



FLIGHT SAFETY FOUNDATION

# CABIN CREW SAFETY

Vol. 23 No. 4

July/August 1988

## How To Survive In A Hijacking And Hostage Situation

—  
by

*Sharon Barthelmess, M.S.*

Terrorists are no longer just striking people who represent a symbol, such as political or military figures, but now the average citizen — crewmember, businessman, or tourist — is also in jeopardy.

In his book *Everything You Need To Know Before You're Hijacked*, Dan McKinnon, Former Chairman, U.S. Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB), states that, "The odds of being a victim of a terrorist attack or hijacking are about one in a million." He then asks: "But, what do you do if you're that one(1)?" This question takes on greater proportions when we consider that crewmembers are at a higher risk by the very nature of their profession.

McKinnon states that: "Unfortunately, terrorism has been on the rise. For that reason, it is smart to mentally prepare yourself to avoid such dangers or think about how you would deal with them (2)." To help ensure that crewmembers are prepared and have a mental "game plan," this article will: explore the four stages of a hostage experience; examine hostage psychological reactions; and provide information on how to protect yourself against the possibility of terrorism.

### **The Four Stages of a Hostage Experience**

Thomas Strentz, a supervisory special agent in the Behavioral Science Unit of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, has interviewed numerous hostages and conducted case-by-case evaluations. Strentz concludes that hostage situations tend to be divided into the following four phases (3).

### **Alarm Phase Is Traumatic**

The alarm phase, for the unprepared law-abiding citizen forced into this life and death situation, is traumatic. Suddenly his world is turned around and he may experience near-paralyzing fear (4). This stage involves the victim passing from a routine existence of comfortable behavior to a sudden and dramatic encounter with threats and possible death. The police, whom he expects to help him, seem to be doing nothing. The hostage feels let down. His situation seems unreal. Common feelings of omnipotence and invulnerability are quickly overcome by the opposite extremes of confusion and defenselessness (5).

Many hostages seek immediate psychological refuge in a defense mechanism by denial of reality. Denial is a primitive but effective psychological defense mechanism that is put into use when the mind is so overloaded with trauma it cannot handle the situation. One may deal with the stress by believing he is dreaming and will soon wake up and it will be all over. Some deal with the stress by actually sleeping.

In the event of a sudden shock, such as being taken hostage, people who have not been prepared may panic. Panic is more likely to occur when the chances of a favorable outcome are perceived to diminish rapidly. Advance preparation can help victims avoid this extremely maladapted response to the stress of becoming a hostage. (See *FSF Cabin Crew Safety* March/April 1988 for a detailed discussion of panic.)

## **Crisis Phase Contributes to Survival**

The crisis phase is of critical importance to the survival of the hostage. The behavior pattern exhibited now creates the precedent for hostage-subject interaction that can maximize the survival potential of the hostage. During the crisis phase, as in the alarm phase, some hostages still rely heavily on the defense mechanism of denial. Others are beginning to outgrow their denial and face reality. They begin to act as they do in normal circumstances. This behavior provides a measure of emotional relief and mental escape.

The stress that individuals experience at this point may be due to their personal fears of isolation, claustrophobia or the loss of a sense of time. These three psychological hazards may be very troublesome, depending upon the length of captivity.

Isolation, can be particularly difficult for the more gregarious hostage. He must be able to handle both the demoralizing effect of being left totally alone and the fact that the only human contact he might have for extended periods of time will be with individuals who tend to be hostile (6).

The second concern is claustrophobia. Darkness in a confined space for an extended period of time can be suffocating. Even in an aircraft of some size, the space usually appears reduced because of terrorist (hijacker) demands that all window shades be pulled down. The terrorist may also require that each individual remain in his seat with the seat belt fastened and tray table down. Even the most sedentary individuals begin to feel the stress of such confinement.

The third hazard experienced by hostages is the loss of a sense of time. The only knowledge each hostage has of real time is what his captor decides to relate. The knowledgeable captor can effectively exploit this and enlist the assistance of his hostages against law enforcement.

## **Accommodation**

During the accommodation phase, the hours may seem like days to the hostage. Boredom is broken only by moments of terror. This alternating of emotions induces fatigue. Some hostages tend to develop what is now called the Stockholm Syndrome. One definition of the Stockholm Syndrome includes the following:

“Positive feelings of the captives toward their captor(s) accompanied by negative feelings toward the police. These feelings are frequently reciprocated by the captor(s). To achieve a successful resolution of a hostage situation, law enforcement must encourage and tolerate the first two phases so as to induce the third and thus preserve the lives of all participants (7).”

It appears that the Stockholm Syndrome is a coping device

that most frequently is specific to the hostage. It is doubtful that the involvement is a conscious process in which the victim intends the manipulation of the captor through personal identification. In fact, reports indicate that victims who experience the Stockholm Syndrome tried to resist their feelings of compassion for their captor (8).

## **Resolution Phase Develops Mixed Feelings**

During the fourth and final stage of the hostage experience — resolution — the hostages may have mixed feelings toward their captors. One of the most self-revealing descriptions of this inner conflict was offered by a flight attendant who survived a hijacking.

“After it was over and we were safe I recognized that they (the captors) had put me through hell and had caused my parents and fiancé a great deal of trauma. Yet, I am alive. I was alive because they had to let me live. You know only a few people, if any, who hold your life in their hand and then give it back to you. After it was over, and we were safe and they were in handcuffs, I walked over to them and kissed each one and said ‘Thank you for giving me my life back.’ I know how foolish it sounds, but that is how I felt.”

## **Hostage Psychological Trauma Can Be Reduced**

In order to better understand the psychological reactions of a hostage, Strentz has developed a hostage psychological survival guide.

His research has shown that the trauma of being taken hostage can be minimized by preparation and an understanding of the psychological components at work. As a result of his work with hostages, Strentz discovered, unexpectedly, that hostages tend to fall into one of two groups. According to Strentz, “survivors” are defined as those individuals who return to a meaningful existence with strong self-esteem; and live healthy and productive lives with little evidence of long-term depression, few nightmares or serious stress-induced illness.

On the other hand, “victims” or “succubers”, as Strentz calls them, may not have lived through the ordeal or upon release or rescue require extensive psychotherapy to deal with real or imagined problems (9).

*U.S. Professor Freed in Beirut*, were the headlines around the world on October 4, 1988. Indian-born educator, Mithileshwar Singh was released in Moslem west Beirut after 20 months in captivity. Mr. Singh was seized along with three American colleagues from Beirut University in Lebanon on January 24, 1987. Nine Americans are currently being held hostage. The longest-held is Terry A. Anderson, chief Middle

East correspondent of The Associated Press, who was kidnapped March 16, 1985 (10).

According to Strentz, few people ever forget the hostage experience. However, it is the ability to make their ordeal into a positive growth experience which tends to separate the "survivors" from the "victims". The recommended hostage psychological reactions listed below are designed to ensure survival with dignity (11).

## HOSTAGE PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTIONS

### SURVIVORS

Faith  
Hostage Hostility  
Superior Attitude  
Fantasy  
Rationalize  
Routine Behavior  
Mature Stability  
Flexibility and Humor  
Blend with Peers

### VICTIMS

Abandon  
Act Out Aggression  
Self Pity  
Reality  
What If?  
Antagonistic Reaction  
Youthful Immaturity  
Obsessive Compulsive  
Over Compliance or  
Resistance

## Faith

Depression is a common and, at times, an insurmountable enemy. However, a positive mental attitude is absolutely required to survive a hijacking. Hostages must have faith in their country and themselves. An American hostage in particular is never alone and should know that the U.S. government, at a variety of levels, is monitoring the situation while working toward a negotiated release or a rescue.

It is a federal felony for a person to take a citizen of the United States hostage anywhere outside the United States (12). This means, in part, that the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation opens a case on each citizen who is abducted or hijacked, and prepares material for prosecution in U.S. District Court with the intent of taking to trial those identified as the abductors. The Achille Lauro incident of October 1985 showed the American public and the world how this process can work and what resources the U.S. government will expend in this process to protect its citizens and bring terrorists to justice. Therefore, hostages should concentrate on the positive resolution of the abduction rather than sinking into depression with feelings of being abandoned and isolated.

## Hostage Hostility

Hostile reactions can and must be masked by the psychological defense called "suppression and isolation of affect." This reaction allows the hostage to keep aggressive feelings inside rather than challenge the captors with hostile words and deeds or by insisting on comfortable conditions. The name London Syndrome has risen in this context due to the behavior of one

Iranian named Abbas Lavasani.

During the Iranian Embassy siege in London, Lavasani refused to compromise his dedication to the Ayatollah and continuously argued with passion for the righteousness of the Islamic revolution. Intent on martyrdom, he prolonged political discussions despite the pleas of fellow hostages for silence and was finally killed by his captors. His death was needless, and triggered the assault during which additional people were killed. The reverse of the London Syndrome was demonstrated by many Americans who survived the Bataan Death March; they concentrated on surviving, refusing to engage in senseless arguments with their captors (13).

## Superior Attitude

A superior attitude will help people rise above their situation so long as it does not translate into hostile actions toward the hijackers. And, indeed, most hostages have every reason to feel superior: they have, after all, been taken because they are valuable to their government. No matter how the hijackers try to demean them, hostages remain secure in the knowledge of their value to their government.

## Fantasy

The ability to escape mentally from the hostage experience by engaging in fantasy is well-documented in interviews and in the writings of many hostages. Some speak of building homes in their imagination while others plan trips to various places. Some reduce stress by daydreaming the hours away, others by withdrawing into sleep. All agree that occupying empty hours and thus dealing with the real enemy of boredom is one of the major problems of the experience (14). By constructive fantasizing, by withdrawing into the pleasures of the imagination, one can gain some sense of control, fill the empty hours, and distract oneself from the dangerousness of the situation. Fantasy is an excellent escape from the trauma of this reality.

## Rationalize

One should focus on the fact that one is alive and a hostage rather than using hindsight to see how one could have avoided becoming a hostage in the first place. Except in the eyes of fanatics, it is clearly more desirable to be a live hostage than a dead martyr. One must accentuate the positive, give thanks for being alive, and resolutely adjust to the demeaning hostage status.

Hostages can learn to play mental games with themselves and each other; how could things be worse? I/you could be dead or disabled rather than dwell on how things would be better if one had stayed home and gone to work for the railroad. When all is said and done, hostages must recognize and accept what they cannot change (their status), then adjust to the circumstances and make the best of a difficult situation.

## **Routine Behavior**

Acting according to one's usual routines is a great stress reliever as long as such activities do not pose a threat to the captors. Flight attendants taken hostage have found great consolation in doing routine tasks such as cleaning the galley; others have deliberately written letters and kept logs. Some flight engineers have navigated their most perfect course and pursers speak of achieving a perfect accounting of items served and money received. Pilots speak with pride about smooth flights and landings. It is important that this activity occupy the mind of the captive to help in a mental escape from the stress of captivity while not appearing as a threat to the captors by staring at them or even daydreaming while looking in their direction.

Physical exercise, such as dynamic tension activities, provide a multitude of benefits. They occupy time, are healthy endeavors, and allow better mental and physical functioning. They also enable one to sleep better and provide the very positive effect of goal setting and achievement. To set a realistic goal of a specific number of sit-ups over a few days is much more logical than to set a goal for release by your captors within an arbitrary time frame. The hostage controls the fitness goal. Release, however, is generally in the realm of others and thus, an artificial goal that, when not met, may induce depression. A strong sense of obligation to others can also be very helpful. Hostages who are preoccupied with helping or caring for others have little time to reflect upon their plight. This was true of the doctors in the POW camps and of crewmembers on hijacked aircraft (15).

## **Mature Stability**

A mature, stable appearance of one who is in control, in spite of inner turmoil, expresses a sense of confidence and may help the terrorist settle down. You are also helping your passengers and law enforcement officials by maintaining safety and order on the aircraft while exercising your position of authority. Within limits, by doing the job you were trained to do as a cabin crew member, you insure the safety of the flight. You are the most important safety feature of the aircraft. It is important that your mature professional and decisive behavior convey this fact to the hijacker and passengers.

## **Flexibility And Humor**

Serviceman captured in Vietnam learned that physical conditioning and flexibility were crucial. A flexible personality which will allow one to laugh at personal idiosyncrasies and find humor in little things is also crucial in a civilian setting. Naming the guards with secret and humorous names is one proven way to help relieve stress.

## **Blend With Peers**

On the one hand it is best to blend with one's peers, since some terrorists have selected leaders for abuse. However, if you are comfortable in a leadership role or have skills which will help, this activity may assist in survival with dignity.

Doing what one is told, but slowly, to insure safety is recommended. Unless passenger, aircraft or personal safety is endangered, doing more than what the hijacker orders is not a good survival tactic.

## **Protecting Yourself Against Terrorism**

According to the U.S. Department of State, "Terrorist acts occur in a random and unpredictable fashion which makes it impossible to protect oneself absolutely. The first and best way is avoid travel to unsafe areas — areas where there has been a persistent record of terrorist attacks or kidnapping (16)."

The U.S. Department of State issues travel advisories recommending against travel to certain countries with terrorist or unstable government problems. Instructions on how to obtain this information appear at the end of this article.

As a crewmember or passenger, however, you may be required on occasion to layover in areas of terrorist activity. McKinnon said, "The Middle East has become the primary source of international terrorism, accounting for about 35 percent of the incidents and about 97 percent of all press exposure . . . While the Middle East may be the source of most terrorism, Europe is the location of the largest number of incidents, followed by the Middle East and Latin America.

"The vast majority of foreign states have a good record of maintaining public order and protecting residents and visitors within their borders from terrorism. Most terrorist attacks are the result of long and careful planning. Just as a car-thief will first be attracted to an unlocked car with the key in the ignition, terrorists are looking for undefended, easily accessible targets who follow predictable patterns (1)." The following precautions may provide some degree of protection, and some can serve as practical and psychological deterrents to would-be terrorists.

- Discuss with your family what they should do in case of an emergency in addition to making sure your affairs are in order.
- Remain friendly, but be cautious about discussing personal matters, your itinerary, etc., with strangers.
- Leave no personal or business papers in your hotel room.
- Watch for people following you or "loiterers" observing your activities.

- Keep a mental note of safe havens, such as police stations, hotels and hospitals.
- Select your own taxicabs at random — don't take a cab which is not clearly identified as a taxi. Compare the face of the driver with the one posted on his license.
- If possible, stay with others when you go out.
- Refuse unexpected packages.
- Learn a few phrases in the local language so you can signal your need for help, the police, or a doctor.

For information regarding conditions of political or civil unrest in particular countries write to:

Citizens Emergency Center  
Office 4811  
2201 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20520, U.S.

Or, contact the Citizens Emergency Center at the U.S. Department of State by calling 202- 647-5225. ♦

## References

- (1) McKinnon, Dan, *Everything You Need To Know Before You're Hijacked*, (San Diego: House of Hits, 1986).
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Strentz, Thomas, "Preparing Victims of Hostage Situations," Proceedings/Second Annual International Aircraft Cabin Safety Symposium, Feb. 1985.
- (4) Rahe, Richard H. M.D. and Genender, Ellen, "Adaptation to and Recovery From Captivity Stress," *Military Medicine*, 148, pp. 577-585, 1983.
- (5) Ibid.
- (6) Jenkins, Brian M.; Johnson, Janera; and Ronfedt, David, *Numbered Lives: Some Statistical Observations from Seventy-Seven International Hostage Episodes*. (Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 1977)
- (7) Strentz, Thomas, "The Stockholm Syndrome: Law Enforcement Policy and Ego Defenses of the Hostage", *The Law*

*Enforcement Bulletin*, April 1979.

(8) Ibid.

(9) Strentz, Thomas, "A Hostage Psychological Survival Guide," Proceedings/Third Annual International Aircraft Safety Symposium, Jan. 1986.

(10) *San Diego Union*, Oct. 4, 1988, p. A-1.

(11) Strentz, Thomas, "*Hostage Psychological Survival Guide*."

(12) Title 18 USC sec. 1203.

(13) Nardini, John E., "Survival Factors in American Prisoners of War of the Japanese," *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 109 Oct. 1952, pp. 241-248.

(14) Derrer, Douglas LCDR USN MC, "Terrorism," *Proceedings/Naval Review*, May, 1985. p. 198.

(15) Nardini, John E., "Survival Factors in American Prisoners of War of the Japanese," *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol 109 Oct. 1952, p. 247.

(16) U.S. Department of State, "A Safe Trip Abroad", U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. July, 1986.

## About The Author

*Sharon Barthelmess is president of Free to Fly, a company that organizes and conducts seminars designed to help persons overcome their fear of flying. The San Diego, Calif., U.S., company also conducts over a wide range of aviation issues. A college instructor, she also lectures and writes about aviation safety.*

*A former cabin safety specialist with the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration, she was responsible for the development, management and evaluation of FAA's Aircraft Cabin Safety Program. During her FAA tenure, she also reviewed and evaluated existing regulations and proposed regulations related to cabin safety.*

*Before joining FAA, Barthelmess, who has an M.S. in psychology, spent seven years as a United Airlines flight attendant.*

Flight Safety Foundation  
**International Aircraft Occupant  
Safety Conference And Workshop**

October 31-November 3, 1988

Sheraton National Hotel  
Arlington, Va., U.S.

Sponsored by the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)  
For more information contact Ed Wood, FSF

Join Us "**DOWN UNDER**" for an  
Overview of Aviation Safety  
FLIGHT SAFETY FOUNDATION  
**41st Annual International  
Air Safety Seminar  
SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA**

December 5-8, 1988

"Basic Principles - The Key to Safety in the Future"

Hosted by

**THE AUSTRALASIAN AIRLINES FLIGHT COUNCIL**

For more information contact Ed Arbon or Bob Cooke, FSF

**CABIN CREW SAFETY**

Copyright © 1988 FLIGHT SAFETY FOUNDATION, INC. ISSN 0898-5758

Articles in this bulletin may be reprinted in whole or in part, but credit must be given to Flight Safety Foundation and *Cabin Crew Safety*. Please send two copies of reprinted material to the editor. • The suggestions and opinions expressed in this bulletin are the authors and are not necessarily endorsed by Flight Safety Foundation. Bulletin content is not intended to take the place of information in company policy handbooks and equipment manuals, or to supercede government regulations. • Unsolicited manuscripts must be accompanied by stamped and addressed return envelopes if authors want material returned. Reasonable care will be taken in handling manuscripts, but the Flight Safety Foundation assumes no responsibility for material submitted. • Subscriptions : \$50 U.S. (U.S., Canada, Mexico), \$55 U.S. Air Mail (all other countries), six issues yearly. • Staff: Alisa Joaquin, editorial assistant; Jacqueline Edwards, word processor. • Request address changes by mail and include old and new addresses. • Roger Rozelle, editor, Flight Safety Foundation, 5510 Columbia Pike, Arlington, VA 22204-3194 U.S. Telephone: 703-820-2777 • Telex: 901176 FSF INC AGTN • Fax: 703-820-9399