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TERRORISM IN THE SKIES



I am sure that never was a people, who had more reason to acknowledge a Divine interposition in their affairs, than those of the United States; and I should be pained to believe that they have forgotten that agency, which was so often manifested during our Revolution, or that they failed to consider the omnipotence of that God who is alone able to protect them.

—George Washington

Many years later, American investigators established Mohammed Rashed's movements leading up to the bombing of Pan Am Flight 830, the flight I boarded on August 11, 1982, with my wife, Ronnie. Rashed had boarded that same plane with his wife and child the day before, and flew from Baghdad to Tokyo. On the Hong Kong–Tokyo leg of the journey, Rashed, a member of a radical Palestinian nationalist group called The 15th of May, took out a handheld bag and wedged it underneath his seat, 47-K.

The weight of a subsequent passenger sitting down would activate a time-delayed pressure switch that would then detonate his bomb.

The flight originated in Baghdad, stopped in Singapore, Hong Kong, and then in Tokyo for approximately three hours before heading to Honolulu. In Tokyo, Rashed and his family deplaned and booked a flight back to Baghdad. On our leg of its journey, the plane, a 747, carried 267 passengers and a crew of 15. Most of the passengers were Japanese nationals traveling to Hawaii for their honeymoon.

I was working in Taiwan on a temporary business assignment when my wife and I decided to take a one-week vacation to Beijing and Shanghai. We had joined Flight 830 in Hong Kong. Even though my stomach was still talking back to me after a bad plate of teriyaki chicken the night before, we were looking forward to a two-day layover in Hawaii before heading home.

I traveled a lot for work in those days. “Travel” meant living abroad for anywhere from a few months to a few years, and during this assignment Ronnie and I decided it would be in our children’s best interests for her to remain at home. I worked for a major oil company, putting my years in the navy and the merchant marine to good use. The ocean was in my blood, and in the blood of my forefathers. I grew up with a love of ships, and when I found a job that would allow me to work in the maritime industry, I felt a deep connection not only to my own dreams, but to my grandfather—he was a boat-builder and seaman in Italy—and even to American history at large. We are a nation of people who sailed from afar, and we built our wealth and our strength on the high seas. So it was not with a little irony, as I took my own place in the lineup of history, that my work was about ships, but I spent much of my time in an airplane.

History is made up of individual lives, individual concerns—and so it was with my personal drama. I commuted home every couple of months, but the long periods abroad had created stress in my marriage, on top of stress at work. Ronnie and I hoped that a layover in Hawaii and my week at home would relieve some of the tension between us. I believed at the time that I'd remember this trip as a turning point—something that would show us whether our future held hope or divorce. There was indeed a lot at stake when we boarded that airplane, but not in the way we imagined.

At approximately 9:00 a.m., as we answered the last call for beverages, Rashed's plastic explosive detonated in the right rear of the main passenger compartment under the seat of a sixteen-year-old boy, Toru Ozawa, who was traveling with his parents from Japan. The bomb blew a hole about 12 by 36 inches in the floor between the cabin and the cargo hold. The fuselage ruptured, and an instant later, flash fire, lots of smoke, and flying shrapnel ripped through the air.

Ronnie and I, sitting in row 4 of the first class section experienced the initial blast as a deafening explosion that rocked the plane in the air. The cabin cockpit rapidly filled with acrid blue smoke so thick that the emergency oxygen masks dangling in front of our faces were barely visible. The giant plane dipped into a screaming forty-five-degree dive. We grabbed each other's hands and armrests and held on for dear life. It was Hail Mary time. And when that time comes, your life really does flash before your eyes.

I also kept thinking of what it would be like trapped inside the plane as it hit the water. The fuselage of the plane would make its submarine-like crash dive to death. If we survived the first impact, it would be agonizing, clawing

at the window next to us, unable to break it, as the water level slowly rose and covered the wreckage. That was not how I had expected to die at sea—I thought more in terms of Admiral Farragut’s line, “Damn the torpedoes ... Full speed ahead!”

The rapid loss of air pressure caused the plane to drop immediately from an altitude of 26,000 feet to 10,000 feet. The cabin was full of flying utensils, books, pens, and cups. Passengers screamed and yelled. The captain’s voice came over the intercom, reassuring passengers that the plane was under control and due to land within minutes.

After the plane leveled off at about 5,000 feet, things began to return to normal. We were now making a controlled descent into Honolulu from 140 miles out. I must give credit to the crew, who performed brilliantly in assisting passengers and trying to calm their fears. They brought a couple of passengers forward and seated them in our section of the plane, where there were a few vacancies. The first passenger had blood on her shoulders and was in shock, unable to relay anything coherent. However, the second passenger, whose hair was almost completely singed away, began to tell us of the hell the passengers in the aft cabin had experienced. There was hysteria, dangling oxygen masks, fire, and dense smoke. They felt certain we were going to plunge into the sea. He said there was an odor in the smoke, “Kind of like the smell of a shotgun blast.” It was from him that we learned someone was dead.

Miraculously, the pilot was able to land the plane safely at Honolulu Airport at around 9:30 a.m., about twenty minutes after the explosion. A battery of emergency equipment awaited us on the ground—fire trucks, ambulances, police cars, and every other kind of emergency equipment imaginable.

Oddly, as we disembarked from the plane, it dawned on me that in all the confusion I had left two bottles of liquor in the overhead compartment. I dashed back on board and retrieved the two bottles. As I was about to leave the aircraft again, it occurred to me to have a firsthand look at the scene around row 47. I thought the crew or other officials on board by this time might stop me. However, as I walked aft through the right aisle unhindered, there lying in the aisle in full view were the bloody remains of the poor young man who had been killed in the explosion. There was blood all over the seat and some of his intestines were splattered around the seating area. Passengers who had vomited from the sight made it a grisly, foul-smelling scene.

As it turned out, fifteen people on either side of him suffered shrapnel injuries. The boy was killed from the explosion, which propelled him into the aisle, blew a hole in his abdomen, tore off a leg, and mutilated the rest of his body. His parents had watched him bleed to death. Later his father, Shigetsugu Ozawa, confessed that “at the time my honest emotion was to wish the plane would crash into the ocean, as I had lost the will to live since my son was no longer alive.” My wife and I could not begin to imagine such heartache, not until we lost our son Nicky six years later.

Feeling queasy, I made a quick exit from the plane and rejoined my wife in the lounge. After we disembarked, police, FBI agents, and airline staff interviewed the passengers and crew. All baggage was thoroughly searched. Trained dogs were brought in to check for possible bombs aboard the plane and in the luggage. During an impromptu news conference later that day an FBI spokesman said they thought the incident was caused by an explosive device rather than a malfunction in the aircraft. How times have changed! In this day and age everyone would have already

jumped to the conclusion that the cause was a terrorist bomb, which it was.

When we got to the hotel we quickly called home to assure everyone that we were safe. It was a good thing we did, because by that time news and TV reports had alerted the world to this: the first terrorist air-bombing.



Two days later we were faced with the prospect of flying again, this time to the mainland. We were edgy, but the astronomical odds of another incident of this nature occurring again within such a short period gave us the courage to get back on board another Pan Am flight leaving Honolulu. After all, what other practical alternative did we have? We never heard another word about the incident from Pan Am, the FBI, or any of the other authorities since the day of the bombing. Moreover, no individual or group claimed responsibility for the bombing. It took years of other terrorist bombings and investigation before the United States Justice Department fingered Mohammed Rashed as the courier who planted the bomb. He was to stand trial before an American court for many terrorist acts against American passenger planes in the 1980s, including an identical bomb on another Pan Am plane in August 1982, which was discovered in Rio de Janeiro and defused without injury.

When terrorists supported by Iran and Syria had bombed the Marine barracks in Beirut in October 1983, the Iraq-based, Jordanian-born Rashed had already tried to kill more than a thousand people by planting as many as fifteen high-powered bombs on American airplanes and in Western embassies. In a 1998 hearing in Washington,

he was formally indicted with murder, attempted murder, sabotage, and a number of other crimes in connection with the Pan Am bombings. He was charged with placing the bomb under Toru Ozawa's seat.

He pleaded guilty in the District of Columbia on December 17, 2002, following a U.S. Appeals Court challenge that upheld the charges in the indictment. On March 24, 2006, almost a quarter of a century after that terrible morning, Mohammed Rashed was finally sentenced for the crime in federal court. The 59-year-old Palestinian had been in U.S. custody for eight years. When he is released in 2013 and deported, he will have spent approximately twenty-five years in custody. The U.S. court judge also imposed restitution of \$116,525 to be paid to the parents of Toru Ozawa. Cold comfort indeed.



This first terrorist air-bombing proved to be a turning point in my life, if not in our marriage. I have traveled far and wide and have seen the world many times over. From my travels and readings I am well aware of how military conflict has changed since the founding of this country and the role my family has played during half of its history. That background gave me a respect for the right of every person to pursue of a better life, and reinforced the years I had spent in service of my country onboard her ships. But what changed was subtle. I realized there was little that even a multi-billion dollar, nuclear-powered aircraft carrier could do to protect us against our new enemy: terrorism. During my chapter in history's long voyage, our technical wizardry has created a way of life in America, and on 9/11, has also been used as a terrible weapon against us.

I try to see the present as my grandfather would have seen it from his position in history. American civilians have been called upon to make the kind of sacrifices never before envisaged. Yes, there would still be conflict on the battlefield, but we would become familiar with a new kind of warfare after 9/11. We would feel threatened at home and abroad. New and strict “homeland security” measures would inhibit privileges we had always taken for granted. There was apprehension and suspicion towards immigrants, and even long-time resident foreigners. Ethnicity was the new buzzword. So were technology, political correctness, transparency, modernization, and globalization. As the sole remaining superpower economically and militarily, America was expected to provide global leadership in stabilizing all this madness, and did.

As a parent and grandparent, my reaction is the obvious: I wonder, “What kind of a world am I leaving behind for them?” My fears are considerably different and more alarming than those my parents and grandfather had for me. I think they were always confident they were leaving behind a better world than the one they found. I also think that my grandfather had every confidence that with each succeeding generation, the American dream would become more than a cliché—it would become a reality for his family. He knew there was no “free lunch,” but he expected every one of us to be given the opportunity to earn it, and with hard work, even relish some of the extra goodies. Perhaps for the first time in our history, we have to ask ourselves if we are willing to make the sacrifices that are necessary to assure the greatness of succeeding generations. Given the decline in recent years of U.S. economic prosperity, perhaps we also have to ask ourselves if the dream is in jeopardy. There are those who think it is, but I firmly believe there

is still no other country in the world that affords more opportunity and freedom.

Even as I look back over five generations of Staraces and their families in this country, I see a persistent belief in the spirit and values that drew our ancestors across oceans. The dream may seem tougher to realize, but it will survive as long as we pursue it. At the same time there is always a sense of pride in our roots and a willingness to return to those roots to better understand them. I therefore remain steadfast and optimistic in my belief that my kids, and their kids, and their kids will bear witness to a better world. It is the simple faith that there is goodness in human nature, and that it will eventually embrace us all. Without that kind of faith, we are all doomed.

That day at 26,000 feet, sitting next to my wife somewhere far above Hawaii, I glimpsed something of the intersection between the personal and the historical. Perhaps from this tragedy, I began to see a way into the book I conceived so many years before on the decks of the SS *Exford*.