirut. We must land at Beirut. No alternative." After much delay, the curious, grudging reply of the Beirut control tower: "Very well. Land. Land quietly. Land quietly." Then another desperate plea: "They are beating the passengers. They are threatening to kill the passengers. We want fuel now. Immediately. Five minutes at most, or he is going to kill the passengers." After that, another, more excited, more hostile voice, in broken English: "The plane is

booby-trapped. If anyone approaches, we will blow it up. Either refueling the plane or blowing it up. No alternative."

After airport authorities complied, the stricken plane took off from Beirut, where it had landed after having been hijacked out of Athens. Hours later, it landed in Algiers, then took off again and returned late that night to Beirut, the tension rising, the crew bone-weary. And minutes after landing, the senseless slaying of a hostage, and a harsh voice over the plane's radio: "You see? You now believe it. There will be another in five minutes," and the nightmare rolled on.

In the beginning, the hijackers were outnumbered by their captives 153 to 2, and U.S. authorities tended to believe that the terrorists would soon be overwhelmed by exhaustion if nothing else. By Sunday morning, however, with the plane on the ground in Algiers, the ranks of the hijackers had swelled to between twelve and 15, and all but 32 male American passengers and crewmen had been released. The gunmen set a 10 a.m. deadline (5 a.m. E.D.T.) for their demands to be met, but then inexplicably left Algiers more than an hour ahead of time. Once again, their destination was Beirut. On landing there, they demanded the release of 50 fellow Shi'ite Muslims currently detained in Israel; such a gesture was justified, the hijackers said, by their freeing of three American men the night before in Algiers. The terrorists had been seeking the

release of 700 Shi'ites from Israeli custody, and this appeared to be the first step in realizing that goal. If Israel and presumably the U.S. balked, declared the hijackers, "our blood will be a witness."

Tension and deep fatigue had marked the TWA jetliner's third arrival at Beirut. Not only was the crew frazzled, but the plane was thought to be in need of maintenance. Beirut authorities had again tried to refuse permission to land, but had been overruled by the hijackers and by a desperate-sounding pilot who said he had only five minutes' worth of fuel. Even as he prepared to land, Shi'ite militiamen around the airport fired their weapons out to sea, at what they claimed was an Israeli gunboat. The lives of remaining passengers and crew were obviously still in danger. But particularly disturbing was the news that on the plane's second stop in Beirut the previous night, some six or eight passengers with Jewish-sounding surnames had been hastily removed from the aircraft in the darkness. In effect, this meant that the well-organized hijackers had created a hostage crisis within a hostage crisis, and there was no end in sight.

For the U.S., it was no ordinary sky-jacking, no incident involving some troubled soul who needed to be jollied or sweet-talked or strong-armed out of a free ride to Havana or Timbuktu. It was an American plane, Trans World Airlines Flight 847 on its leg from Athens to Rome, with 153 passengers and crew members aboard, at least 100 of whom were Americans. Most important, the hijackers were identified by an accomplice as members of Islamic Jihad (or Holy War), the shadowy Shi'ite Muslim organization that is regarded as a sort of umbrella for various fundamentalist terror groups operating in Lebanon and other Middle East countries. Loyal to Iran's revolutionary ruler, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and quite possibly subsidized and directed by the Iranian leadership, Islamic Jihad and its confederates are blamed for many of the suicide bombing missions that have afflicted American and other Western military bases and diplomatic missions in the Middle East in the past two years.

On a political level, the hijackers of Flight 847 called for the release not only of the Lebanese Shi'ites still held by Israel, but of a few others imprisoned in Cyprus and Kuwait. They also demanded the immediate withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon (a pullout has been under way since January and, except for patrols and forays back into the border area, is now virtually

complete) and international condemnation of the U.S. and Israel. In a broader sense, the Shi'ites of Lebanon, newly radicalized by the violence that has plagued their country, particularly since the Israeli invasion of June 1982, are seeking a fairer shake after generations of neglect and discrimination by Lebanon's wealthier and more powerful Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims. Beyond all that, the Shi'ite fanatical fringe, inspired by the example of the Iranian revolution, wants to destroy the last vestiges of Western "decadence" in the Islamic world, particularly the presence of the U.S., that "Great Satan." To accomplish this goal, these extremists have demonstrated that they are willing and even eager to employ savagery and mass murder.

This was the first hijacking of an American airliner in the Middle East since Ronald Reagan took office in January 1981, and the Administration was deeply disturbed. It was convinced that the hijackers of Flight 847 were in the same league as the ones who seized a Kuwaiti airliner last December, took it to Tehran and eventually killed two American passengers. That incident ended when the Iranians sent a platoon of security men aboard the plane dressed as a maintenance crew. The hijackers were arrested, but there is no evidence

that they were ever brought to justice.

As Flight 847 zigzagged around the Mediterranean, the Administration faced the vexing question of what it should, or could, do to respond to the crisis. By 9 a.m. Friday, a working group chaired by Robert Oakley, chief of the State Department's office for combatting terrorism, had gathered next to Secretary of State George Shultz's office in the State Department's antiterrorism suite. The group set to work on a 24-hour watch, monitoring events, establishing communication lines, serving as liaison

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to the various foreign governments involved, soothing the families of hostages and working out options for U.S. action. That evening, the Administration dispatched antiterrorist Delta Force units from West Germany and Fort Bragg, N.C., to the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean; the 40- to 50-man units are trained in such skills as counterintelligence and commando operations, but they have never been used to storm a pirated airliner.

When asked later in the day what the U.S. was doing to help, the President replied, "Everything that can be done." But when asked if it were true that Washington had threatened to retaliate against Iran if any U.S. hostages were harmed by Islamic fundamentalists, Reagan said flatly, "I can't answer that."

In fact, Shultz had warned Iran months ago that if any of the Americans kidnaped in Beirut were executed by its Lebanese surrogates, Iran would suffer the consequences. Precisely what that means would have to be carefully determined, but the U.S. has long since learned that it is difficult to retaliate against so amorphous an enemy as the Lebanese fanatics. Their headquarters and even their whereabouts are hard to pin down, and their precise links with Iran are not easy to define. As Friday turned to Saturday and the ordeal continued, the President remained in touch with the situation from his weekend retreat at Camp David, telling National Security Adviser Robert

McFarlane: "Let's do all we can to support the Algerians. Our main objective is to get those people out safely." Shultz canceled a trip to Evanston, Ill., where he had planned to accept an honorary degree from Northwestern University. On Sunday, Shultz and McFarlane were back at their desks tracking the ominous new trends in the crisis. The President remained at Camp David, but was due to return to the White House Sunday afternoon.

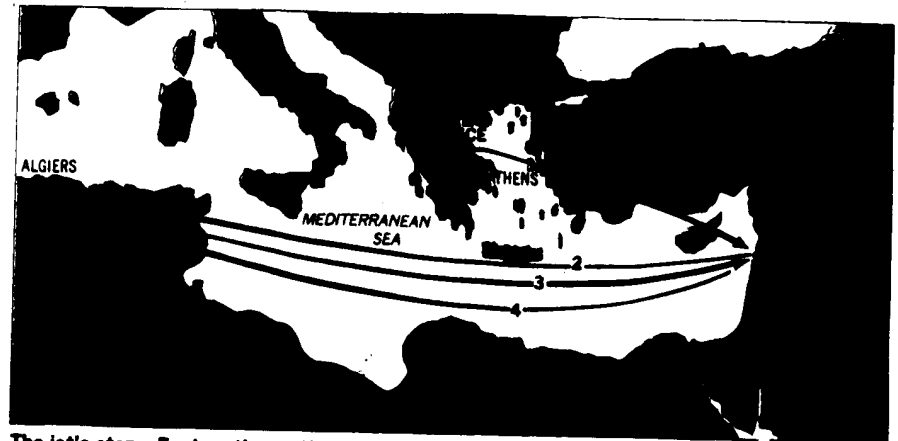
The hijacking of Flight 847 had begun Friday morning when the plane, a Boeing 727 that had taken off from Cairo two hours earlier, landed at Athens and took on additional passengers. Among them were 24 members of three Roman Catholic churches from towns in northeastern Illinois, who had spent a fortnight visiting the Holy Land. Also among them were two well-dressed young Arabs carrying shoulder bags who had arrived from Cairo the day before. Along with a third man, they spent the night in the airport lounge, waiting to board the TWA plane. As it turned out, only two of the men managed to get seats on the crowded flight; the third, after arguing with TWA officials, was forced to stay behind. He was later arrested at the airport by Greek police

and identified as Ali Atwa, 21, an air-conditioning technician from southern Lebanon. He identified his confederates as Ahmed Gharbiyeh and Ali Youness, both 20 and also Lebanese.

According to police, Atwa said he and the others were members of Islamic Jihad, a claim later affirmed by an anonymous caller in Beirut and then disputed in a statement delivered to news agencies there. The confusion may stem from Iran's recent efforts to play down its connections with terrorists in hopes of winning international support for its 4½-year

said, "There was some shooting, but I didn't dare raise my head to see what was happening. The hijackers were beating people on the heads." Passengers were unnerved by the behavior of the hijackers. "They were hysterical, they were screaming," said Patricia Weber of Albuquerque.

Next stop was Algiers, where local of-



The jet's stops, Eastern times: 1) lands in Beirut 4 a.m. Friday; 2) arrives Algiers 10:30 a.m.; 3) back in Beirut, 7:20 p.m.; 4) Algiers again, 2:45 a.m. Saturday. On Sunday, it returned to Beirut.

struggle against Iraq. Atwa told police that his friends had managed to smuggle two grenades and a 9-mm pistol through the airport's X-ray machines by wrapping the weapons in fiber glass insulation.

Scarcely 20 minutes after the plane had taken off for Rome's Leonardo da Vinci Airport, on a flight that was supposed to continue via a Boeing 747 to Boston, Los Angeles and San Diego, it was taken over by the two terrorists, who wildly brandished their grenades and pistol. They gave the pilot, Captain John Testrake of Richmond, Mo., the first order: fly to Beirut. At Beirut International Airport, the last thing officials wanted was a skyjacking crisis on their hands, and so they blocked the airport runway with buses and other obstacles. But the terrorists and their captive pilot were having none of it. Demanded the pilot: "They are beating up passengers. We must land in Beirut. He has pulled the pin of the grenade. We must land. He is ready to blow up the plane."

On the ground in Beirut, the plane was refueled as the hijackers had ordered. The terrorists also asked to speak to an official of Amal, the mainstream Shi'ite Muslim political and military force, but Amal leaders refused the request. After announcing their demands, the hijackers released 19 women and children via a yellow escape chute lowered from the forward door. One freed hostage, Irma Garza of Laredo, Texas, said that the terrorists had shot a passenger in the neck. Another of the released passengers, Frances Reynolds of Chicago,

officials responded to the plane's landing request by closing their airport. But they changed their minds after the arrival of an urgent plea from President Reagan to Algerian President Chadli Bendjedid. U.S. officials, who well remember the important role played by Algerian diplomats in settling the Iranian hostage crisis almost five years ago, had hoped that the hijacking could be resolved one way or another in Algiers. But after remaining on the runway there for five hours, during which time they released another 21 passengers, the hijackers ordered the pilot to take off again and head back to Beirut.

It was well past midnight in the Middle East when Flight 847 again landed in Beirut. The airport-tower operator did his best to refuse permission, but Captain Testrake was adamant: he was running out of fuel, and the terrorists were threatening to kill him. A hijacker may have clinched the argument by shouting, "We are suicide terrorists! If you don't let

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us land, we will crash the plane into your control tower, or fly it to Baabda and crash into the Presidential Palace!" The tower relented. The plane touched down at 2:20 a.m. Saturday.

Once again, the hijackers asked to speak to an Amal official, and when none appeared, they responded by murdering an American passenger and throwing his body onto the tarmac. They claimed the victim, a young man with a crew cut, was a U.S. Marine who had taken part in "security blowups in Lebanon." It was then, after the pilot shouted over the radio, "He just killed a passenger! He just killed a passenger!" that a hijacker declared, "You see? You now believe it. There will be another in five minutes." When the control-tower operator remonstrated with him, saying, "Isn't it a shame, killing an innocent passenger?" the hijacker replied angrily, "Did you forget the Bir al Abed massacre?" He was referring to the March 8 car bombing in the Bir al Abed suburb of Beirut that killed more than 75 Shi'ite Muslims but

The body of the murdered American had been lying on the tarmac for about two hours when a hijacker told the tower, "The Red Cross can come and get the body." The hijacker then called for fuel, food and water, saying, "I want 200 sandwiches, 150 apples and 88 lbs. of bananas. But the fuel first, and make it fast." As the food and fuel were taken on, the pilot said he wanted the runway cleared for takeoff at dawn. He was asked for his destination. His reply: "I don't know."

The next destination turned out once more to be Algiers, where the plane landed, for the second time, at 7:45 a.m. local time (2:45 a.m. E.D.T.) Saturday. Algerian officials authorized the landing on condition that the hijackers not use violence. Before leaving Beirut, it turned out, the hijackers had demanded that Ali Atwa be released by Greek authorities and brought to Algiers. Otherwise, they said, they would kill all eight Greeks on the plane, including Singer Demis Roussos. Greek authorities complied and sent Atwa to Algiers in an Olympic Airways plane.



■ Terrorist Ali Atwa in Algiers on his way to join his comrades on Flight 847

failed to hurt Sheik Mohammed Hussein Fadallah, one of Lebanon's pro-Iranian Shi'ite religious leaders. Shi'ites later claimed that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency had engineered the bombing, in an attempt to fight Shi'ite terrorism with counterterrorism; the CIA denied the charge.

Moments after the killing of the passenger, an Amal official and his bodyguard went aboard the plane, where they remained for some time. As negotiations continued, a hijacker asked that all airport lights be turned off, and the demand was met. At the time, it seemed that the hijackers were fearful of an attack by the Israelis or by one or another of their enemies within Lebanon. In fact, however, it later became clear that they wanted the darkness for other reasons: to bring aboard about a dozen additional terrorists as reinforcements, as well as a supply of arms and ammunition; and to remove the six or eight passengers with Israeli- or Jewish-sounding names. A day later, a released passenger, Ken Lanham of San Francisco, reported that the hijackers went up and down the aisle calling out the names of these people, and then led them away.

Soon after the TWA jetliner landed in Algiers, two ranking Algerian officials came aboard and began discussions with the hijackers. The negotiations evidently paid off. Having released three hostages on arrival, the hijackers then released 58 others. That apparently left only American men on board. "We're begging them to keep the plane in Algiers," said a State Department official. "Keep talking, keep wearing them down, but for Christ's sake, don't let that plane take off again."

Among the stunned and fatigued passengers released in Algiers was Dorothy Sullivan of Chicago, who described the tension during the seemingly endless ordeal. One of the original hijackers had been soft-spoken, the other brutal, she said, and the latter liked to go up and down the aisle thumping passengers on the head. Several passengers recalled that Stewardess Uli Derickson, of Newton, N.J., had stood up to the hijackers. Said she, speaking of her passengers: "They're doing what you tell them to do. Why do you keep beating them up?" The released passengers also noted that, before leaving the plane, they were relieved of their cash and valuables by the hijackers.

That evening, the terrorists announced that if their demands were not met by the following morning, they would

fly to an unspecified destination, and destroy the plane and perhaps its remaining passengers. By early Sunday afternoon, they had made good on only the first half of their ultimatum, arriving in Beirut for the third time. On the ground, the hijackers called for food, fuel, newspapers and videocassettes. They urged the International Red Cross to work for the release of the 50 Shi'ites in Israel and "move fast before it is too late so that all will achieve satisfactory results." The hijackers added ominously that the next communiqué would be their last, presumably meaning that they planned to destroy the plane afterward.

Back in the U.S., some worried relatives learned of the hijacking only hours before they had intended to go to the airport to welcome travelers home. Against a backdrop of yellow ribbons and flickering candles, parishioners of three Catholic churches in the Chicago area spent the day praying, huddling around radios and exchanging bits of information. They were cheered by the news that many of their 24 friends had been released in Beirut or Algiers. "We're waiting, we're praying, we're hoping," said the Rev. Robert Garrity of St. Margaret Mary Church in Algonquin, where parishioners maintained an all-night vigil.

Elsewhere, reactions were much the same. "I just hope they're not beating people, like they say they are," said Pete Lazansky of Tulsa, whose parents were on board. Other passengers included Kathryn Davis and her fiancé James Hoskins Jr., both 22 and from Indianapolis, whose parents had given them European vacations as college graduation presents. "I was going to pick her up this evening," said Stockbroker Stephen Davis of his daughter. "We just sit here and wait." Passenger Irma Garza of Laredo telephoned her brother-in-law from Cyprus to tell him that she and three relatives had been released but that her husband, a granddaughter and son-in-law were still on board. Said the brother-in-law: "She sounded real nervous. She was crying." Tina Migos, of Revere, Mass., had been preparing for the arrival of five relatives from Greece who were to attend the christening of her year-old son. "We had a party planned and everything," a cousin reported. "Now we're just waiting to

hear what's going to happen."

In Florissant, Mo., Katharine Ellerbrock tuned in a morning TV show and realized that she was listening to the recorded voice of her brother, Flight Engineer Benjamin Zimmerman, talking to the Beirut control tower. She said her brother, who manages to be both a full-time TWA pilot and a Lutheran pastor with a ministry in the mountains of

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...was strong, steady and stable" and "has got to be a comfort to the passengers." In Richmond, Mo., a small town northeast of Kansas City, friends and neighbors stayed up to follow the ordeal of Captain Tes-trake, who in his spare time raises horses, restores small antique planes and nurtures a recently planted vineyard on his nearby farm. "He's been an airman for a long time," said Howard Hill, editor of the Richmond *Daily News*. "He won't panic."

One of the most troubling aspects of the plight of Flight 847 was that it was the third hijacking that occurred in the region within three days last week, and the second apparently engineered by Lebanese

Shi'ites. In earlier times, Arab skyjackers tended to be Palestinians, from one or another faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization, attempting to advance or at least dramatize the Palestinian cause. Shi'ite Muslim terrorism, linked to Iran ideologically if not logistically, is both more puzzling and more frightening: drive out the American Satan and all its influence.

The week's first hijacking had begun on Tuesday, when half a dozen Shi'ites stormed aboard a Jordanian-owned Boeing 727 at Beirut airport. They overpowered eight Jordanian security guards,

then ordered the Swedish pilot to fly to Larnaca, Cyprus.

Over the next 28 hours, as the plane bounced around the eastern half of the Mediterranean, the skyjackers had ample time to air their complaints. They were angry about an Arab League statement supporting the cause of the Palestinians in the Beirut refugee camps, which have been under attack by Lebanese Shi'ites for the past three weeks.

The Shi'ites want to drive out the Palestinians to make sure

that the P.L.O. will never again be able to set up a "state within a state" in Lebanon. After several dire threats, the hijackers freed the passengers, blew up the plane and sped off in a Range Rover, disappearing into the Shi'ite neighborhoods near the airport.

Several of the released passengers then boarded the first plane they could catch out of Beirut, a Middle East Airlines flight to nearby Cyprus. But as the Lebanese Boeing 707 landed there, a young Palestinian, producing a hand grenade, threatened to blow up the plane as a protest against

the earlier Shi'ite hijacking. He soon surrendered to the plane's captain, however, after being granted his request to fly to Amman aboard a Jordanian airliner.

On board both the hijacked Jordanian plane and the hijacked Lebanese plane were Professor Landry Slade, an American who is serving as an acting dean of the American University of Beirut, and his teenage son William. "It wasn't bad," the younger Slade remarked, after he and the other passengers had been released in Cy-

prus, "but it isn't something we want to talk about." Two days later, when he learned of the hijacking of TWA Flight 847, Landry Slade told reporters, "God help them all. I know what it's like." Professor Slade was, in fact, a good deal luckier than his colleague, Thomas Sutherland, 54, dean of the American University's agriculture and food sciences faculty. Sutherland had been kidnaped earlier in the week as he was rid-

ing in a six-car convoy from Beirut airport to his campus home. He thus became the seventh American and the twelfth Westerner currently being held by various extremist groups in Lebanon.

In a sense, the hijackings were a microcosm of the horrors rampant in the two countries that formed the backdrop of the case. Iran and Lebanon. In Iran, 78 people were killed and 332 others injured one night last week in a series of bombing raids by Iraqi aircraft against the Khomeini regime. After a series of antiwar protests, the Tehran government sponsored a huge demonstration at which thousands of marchers chanted, "War, war till victory!" Iran has serious internal problems, but none so critical as to constitute an imminent threat to Khomeini's authority.

In Lebanon, as usual, superlatives were insufficient to describe the scene. The fighting in the refugee camps between Palestinians and Shi'ites spread to other parts of West Beirut. On Friday morning, a shell struck a vegetable market there, killing or wounding 50 people.

Two suicide bombers crashed an explosives-laden car into a Lebanese Army position, killing 23 and wounding 36. Since the victims were mostly from the predominantly Shi'ite Sixth Brigade, reports had it that the bombers were Sunni Muslims, who have sided with the Palestinians in the current struggle and view with apprehension the Shi'ites' lust for a greater share of political power. The Shi'ites and the Druze were allies until about a month ago, but last week they were shooting at each other after a group of Amal militia-men tried to stop a car loaded with Druze. Druze Leader Walid Jumblatt agreed to a cease-fire but later, when asked how long it would last, replied, "Only God and Syria know." Given all these circumstances, Syrian President Hafez Assad was content to let the rival factions in Lebanon fight on for a while before he risks his own troops to try to restore order.

In Lebanon, the Israeli forces were largely gone, but the impasse continued between the United Nations peacekeeping forces and the Israeli-backed, predominantly Christian militia known as the South Lebanon Army. Two weeks ago, the S.L.A. had seized 25 Finnish soldiers of the U.N. force, released three of them and taken the others to the Christian town of Marjayoun. It refused to let them go until eleven of its own members had been handed over by the Shi'ite Amal militia. The S.L.A. accused the U.N. force, which does not recognize the S.L.A. as an

independent militia and customarily disarms its members whenever they try to pass through U.N. lines, of having captured the eleven S.L.A. members and turned them over to Amal. The Shi'ite militia, in turn, claimed that the eleven S.L.A. members had defected to their side.

At midweek, Israel arranged for Western newsmen to visit Marjayoun. The trip demonstrated not only that the Finns were in good condition, but that the Israelis, if they chose to do so, could have ended the

incident quickly by putting pressure on the S.L.A. The situation took a comic turn late in the week when the eleven S.L.A. men, all of whom happened to be Shi'ites in an overwhelmingly Christian militia, told U.N. and Red Cross officials that they had no desire to return to the S.L.A. Confronted with this information, the S.L.A. commander, General Antoine Lahd, released the Finnish soldiers the next day.

This was the world that had produced the nightmare of Flight 847, an ordeal that continued without resolution as the new week began. There were hints that Israel might be willing to release its Shi'ite detainees if the U.S. asked it to do so; after all, only a month ago, the Israelis had exchanged 1,150 prisoners, including some world-class terrorists, for three of their own servicemen. At the same time, there were reports that the U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean had invoked a "radio

silence" on its movements—a possible sign of action to come.

Perhaps nothing so aptly epitomized the chaos of Lebanon for Americans last week as the fate of the body of the young man, said by the hijackers to be a U.S. Marine, who had been murdered on Flight 847. After lying on the tarmac for two hours, the body, with a bullet wound in the head, had been taken by an International Red Cross ambulance to a morgue at the American University Hospital in Muslim West Beirut. U.S. officials, based on the other side of the "green line" in Christian-dominated East Beirut, were unable to retrieve it for 24 hours. Not until Sunday morning did a State Department spokesman announce that the body was at last on its way to a U.S. air base in Spain for identification. Used first as proof of the hijackers' resolve, the stranded corpse had thus become a symbol of the obstacles and divisions that afflict the terrorists' homeland. —By William E. Smith. Reported by John Borrell/Algiers, Dean Fischer/Cairo and Johanna McGeary/Washington