



Photo courtesy Mr. Mark Crabill, Office of the Chief, Army Reserve

By Major Ron Eschmann

*"...We must, I repeat, we must land at Beirut! We must land at Beirut! No alternative..."*

*"...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..."*

*"...He just killed a passenger! He just killed a passenger!..."*

*— Cockpit communications between TWA Flight 847 pilot and the Beirut control tower*

On 14 June 1985, following a temporary tour of duty in Egypt, an Army Reserve civil engineering support planning officer from the 416th Engineer Command, boarded TWA Flight 847 bound from Athens to Rome. He was anxious to get back to spend his first Father's Day with his wife and newborn child. On the same flight were two armed Hezbollah members with other plans. Soon after takeoff, the soldier wasn't sure if he would even be alive the next day.

At the Army Reserve's 416th Engineer Command in Chicago, the call was out: Officers needed for a predeployment site survey on an upcoming training exercise called "Bright Star." Held in Egypt, Bright Star was a joint tactical exercise involving thousands of multinational troops. Army Reserve Major Kurt Carlson, a Rockford, Illinois, roofing and building contractor, was subsequently selected for the anticipated week-long trip.

To Carlson, overseas trips were always an adventure, and he looked forward to them. "To be successful, you needed to hit the ground running to complete a lot of work in a limited period of time and," he said prophetically, "maintain a low profile."

Following several days of liaison duties with the Egyptian military and US Army Central Command officials, the site survey, and a tour of the Giza pyramids on camelback, Carlson now had time to call Pan American Airlines to confirm his return flight. He was looking forward to experiencing his first Father's Day. He called his wife to let her know he would be in Chicago on Friday, 14 June.

Flights from Cairo to other connecting hubs had changed, said the Pan American representative on the crackling hotel telephone. Carlson thought he might have better luck at the Cairo airport. It turned out that it was no better. Fate seemed to be preventing him from getting back to Chicago on time. That was until a beaming ticket agent with a

sense of mission accomplishment told him that he got him the last seat on TWA Flight 847 from Athens to Rome. From Rome, he could make a New York connection.

As the TWA Boeing 727 aircraft headed toward Athens from Cairo to take on additional passengers, the home-bound soldier considered himself fortunate.

Deplaning briefly before the next leg of the trip to Rome, Carlson noted alarmingly the lack of security at the Athens passenger control point—disinterested security guards and malfunctioning equipment. More disturbing was the fact that there had been two air hijackings in the region within the past week. Carlson recalled that when they traveled overseas, they always used US airlines for security purposes. At that time—1985—they had little training in dealing with a terrorist hijacking or kidnapping—only prisoner-of-war training.

Filled mainly with American tourists, the TWA aircraft—carrying 145 passengers and 8 crewmembers—finally took flight midmorning on 14 June, about an hour and a half late. As the aircraft gained altitude, all appeared normal as passengers became comfortable in their surroundings. Some rustled in their seats, others talked, some started to read—no different than any other standard aircraft takeoff.

The false sense of normalcy in Carlson's world immediately changed when the flight engineer turned off the cabin "Fasten Seatbelt" sign. Almost instantaneously, two well-dressed men in white suits with black shirts rushed the cockpit door, waving weapons. One of them had a fragmentation grenade in his hand, and he was frantically pulling at the pin. They both screamed repeatedly, "Come to die! Americans die!"

One of the hijackers viciously kicked a German-American flight attendant in the chest, which slammed her against the aircraft bulkhead and—in an "I-dare-you" motion—held a chrome-plated, 9-millimeter pistol to her ear. The hijackers were later identified as Mohammad Ali Hamadei and Hasan Izz-Al-Din, both belonging to a Lebanese Hezbollah faction. Hamadei, who was fluent in German, brandished the pistol and shouted at the attendant in her native language, while simultaneously pounding on the door of the pilot's compartment.

"They're on a suicide mission," thought Carlson. His first reaction was to want to try to overpower them. He unfastened his seatbelt and stood up, but noticed that no other passenger contemplated the same action. Carlson did note the sheer terror on their faces. Realizing he couldn't take on two armed fanatics who could blow the aircraft out of the sky, the Reserve engineer sat back down. "There may even be others on the plane," he reasoned.

*(Note: In fact there was a third hijacker Ali Atwa, who was arrested by Greek police at the airport just prior to boarding. Later released by the Greek*

*authorities, Atwa is still listed by the FBI as one of the most wanted terrorists for his role in the hijacking.)*

By this time, Izz-Al-Din, who held the fragmentation grenade, had forced his way into the cockpit. Soon after this forced entry, the pilot announced over the aircraft address system that their new destination was Beirut, Lebanon. Following the pistol-whipping of some of the flight crew, the hijackers subsequently went from row to row, collecting passports from the passengers.

Carlson's actions turned to hiding his military identification card in the airline seat cushion while at the same time worrying about his passport and other official papers in his briefcase located in another section of the aircraft. Carlson figured that if they searched him and found the identification card, he would have no opportunity at all to jump them at some future point, because they would have either separated him from the rest of the passengers or killed him right there. He thought he would try to buy some time in order to help at any opportunity. As an Army Reserve officer, he knew he had an obligation to do whatever might be required of him to help protect the other passengers and possibly overpower the hijackers, even at a risk to himself.

Hamadei waved his pistol and barked orders in German to the flight attendant, while Izz-Al-Din jumped up and down and made threatening gestures. The flight attendant spoke to the passengers, "Please, no talking. Put your heads down and clasp your hands over your heads... We must do exactly as we are told." The aircraft became deathly quiet. After hours in this contorted face-down position, muscles began to cramp and ache, but passengers who made a noise or complained were severely beaten.

In what became a macabre game of musical chairs at gunpoint, men were placed in window seats and women and children were forced to sit in aisle seats in order to limit the threat to the hijackers. Additionally, passengers in the forward

area of the aircraft were moved to the rear, armrests were removed from the seats, and four people were crammed in the three-seat rows.

From his seat, Carlson could hear the hijackers hysterically yelling, "Marines!" and "New Jersey!" He could hear other military members trying to explain that they were US Navy construction divers, not Marines.

*(Note: Why did they use the terms "Marines" and "New Jersey"? In 1983, the 24th Marine Amphibious Unit had been sent to Beirut to support the Lebanese armed forces. On 23 October, a truck filled with 2,500 pounds of TNT, driven by members of the Free Islamic Revolution Movement, crashed through a gate at the Beirut International Airport and came to a stop next to a four-story building and exploded, resulting in the deaths of 241 US Marines. In 1983 and 1984, the battleship USS New Jersey fired her massive 16-inch guns at hostile antiaircraft positions inland of Beirut with highly effective results.)*

Carlson's luck ran out when the hijackers finally discovered his official passport, which he used on military travel. Maniacally screaming "CIA! FBI!" the pistol-carrying Hamadei pointed his chrome-plated weapon in the major's face. "Tell him I'm in the Army Reserve and am only on a one-week tour of duty," he told the flight attendant. Temporarily satisfied that he was not a CIA or FBI operative, the hijacker moved on to intimidate and bludgeon other passengers.

Beirut International Airport officials wanted no part of this escalating international incident, so with the assistance of local militia, they decided to block the runways with barricades. Someone at the control tower subsequently told the pilots that the airport was closed. As if matters couldn't get worse on the ground, a rival militia had engaged the militia putting up the runway obstacles in a firefight. The attacking militia, called the Muslim Amal, ultimately cleared the runway for the aircraft with no time to spare.



**Major Kurt Carlson and his wife are greeted by President Ronald Reagan at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland, upon Carlson's return to the United States after being held hostage in Beirut, Lebanon.**

As the 727 was taking on fuel, the hijackers singled out one of the Navy divers. Grabbing him from his seat, they pushed him to the forward compartment.

Following refueling, Hamadei and Izz-Al-Din demanded to be flown to Algiers. The aircraft reeked at this point—nearly five hours from the initial takeover—from nauseating odors. And for the passengers, it became difficult to breathe. The stench became worse after landing in Algiers as the aircraft sat on the runway in sweltering Middle East heat. Sweat poured off of the hostages, and passengers gasped for air. Other passengers—children and some of their mothers—were released by this time.

Carlson felt a tap on his shoulder and turned around. He again faced the agitated Hamadei and his chrome-plated pistol. The Reserve officer was subsequently forced to the forward compartment, just inside the aircrew cabin area. He remembered that this was the same thing that had happened earlier to the young Navy diver who now remained unaccounted for.

Carlson was blindfolded with a vomit-smelling bandana, and his hands were bound tightly behind his back with a silk

tie—so firmly that it cut into his wrists and numbed his hands and arms. One of the hijackers pushed him just inside the pilot's compartment and proceeded to severely beat him with a steel pipe. He heard the chief pilot talking to the Algiers control tower, "They're killing people and beating them." At the same time, both Hamadei and Izz-Al-Din began kicking him, trying to make him scream in order to get the aircraft refueled again. Carlson, though badly injured, could not feel the kicks because his body was going numb. He prayed that he could survive the pain and the injuries he was receiving.

The hijackers also started making demands that Shi'ite prisoners in Kuwait and Israel be freed. The situation got even worse when they began screaming over and over, "One American must die!"

In a surreal world of pain and peace, Carlson heard a strange sound: click-click, click-click. It took him a moment to realize that the aircraft pilot was keying his handheld microphone nearby. Carlson now realized his part in this brutal reality radio script: The pilot wanted to let the airport control tower hear his screams to let them know the hijackers

were ruthlessly serious. The tower officials were just part of the audience. Hamadei and Izz-Al-Din wanted the world to know that they were willing to kill a passenger. To buy time, Carlson forced himself to yell out, and the continuous beating slowed down.

"Where is the fuel," demanded the agitated pilot. "Your fuel is coming," said the noncommittal voice in the tower. At this perceived delay, Hamadei and Izz-Al-Din began kicking Carlson in the head and spine. The ordeal continued for more than an hour and a half before they put the pistol to Carlson's head and screamed "one American must die!" before giving a 10-minute deadline. Carlson thought of his family and his personal affairs and resigned himself to the inevitable.

The pilot announced that he could see the fuel truck and, for the time being, the officer was spared.

Although Carlson had been beaten very badly for more than 2 hours, he had survived. It was a miracle that the fuel had come just before the hijacker was going to shoot him—an answer to a lot of praying. Several discs in his back were injured, he had broken ribs and fingers and internal and external bleeding, and he had lost a lot of blood. There was head swelling and injuries, blurred vision, mouth and tooth damage, shoulder welts, and difficulty using his hands and arms.

Late that night, the aircraft again headed to the Beirut Airport. The controllers there had once again refused permission to land, but then they gave in to both the hijackers' demands and the pleading of the pilot, who matter of factly stated that they had only 5 minutes of fuel left on board. After a very rough landing, the hijackers made further demands. At this point, they dragged the Navy diver to the door of the aircraft, shot him in the head, and dumped his lifeless body onto the Beirut airport runway.

The pilot began screaming to the tower over his radio that a passenger had just been killed, and one of the hijackers said that there would be another in 5 minutes. Beirut airport officials soon complied with their demands.

The passengers and aircrew pondered on what was the next terror that awaited them. After some additional heated radio discussions with the tower, the tail door of the airplane opened and on rushed a number of shouting and heavily armed militia members, who ran to Hamadei and Izz-Al-Din and hugged them. With the militia weapons pointing at them, Carlson and four of the Navy divers were taken off the aircraft to an awaiting truck, and they sped off to face another nightmare. Following refueling, fresh water, and food, the aircraft departed for Algiers.

The military hostages were taken into a battle-scarred building located near a Palestinian refugee camp and forced into a 12- by 20-foot basement cell with a steel door and bars on the window. As the senior officer, Carlson took command of the small military unit. Still nursing his injuries, he instructed his fellow hostages to learn as much as they could about their environment, the language, and their Hezbollah-connected militia guards. They were given a small radio, which was not only their source of news but also a source of frustration. They subsequently found out via BBC broadcasts that there were small clusters of 39 of the original 145 passengers and crew scattered throughout the city. The hostages could also hear how tenuous, painstaking, and slow the negotiations were. Days went by, and they were still unsure of their ultimate fate.

Although Carlson was badly injured, the Navy divers who were in the cell with him helped him survive. Together, they figured out their location in Beirut in relation to the airport and the sea. They learned their guard's strengths, weaknesses, and routine, and they developed a plan for escape. They would have likely made an escape within a few days after their capture if other hostages had not been taken and held in Beirut. The soldiers didn't want to jeopardize the lives of the other hostages, since negotiations were underway for release of the entire group.

As the military hostages waited in their cell, they occasionally felt the impact of mortar explosions or the

ricochet of bullets, which added to the tension of their captivity. They began to worry that the shell-pocked building they were in might fall in if an explosion was close enough.

On 25 June, after much diplomatic and political negotiating, Carlson's group was driven to a three-story yellow schoolhouse that was filled with their fellow passengers. Some of them were shocked to see that the officer was still alive. From there, they were moved to a hotel on the Lebanese coast. Here, they met with Red Cross officials and the international news media and learned that they would be crossing into Syria.

At the Damascus airport was a sight that will be forever burned into Carlson's memories—a US Air Force C-141 aircraft that would take them to military facilities in Germany.

After being released from captivity and flown to Wiesbaden, they were interviewed by Navy psychiatrists. Carlson couldn't talk about the hijacking and captivity. It was all there in his mind, but it wouldn't come out. He needed to clear his mind of the terror and somehow find some good from the experience.

Returning home, Carlson chose to stay in the Army Reserve. As part of his recovery, he assisted in educating the military about terrorism. He gave many talks and even wrote a book, *One American Must Die*. In 1987, he returned to Germany to identify one of the hijackers who had been captured and later testified at his trial.

*(Note: Mohammad Ali Hamadei was arrested by German authorities in 1987. He was convicted by a German court and sentenced to life imprisonment. Hasan Izz-Al-Din and Ali Atwa are still at large, as shown in the Web sites listed at the right.)*

Carlson later served during Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm during 1990 and 1991. He concluded his Army career in 1998, following 3 years of command of the 961st Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Heavy).

"Through my 29 years of duty, I was a true Reservist," said Carlson. "I never

sought an assignment or position, but volunteered when asked to serve. It was an honor and a privilege to be a member of the Army Reserve in service of our country." Reflecting on the current world situation, he stated, "My support and prayers will always be there for Army Reserve soldiers and their families."

*(Note: In 1995, a guided-missile destroyer was named for the slain petty officer, Robert Stethem. From 2000 through 2002, Carlson and the Navy divers, along with the family of the slain diver, took the Iranian government to court for planning, sponsoring, and training the terrorists who conducted the hijacking. They won a landmark case against Iran and state-sponsored terrorism.)*



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#### **For additional information on the Flight 847 hijacking:**

##### **Books**

Kurt Carlson. *One American Must Die: A Hostage's Personal Account of the Hijacking of Flight 847*. New York: Congdon and Weed, 1986.

John Testrake and David J. Wimbish. *Triumph Over Terror on Flight 847*. Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1987.

##### **Video**

*The Taking of Flight 847: The Uli Derickson Story* (1988) (TV Movie).

##### **Internet**

FBI's Most Wanted Terrorists, Hasan Izz-Al-Din, <<http://www.fbi.gov/mostwanted/terrorists/terizzaldin.htm>>.

FBI's Most Wanted Terrorists, Ali Atwa, <<http://www.fbi.gov/mostwanted/terrorists/teratwa.htm>>.