

# TWA FLIGHT 847

**Situation:** Terrorists murdered Navy Diver Robert Stethem because he was US military.

On June 14, 1985 two well-dressed terrorists smuggled two hand grenades and a 9-mm pistol on-board TWA flight 847. Twenty minutes after leaving Athens enroute to Rome, the terrorists entered the cockpit and ordered the Captain to fly to Beirut. They moved male passengers to window seats and collected passports. When they saw the military ID of Robert Stethem, a US Navy diver, they beat him, shot him, and dumped his body on the tarmac in Beirut. The terrorists kept control of the plane for 17 days.



Some terrorists focus their hatred on the US military. Robert Stethem was singled out because the terrorists thought he was a US Marine and wanted to avenge the US Marine role in Lebanon in 1982 and 1983.

Robert Stethem demonstrated great courage as terrorists beat him, and a US warship, the USS Stethem, has been named in his memory.

What lesson can be learned from this tragic experience? Do not expose your US military affiliation to terrorists.

**Terrorists attack US troops of all ranks and services. Generally, you should blend in and not be an obvious target. Try to avoid the most exposed locations in an aircraft, the aisle seats at the front and rear. Conceal your military ID and travel on a tourist passport.**



On the preceding day, three well-dressed Lebanese men belonging to the Islamic Jihad Organization arrived from Cairo and spent the night in the airport terminal. On the day of the skyjacking only two of the terrorists could board the plane because the flight was overbooked. After creating a scene, the third skyjacker was detained by security officers and was found to have two forged Moroccan passports.

The skyjackers managed to smuggle aboard two hand grenades and a 9-mm pistol. Once on the plane they took seats in the rear of the aircraft. TWA 847 departed Athens, Greece, en route to Leonardo Da Vinci Airport in Rome, Italy with 153 passengers and crew on board, including 120 Americans.

An airport known for lax security was the start point for this tragedy. Consider this when you are making flight reservations.

Ali Atwa (pictured here) has been indicted for his role in the incident and the Rewards For Justice Program, US Department of State, is offering a reward of up to \$5 million for information leading directly to his apprehension and conviction.

About 20 minutes into the flight, the two hijackers ran down the aisle shouting and waving their weapons, and they ordered the pilot to fly to Beirut. They moved male passengers to window seats and randomly beat upon passengers. Head flight attendant Uli Derickson, an ex-German national, was ordered to collect passports as one of the hijackers followed close behind.



Onboard were four US Navy divers who had no passports but traveled on military ID cards. When Derickson translated sailor into German as kriegsmarina, the terrorists mistook the divers for US Marines and spoke of avenging the Marine role in Lebanon. Beirut Airport twice denied permission to land, so they seized 24-year old Robert Stethem and began to beat him with an armrest from a cockpit chair.

During the ordeal, the badly beaten Stethem expressed hope to another passenger that his fellow sailors would be spared since they were married and had children.

His Bronze Star Medal citation recognized his extraordinary physical, moral, and emotional courage and noted that his steadfastness and loyalty were in keeping with the finest traditions of the US Naval Service.



Finally yielding to pleas of the Captain, Beirut allowed the plane to land. In exchange for fuel, the terrorists released 19 women and children. Over a 17-day span, the plane made several flights between Beirut and Algiers, releasing passengers at each stop. This movement distanced the hijackers from the rapidly building US military presence in the area. Robert Stethem was killed shortly after TWA 847 landed in Beirut a second time.

On 30 June the hostages were released to Syria for their trip back to the United States. In exchange the terrorists demanded release of Lebanese radicals held by Israel, withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon, and international condemnation of US and Israeli actions in the Middle East.

Political and cultural hatreds can make US uniformed personnel the targets of vicious acts of violence. You should generally try to blend in and remain anonymous. When this became impossible, Robert Stethem conducted himself with great distinction.