

Lufthansa 737

October 13, 1977

On October 13 1977 a Lufthansa 737 airliner en route from Palma in the Balearic Islands to Germany was hijacked by terrorists over the French Mediterranean coast. On board the aircraft were five aircrew (two pilots, three stewardesses), 86 passengers, and four terrorists, two of them women.

The hijackers' leader called himself "Captain Mahmoud", and was subsequently identified as a notorious international terrorist, Zohair Youssef Akache. He ordered the aircraft captain to fly to Fiumicino airport in Rome, where the airliner was refueled.

From Rome, the airliner set off eastwards and landed at Larnaca in Cyprus at 2038. Here, "Mahmoud" demanded that the aircraft be refueled again, or he would blow it up, the first of many threats to use explosives. After refueling, the airliner took off and overflow various Middle East countries. Permission to land at Beirut was denied and the runways were blocked, so it was taken on to Bahrain in the Persian Gulf where the same thing happened. It was flown on to Dubai, where, despite being refused permission to land, the crew were forced to do so for lack of fuel.

At one point at Dubai the airliner lost power and the temperature inside rose to over 120 degrees F (49 degrees C); many of the passengers, some of them quite elderly, became very distressed. While here, the crew managed surreptitiously to signal that there were four hijackers.

Then on Sunday, October 16, the airliner suddenly took off, only 40 minutes before the first deadline for blowing it up. It was refused permission to land in Oman and arrived over Aden airport with sufficient fuel for another 10 minutes' flying. Despite warnings from air traffic control, the aircraft was brought down safely on the taxi track.

PILOT EXECUTED

By now conditions inside the aircraft were very bad, and "Mahmoud" was acting in an increasingly unpredictable and unstable manner. Jurgen Schumann, the pilot, was allowed to leave the airliner to check the undercarriage, and disappeared for a few minutes. When he returned he was taken to the first class cabin and made to kneel on the floor; "Mahmoud" then shot him in the head, killing him instantly, directly as a result of Schumann's earlier, successful effort to feed information about the terrorists to authorities.

The next morning the co-pilot, Jurgen Vietor, took off and flew the airliner to Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia. There, German government spokesmen contracted the hijackers and said they were prepared to release 11 terrorists held in jail and fly them to Mogadishu; "Mahmoud" postponed his deadline to 0145 hours the next morning (October 18).

THE RESCUE

A 30-strong contingent from GSG 9 was in the air within hours of the hijacking and arrived in Cyprus just as the Boeing 737 was taking off. Following a brief discussion with the Cypriot police, the GSG 9 team took off in their aircraft again and returned, via Ankara, to Frankfurt. Meanwhile, a second aircraft containing Hans-Jurgen Wischenewski, West German Minister of State, psychologist Wolfgang Salewski, and another 30-strong group from GSG 9, led by their commander Ulrich Wegener, had left

West Germany and gone to Dubai. From there they went to Mogadishu, where they were given permission to land.

In Mogadishu, Wischenewski took over discussions with the hijackers. As the 1600 hours deadline approached and it was clear the "Mahmoud" would in all probability carry out his threat to blow up the aircraft, the German minister said that the 11 prisoners would be released. "Mahmoud" gave them until 0245 hours the following morning to produce the 11 at Mogadishu. At 2000 hours the first group of GSG 9 who had gone to Cyprus and then returned to Germany arrived in Mogadishu and the rescue briefings began.

At 0205 hours, just 40 minutes before the deadline, Somali troops lit a diversionary fire ahead of the aircraft. Two hijackers went to the cockpit to assess its significance, whereupon the tower contacted them by radio and started to discuss the conditions of the exchange. They said it would commence in the near future, when the aircraft arrived from Germany with the released prisoners on board.

At 0207 precisely the emergency doors over the aircraft wings were blown open and members of the rescue party tossed in some "stun grenades." The men of GSG 9, with two British SAS men lent by the British government, had reached the aircraft and climbed onto the wings completely undetected; the hijackers (and the hostages) were taken by surprise.

The men of GSG 9 rushed into the aircraft shouting to the hostages to keep down on the floor, and opened fire on the hijackers. "Mahmoud" was fatally wounded in the first few seconds, but managed to throw two hand-grenades before he died; fortunately, their effects were cushioned because they rolled beneath seats. One of the women terrorists died also and the second man was wounded inside the aircraft but died outside in a few minutes later. The second woman, Suhaila Sayeh, was wounded but did not die. Meanwhile, the passengers were herded off the aircraft through the doors and emergency exits; three hostages had been wounded, but none was killed.

The operations ended at 0212 hours and was entirely successful. GSG 9 had proved itself and the men received a well-merited heroes' welcome when they returned to Germany.