

Raid on Entebbe

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Prelude

On 27 June 1976, Air France Flight 139 from Tel Aviv to Paris was hijacked shortly after taking off from Athens. What followed was a week long hostage drama which finally culminated in a spectacular hostage rescue operation carried out by Israel's Special Forces operating more than 3800 km away from home.

The Hijack

Shortly after its take off from Athens around 1230 h, Flight 139 was hijacked by four hijackers—two Palestinians from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine- External Operations (PFLP-EO) and two Germans from the German Revolutionary Cells—Wilfried Böse and Brigitte Kuhlmann. The flight was re-fuelled at Benghazi in Libya where it made a stopover for seven hours. One pregnant female passenger was released at Benghazi. The flight landed at Entebbe airport in Uganda around 1515 h on 28 June 1976. At Entebbe, the four hijackers were joined by at least four others, supported by the pro-Palestinian forces of Uganda's President, Idi Amin. They demanded the release of 40 Palestinians “freedom fighters” held in Israel and 13 other detainees imprisoned in Kenya, France, Switzerland, and West Germany. Six of these prisoners belonged to the German Baader-Meinhof gang. They threatened that if these demands were not met, they would begin to kill hostages on 1 July 1976. At least 53 passengers mostly women and children were released by the hijackers.

The Israeli government, well known for its non-negotiation stand with terrorists reluctantly began negotiations with the hijackers while most of the

other countries refused to release prisoners held in their respective countries. After the Israeli government agreed to negotiate, 101 hostages were allowed to fly to Paris and the deadline for the release of prisoners was extended by another three days.

The hostages were held in the Transit building (now Old Terminal building) at Entebbe airport. The non-Israeli hostages were released by the terrorists. 106 hostages including 12 crew members continued to remain captive. At this time, a decision to launch a hostage rescue operation was reluctantly taken. But as time went by and the possibilities of achieving success in a daring commando operation so far away from home and in a hostile country appeared remote. Therefore, the option of negotiations seemed to be the only alternative. Indeed, late in the week, reviewing his country's meager options, an Israeli official sadly (although not quite accurately) concluded: "Since we are completely powerless to act, we have no choice but to make a deal."

But as the talks with the terrorists went on, it was realised that there could be no guarantee of the safe release of the hostages even after conceding their demands. There were reports that President Idi Amin of Uganda was preparing his own set of demands which included financial ones from Israel.

Israel's intelligence wing, Mossad and the Assault Group Commander Lt Col Jonathan (Yoni) Netanyahu extensively interviewed the released hostages in Paris. A French-Jewish hostage who was mistakenly released provided extensive details about the building at Entebbe airport and the position of the hijackers in which the hostages were being held. A contact discreetly photographed the airport terminal at Entebbe. The blue-print of the building was obtained from an Israeli contractor who had built the airport. It took about a week to conceive the raid after piecing together all available information and intelligence.

Operation Thunderbolt

Even as the hostage drama unfolded, Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) officers, Lt Col Netanyahu, Maj Muki Betzer and Maj Gen An Shomron, Intelligence officer Col Ehud Barak and others were planning the rescue operation. Three options included traveling in the Hercules aircraft, parachuting to boats on Lake Victoria or driving from Kenya. Finally, it was decided to fly into Entebbe by impersonating as President Idi Amin's entourage. Maj Muki Betzer who was previously posted in Uganda when Israel had diplomatic relations with that country provided information on President Amin and the Ugandan Army. A mock-up of Entebbe airport was constructed and dry runs conducted in

which troops rehearsed alighting from the aircraft and executing the rescue mission.

By mid-afternoon on 3 July 1976, 4 Hercules C-130 Transport aircrafts took off from Israel with nearly 200 IDF troops comprising of the Sayeret Matkal, Golani Brigade and Paratroopers and Armoured Vehicles on board. The aircrafts escorted by fighter aircrafts flew at a low altitude to avoid detection by radars. After a brief stopover at Sharm-al-Sheikh off the Red Sea Coast, the soldiers switched into Ugandan Army uniforms.

At midnight on 4 July 1976, the four Hercules approached Entebbe airport for a landing. Luckily, the landing strip lights were on. The first Hercules was carrying the assault group led by Lt Col Yoni Netanyahu and 29 others from Sayeret Matkal, Israel's elite Commando unit. They split into two squads each assigned to storm the terminal building from three entry points. To achieve the element of surprise and swiftly approach the terminal building where the hostages were being held hostage, the ramp of the first Hercules was opened 5-8 minutes before landing. Some Paratroopers jumped off while the plane was taxiing and placed lighted markers on the runway. The 30 Sayeret Matkal commandos soon followed in their black Mercedes and two Land Rovers disguised as President Amin's entourage.

The Black Mercedes was flagged down by two Ugandan Army sentries and one of the Israeli commandos shot them with a silencer-fitted pistol. Another Israeli commando in the second vehicle opened fire and killed both the sentries as he realised that they were only injured and could have still opened fire on the Israeli commandos. He was using a non-muzzled weapon and the noise of the firing took away the element of surprise from the operation. Lt Col Jonathan Netanyahu now decided to abandon the original plan of driving to the terminal building and instead alighted from their vehicles near the control tower and approached the terminal building on foot.

The Ugandan troops shut out the airport lights and exchange of fire began. After some intermittent exchange of fire, the Sayeret Matkal squads were inside the terminal building. One terrorist was shot dead in the room where the hostages were being held. Another two were killed in an adjoining room. The fourth hijacker was shot behind a pillar where he was hiding. Three hostages died in the cross-fire including one who was mistaken to be a terrorist and shot by the Israeli commandos. At the same time, the Paratroopers were called in from the periphery and the hostages were being ferried to the Hercules in jeeps and

armoured vehicles from the terminal building. The peripheral party continued to engage the Ugandan soldiers. 20 Ugandan Army soldiers were killed in the firefight. 11 Soviet built MiG-21s and MiG-17s were destroyed by the troops holding the periphery. Lt Col Jonathan Netanyahu was hit by a burst of Kalashnikov fire from the Control tower and was hit in his arm and chest. He succumbed to his injuries on board the Hercules transport. Five other IDF soldiers were injured in the operation which lasted all of 53 minutes. The assault lasted only 30 minutes. Three hostages died and 12 suffered injuries in the operation. One hostage who was left behind was later shot dead by two Ugandan Army officers in a hospital. By some estimates, nearly 33-45 Ugandan Army soldiers were killed in the operation. Ugandan Army admitted that it had lost 20 soldiers in the raid.

The hostages finally reached Israel after a re-fuelling stop at Nairobi airport in Kenya. The Operation was later re-named 'Operation Yonathan' in honour of Lt Col Jonathan Netanyahu.

Strategic Deductions

- For two to three decades leading upto 9/11 commandeering aircrafts by terrorists led to anti-hijacking operations by various countries. Post 9/11, terrorists changed tack and diversified targeting to attacks on hotels, railway tubes, etc. As part of their changing tactics terrorists may once again go back to striking aircraft carrying Indian citizens. Hence, we need to prepare ourselves to possibility of carrying out anti-hijack operations both within and outside the country.
- We, therefore, need to have a dedicated force structure, including and expeditionary one, to tackle such threats.
- Such a structure needs to be a seamless one- a joint force-including the Coast Guard and the National Security Guard to carry out a quick response, effective launch to far away lands and across seas, mindful of greater Indian interests and economic participation across the globe.
- We need to nurture and evolve a will of the people, mandating our political class to take a bold and decisive call to intervene on behalf of and in the interest of our people in such emerging situations.
- When so called upon to act, we must keep the options to act and negotiate as part of the overall aim to take out the hijackers through force.
- We need to allocate sufficient resources to equip a lean and mean force to attack with deadly precision and effect with state of the art equipment and train accordingly.

Tactical Deductions

- Intelligence gathering was critical in conceiving the rescue mission. Human intelligence on the Ugandan Army, blue-print of the old terminal building and layout of the airport and information on the profile and location of terrorists inside the terminal building helped in piecing together a meticulous operational plan. This highlights the need for specialised intelligence gathering and interrogation skills and resources when the crisis is still developing.
- Intelligence needs to be updated at all times. In this instance, information on President Idi Amin using a newly purchased white Mercedes instead of the earlier black one was lacking. This aroused the suspicion of the Ugandan sentries who flagged down the three lead vehicles of the assault group leading to the loss of the element of surprise.
- The need to keep the hijackers engaged constantly to buy time and put in place an effective operation is critical.
- Despite the best of plans and rehearsals, one needs to be prepared for all eventualities and quick re-appraisal of the plan at the execution stage of the operation. Lt Col Jonathan Benjamin took a spontaneous decision to assault the terminal building on foot after dis-embarking from the vehicles near the control tower of the airport after the element of surprise was lost. Rigorous training and mental robustness of all members of the assault team is essential in such commando operations.
- Familiarity of terrain is essential in such type of operations carried over long distances from home country. In today's environment, technology can be harnessed to obtain real time situational awareness, for example, through satellites.
- Synergy between all three services may be necessary in a future operation of such nature. Airlift of Special Forces can be through transport aircrafts, helicopters launched by warships. Use of mid-air refuellers can also be looked as an option for operations where an aircraft has been hijacked to a different county. Close air support by escort fighter aircrafts and flying below the radar are essential in maintaining secrecy of the operation till the last minute.

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Suggested Readings:

- Iddo Netanyahu, Entebbe: A Defining Moment in the War on Terrorism, Balfour Books, 2003.
- Yoni's Last Battle: The Rescue at Entebbe, 1976; Cahners Business Information, 2001.
- The Letters of Jonathan Netanyahu, Gefen Publishing House Ltd, 2001.
- Simon Dunstan, Israel's lightning strike: the raid on Entebbe 1976, Raid Series, Vol 2 of Raid (Oxford, England; 2009).
- William Stevens, Uri Dan, 90 minutes at Entebbe, Bantam Books, 1976