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US Navy Seabee Museum
99 23rd Avenue
Port Hueneme, Ca 93043

Norman E. Hahn, Jr.
1805 Oaklawn Dr.
Eau Claire, WI 54703-1681

Dear Mr. Hahn:

I am writing in response to your request for information on SW2 Robert Stethem. I have included an essay documenting his kidnapping and murder (encl. 1). I hope this helps you with your query.

Please contact me if you have any further questions. I can be reached by e-mail at gina.nichols@navy.mil.

Very Respectfully,

GINA NICHOLS
Archivist
US Navy Seabee Museum
By Direction

Enclosures:

- 1) Essay on SW2 Robert Stethem

Seabee Robert Dean Stethem was
an NMCB 62 Alumni. He was
murdered by terrorists in 1985.

STEELWORKER SECOND CLASS ROBERT DEAN STETHEM

It had not been an exciting trip. Repairing a sewer outfall did not rank among the favorite activities of any of the seven Seabee divers. The quaint little village of Nea Makri on the coast of Greece was interesting and the people were friendly. The seven vowed to learn how many dramchmas or leptaes equaled a dollar but then there was not much to buy and the drinks were lethal.

The Air Detachment of Underwater Construction Team One out of Little Creek, Virginia had flown to Greece two weeks earlier to conduct underwater repairs for the tiny U. S. Naval Communications Station just outside of Nea Makri. The seven petty officers were young men with few years in the Navy but strong feelings of dedication and duty to God and Country. Bob Stethem, the youngest in the group, had joined the Navy in 1981. He served with Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 62 in Gulfport, Mississippi for a couple of years then received divers training to join UCT-1.

Bob and his shipmates, Clinton Suggs, Tony Watson, Stuart Dahl, Jeff Ingels, and Ken Bowen looked forward to the most exciting part of their trip - the flight home. On 14 June 1985, David Smith drove them to the Athens Airport. David was remaining in Greece on leave and saw the other six off in front of the air terminal. Fighting

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their way through the crowd into the terminal, they began the turmoil of boarding their aircraft. The flight was overbooked and the struggle to board became a physical endurance test as people of all sizes, dress, and description attempted to break into the waiting line. Finally, about 0730, they managed to be seated on the Boeing 727. They were seated all over the rear of the aircraft with only Bob Stethem and Clint Suggs able to sit next to each other.

TWA Flight #847 departed Athens a few minutes later for Rome on the first leg of their journey back to the United States. The six finally relaxed, settled into their seats and began dreaming of pizza and cold beer. The aircraft slowly turned over Athens as it gained altitude. It was a beautiful morning with a bright blue sky sharply contrasting with the deep blue sea and white buildings that looked like pearls on a sea of green.

The "fasten seat belts" sign went off and the passengers began tilting back their seats into a more comfortable and permanent position. Suddenly, two well dressed men raced forward down the aisle of the aircraft banishing guns and yelling loudly, "Heads down!" They rushed the stewardesses, herding them into the pantry area. A hundred and forty some passengers gasped and held their breaths as a terrorist hijacking unfolded before their eyes.

The two terrorists ordered the pilot to turn the aircraft and make

for Beirut Airport. When the pilot balked at their orders, Hamadi screamed, "We have come to die! It doesn't make any difference to us. Go to Beirut or we will blow up the airplane!" They had gained entrance to the flight cabin and threatened the flight crew. "Beirut auf Leib und Leben gehen!" (Go to Beirut, it is a matter of life or death) Then all the window shades were ordered pulled down so no one could see out. At least one other terrorist failed to get aboard the Boeing 727 due to the overbooking. He was arrested shortly after Flight #847 departed as he went crazy with anger and frustration at not being permitted to board.

The two men, Muhammad Ali Hamadi and an accomplice, were Shiite Muslim terrorists. Dressed in suits or slacks and sport jackets with shirt and tie, wingtip shoes, and extremely well groomed with neat thin mustaches, they looked anything but hijackers. In a loud and demanding voice, one man made known his demands to the stewardesses in broken German. The head stewardess, known as the flight purser, was Uli Derickson. She was a 44 year old German naturalized US citizen. She walked to the forward bulkhead, grabbed the microphone and, "May I have your attention please. We have been hijacked. Please place your hands over your head. Please do as they say. No one will be hurt."

"Nein, nein," shouted the hijacker as they raced down the aisle beating and pistol whipping passengers who had placed their hands

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in the air. He wanted everyone's head down so they couldn't watch what was happening. When they succeeded in getting everyone's head down, Hamadi returned to the pantry.

Hamadi screamed directions at the stewardesses and finally made it understood that he wanted all the passenger's passports. Uli informed the passengers of the terrorist's command and began gathering the passports. When she came to Stuart Dahl, he gave her his US Navy Identification Card which is used in lieu of a passport by many US military traveling overseas. Uli asked, "Are you in the military?" Stuart nodded in the affirmative.

"Can't you please do something?" she asked in a pleading tone. He knew he should do something but didn't know what under the present conditions. The stewardess informed him there was a total of two armed Arabs. Before he could do anything, however, the Arabs started moving and mixing passengers around to different locations and seats.

One of the Seabees, Tony Watson, was carrying an "Official" passport which was often carried by US Government personnel. Hamadi followed Uli as she gathered the passports and when they reached Bob Stethem and Clint Suggs seats, he asked her the significance of the green cards. She explained they were in the US Navy. Hamadi spoke fluent German but little English and Navy translated to German came out "Marine." (die Marine) He became extremely agitated

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and yelled, "marines, marines," to his accomplice. Uli tried to explain they were sailors not marines in vain as the two began to pistol-whip Stethem and Suggs.

One must understand the mental state of the two terrorists. They had their plans disrupted by failure of all the terrorists to get aboard. They were nervous, excited, and very tense. About 1230, the aircraft landed at Beirut Airport to fuel. They remained on the ground a few hours while the panicked terrorists began inflicting blows and wounds on more passengers. A few women and children were permitted to leave while the plane fueled.

At gunpoint, the two divers, Stethem and Suggs, were moved from their seats in the rear of the aircraft to the First Class Section forward in the craft. Both men did what they were told but moved slowly, reluctantly if you will, with a look of defiance and determination in their eyes. They were both young, well muscled, and looked strong. Their appearance easily passed as "All-American." Curtains were pulled so no one could see what was happening and the pair beaten. The attraction to the pair of divers apparently was the two "marines" sitting together posed a potential threat to their hijacking plans. There was also a genuine dislike for the "peace-keeping" U.S. Marines in the area which had led to the Marine barracks explosion in Beirut a couple of years earlier. The passengers remained surprisingly calm, encouraged periodically

by Uli.

Without warning, Hamadi suddenly burst through the curtains and headed aft. He wanted to look through the passports. Uli handed him the stack of books and his eyes caught and stopped on the passports marked "official." In broken English, he asked the passengers with the "official" passports to stand up. Army Reserve Major Kurt Carlson slowly rose to his feet in the middle of the plane. He was quickly ushered forward to the First Class section. Tony Watson was not about to volunteer and remained seated even after Hamadi called out his name in poor accent and pronunciation. Hamadi asked Uli to call out Watson's name. Now he had to stand.

Hamadi rushed down the aisle, pointed his chrome-plated 9mm pistol at Tony and motioned with a finger to follow him. Tony walked through the curtains and was pushed into a seat. Hamadi pointed the muzzle of his pistol directly at his forehead and cocked the weapon. Tony was sure he was taking his last breath. Hamadi smiled, then turned to Uli convinced "official" meant an important US diplomat. She attempted to relate the true meaning but failed. Tony didn't see Stethem, Suggs, nor Carlson for they had already been beat senseless and lay on the deck between some seats.

Hamadi returned his attention to Tony, again calling him a Marine. Tony explained, "I'm in the Navy, a sailor!" Before Hamadi could

reach him again, Uli stepped between them and pleaded with Hamadi not to shoot. Only then was Tony again permitted to speak. He pointed to the lights in the overhead and explained he was an electrician. Hamadi wanted to know what he was doing in Greece and Tony explained he helped construct a building and he did the electrical work. This seemed to appease Hamadi and he calmed down a bit. About 1500 the aircraft took off for Algiers.

During the flight, the two terrorists continued to move people around, often times placing people in other's laps. Kurt was left in Firstclass and Tony was pushed back into the passenger cabin and seated next to a window. Various passengers were periodically hit but Bob and Clint remained unseen to the remaining passenger. They were visited many times during the flight but neither man uttered a cry of pain.

Four hours later, the aircraft landed in Algiers and again required fuel. TWA did not have an account at the airport and when it appeared there would be no fuel forthcoming, Uli again rose to the situation. She volunteered her VISA Card which was accepted and \$64,000.00 charged to her account. While on the ground, Bob Stethem became the prime target and was beaten again and again. He refused to cow to the threats nor the blows yet they continued to beat him as long as he stood. When he collapsed to the deck, the other hijacker ripped an armrest off a seat - with screws still sticking

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in it - and beat him unconscious. After the beating, Hamadi said to Uli: "Look at him now, he thinks he is so strong."

Around nightfall or 1900, the aircraft took off again and the pilot was ordered to return to Beirut. More women and children were permitted to leave the aircraft in Algiers. The three hour flight continued hectic but the terrorists seemed to slow. When the pilot requested permission to land at Beirut, he received an emphatic "negative." The landing strip lights were turned off and barricades set up on the runway to prevent a landing. The aircraft was very low on fuel and had to land in Beirut plus the terrorists demanded a landing in Beirut. Continuing requests to land were futile until the pilot radioed he was coming in even if he had to crash land.

About 2200 the stewardesses prepared the passengers for a crash landing and all electrical power was secured in the aircraft except the running lights. Quick instructions were given to the passengers on emergency deplaning and the pilot began his descent toward the airport. Unknown to the people in the aircraft, save possibly the terrorists, a battle was raging on the ground as the Muslim Amal Militia was attempting to drive the Muslim Druse out of the airport.

The Amal wanted the American men on the hijacked flight and was not about to lose them in an airplane crash. They quickly overwhelmed

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the Lebanese Army forces at the airport with a sizable force of their own. The runway lights were immediately turned on and the barricades removed, permitting Flight #847 to land safely. Captain Testrake, the aircraft pilot, displayed brazen courage in facing down the insistence of the Lebanese not to open the airport but it was the Amal that actually saved the day - or in this case, the night.

For some reason, the window shades were permitted to be opened for the landing. Once the plane touched down, Watson was moved forward again into the row of seats just aft of the First Class area where he joined Carlson. Dahl, Ingels, and Bowen were shuffled around also but remained in the passenger section of the aircraft.

The aircraft came to a stop on a tarmac well away from the airport terminal. Unanticipated bedlam broke out behind the curtains in the first class section. Both Stethem and Suggs were severely beaten again. Bob Stethem had been so badly beaten he was barely conscious but maintained his dignity and refused to plead for mercy. He and Clint Suggs was blindfolded and wrists tied behind their back. Clint called out, "Hang in there Bob. Hang in there." Hamadi opened the forward door of the aircraft and placed his gun to the back of Bobby's head. No stairway had been rolled to the doorway. The stewardess warned the passengers not to react to what they were about to hear...followed by a shot and a thud. Stethem slumped to

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the deck. Most of the passengers thought the pilot or one of the crew had been shot. The two terrorists then yelled, "Another one in five minutes." Clint Suggs was sure he was to be next. It was 1220 in the morning of the 15th.

Callously, Hamadi pushed Stethem's battered body to the doorway and kicked his body out the door onto the cold concrete below. Then they began to beat Suggs again but this time, Uli jumped between them, shouting "enough, enough!" She then pushed Suggs to the floor between a couple seats. They stopped.

Suddenly Amal militiamen stormed up the rear plane ramp into the aircraft shouting, "Welcome to Beirut." They were all armed with AK-47s, bandoleeres, and grenades. They boarded the aircraft to insure there was no interference by the Lebanese Army. There was a brief conversation between the two terrorists and the Amal. Then the two hijackers read a prepared statement about freeing Israeli captives. During the entire ordeal, the Seabees never felt the terrorists were on an Israeli hunt.

All of the known military passengers were pushed to the rear of the aircraft. Tony ended up sitting next to Clint. Clint queried, "Is that you Tony?"

"Shh. Ya. How are you?" Suggs answered, "I think they shot Bobby." Tony started to remove Clint's blindfold but one of the Amal

slapped his hands away. The entire length of the 727's stern ramp was lined with armed Amal and even in the blackness of the night, they could make out the shadows of more armed men on the tarmac. There was a great deal of talking and pointing by all the Amal. A weapons-carrier type vehicle backed up to the bottom of the ramp.

One of the Amal cried out to the Seabees, "You're free. You're free now. We go to the American Embassy and then you go home." All the Seabee divers were herded down the ramp and into the truck. Dennis Rouso, a Greek folk singer and his American girl friend, Kurt Carlson, plus a couple armed guards joined them unceremoniously in the back of the truck. Clint Suggs remained blindfolded and his wrists tied. Tony managed to pull the blindfold down far enough to permit him to see and loosened the ropes on this wrists. The guards made no effort to remove his bonds so the rest of the divers seriously doubted the validity of the "You're free," statement.

An armed jeep with a "Follow Me" sign led their truck out of the airport gates and into the city. Later, the aircraft flew back to Algiers only to return to Beirut a couple of days later with the remaining thirty-three Americans still on board. They were also removed from the aircraft in groups with Jeff Ingels in another military group of six.

The Seabees were taken to Amal Headquarters somewhere in Beirut

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where they were introduced to some high ranking Lebanese officials as well as the top brass of the Amal. They again heard they were going home but not one of the divers believed those words. It was difficult for the divers to follow all of the conversation but the bottom line appeared to be the release of Lebanese prisoners in Israel. The room was filled with Amal regulars in complete uniform and what appeared to be Amal civilian volunteers. Following the meeting, The Seabees were taken into the basement of the building and held prisoner for the following seventeen days. The singer and his girlfriend remained upstairs with the Amal and were released the following day leaving Suggs, Dahl, Watson, Bowen, and Carlson. What bothered the Seabees most was the absence of shipmate Jeff Ingels.

Within two hours of their arrival at the Amal Headquarters, the divers were brought back to the main floor and ushered into a large room. Large red banners with Arabic writing were hung from the ceilings and a huge picture of the Ayatollah Khomeini hung from the front wall. One of the Amal officers spoke perfect English since he had been educated in the United States. He spoke to the divers for a minute and then called for the ID Cards and passports. Another militiaman called out the name on each card and then handed the card to the officer. When Bob Stethem's card was called out, the officer replied, "No, not him any longer." What the divers feared was true; Bob Stethem had been killed.

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The prison for the Seabees consisted of a 12' X 12' concrete and stone basement room with bars on the windows. A doorway led to an old wash room with a sink and a hose bib with a short garden hose. A hole had been dug through the floor for a latrine. A single light bulb hung from the overhead. They were given floor mats to sleep on and bottled water. They ate Arabian food given them in frugal amounts although their guards befriended them and brought them additional food from their homes. They never saw the other groups and never knew Jeff Ingels was with another group of six men living literally in a dungeon in another building. Most of the non-military Americans were put up in local family homes and lived under better conditions than the military; at least they had adequate food.

Within a hour or two of their imprisonment, each of the divers were taken out of the basement cell into the wash room and interviewed by members of the civilian Amal. What they wanted was any valuables the Seabees possessed. They conned everything they could then admonished the divers not to tell or they would be killed. Most of the divers surrendered their cash and Travelers Checks but nothing personal.

After everyone was robbed of whatever the guards could get, the six were returned upstairs again where the threats continued. This continued for a few hours and about 0600 the next morning, 15 June

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1985, they were returned to the basement cell. The lights were turned off and the divers permitted to go to sleep. Just as they were about to close their eyes, a familiar sound came from the nearby Beirut Airport; it was the sound of a Boeing 727 taking off; it was their TWA Flight #847 leaving. The six felt even more alone and abandoned.

It was a turbulent time in Beirut and the divers were often awakened or frightened by nearby gunfire and explosives. Beirut was busily at war with itself as each faction, religious and ethnic, fought for their own piece of the city. The Palestinians were herded into a small area near the center of Beirut where they dug in and built a large earthen berm around their area. Their camp was located only a block or two away from the Amal Headquarters Building.

The divers were given a small transistor radio for their listening pleasure and they quickly found an hourly BBC news broadcast which kept them in touch with the outside world including negotiations on their release. Carefully, they only turned on the radio for the news to save the radio batteries.

The seventeen days were filled with periods of boredom and day dreams, rudely interrupted from time to time by stark terror. Periodically, some of the guards would line them up against one of

the cement walls of the cell and begin playing with their weapons. They seemed to relish threatening the six with pistols, rifles, and knives, laughing in glee when one of the divers would flinch as the hammer of a weapon clicked on an empty chamber. One of the local faction neighborhood militia by the name of "Camel" was the worst of the people who enjoyed harassing the men. One guard would spend most of his watch sharpening a mean looking knife. He would shave hair off his arm and slice paper with the razor sharp edge. Then he looked one of the divers in the eye - sweep the knife across his throat and chuckle.

The Seabees maintained their military bearing which gained the respect of their captives. The men were told by the Amal they were being protected from the terrorists although the divers suspected the two groups were working together. A couple of their guards would occasionally let the six go topside to a small room to play cards. One day, one guard was bored and he sat on the deck, bouncing the muzzle of his AK-47 on the floor between his feet. Suddenly the weapon fired three times, sending the rounds ricocheting around the cement room, narrowly missing the divers. Other guards came running at the sound of gunfire, almost shooting the six before their guard could explain.

To avoid depression and fear, they intensely tried to learn the Arab language and culture. They kept moving, walking laps around

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the small room each day. Stuart Dahl was the senior petty officer among the divers and took charge of the group, keeping up their morale and resistance to answering questions. He performed a masterful and successful chore. His greatest challenge was assisting Clint Suggs with his grief over the loss of Stethem. This was a tight group of Seabees.

One day, the divers were taken to the roof of the embassy building and permitted to get some fresh air and look around. The sea looked beautiful and was only a mile and a half from them while the airport was about a mile away. They could even look down on the Palestinian Camp. When they returned to their basement room, they immediately devised an escape plan. They would make for the sea, swim out into the sea and turn left for freedom in Israel.

Getting to the sea was the problem. Each faction in the city had lookouts in their neighborhood and knew exactly who belonged and who did not. The divers would be detected almost immediately and would have a labyrinth of militia to outrun. They decided to hang on a little longer.

Throughout the time they were kept captive, a guard remained in the basement with them. One day, the guard found it necessary to clean his M-16 rifle. He struggled with the weapon, cursing quietly as the pieces refused to come apart. One of the divers watched his efforts for about fifteen minutes and finally could stand it no

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longer. He asked the guard for the piece and quickly field stripped it, cleaned it, and reassembled the rifle. It was a terrible blunder on the part of the diver. Only a military man would know how to quickly field strip a M-16 and the Amal had not made the connection between the divers and Stethem to that point.

The next day, another guard brought a M-60 machine gun to the basement and asked the Seabees to field strip it. They all pretended they didn't know how. "Ah ha. You are all lying to me," spoke the guard, "Stethem was a Marine and you are also." The entire complexion of their imprisonment had just changed.

Twelve days had gone by in the God forsaken basement prison. Despite practicing personal hygiene to the best of their ability, washing down daily with the garden hose, they became a bit ripe to the smell. Their guard decided to take them outside and let them air out a bit. They were permitted to sit by the side of the street in back of the headquarters, relax and have a few cigarettes. Suddenly, a black Mercedes pulled up and a number of the Amal gathered around the car. They opened the trunk and pulled out a young man who had been hog-tied. They beat him unmercifully, then dragged him to an adjoining cell and tied him to the bars in the window. There he is believed to have died for he was a Palestinian and did not belong in the neighborhood.

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Eventually, Syrian President Hafez Assad, the Israeli government, and Nabih Berri, a Lebanese leader, managed to secure release of the hostages. The Israelis were required to turn loose 735 Lebanese prisoners in exchange for the Americans. These two activities were not broadcast together for fear of encouraging more terrorists. On the sixteenth day, the same group of high ranking Lebanese officials returned to visit the divers giving them their first concrete glimmer of hope to be released. On the seventeenth day, all the Americans were mustered in a school yard and told they were being released except for six men being held by the Hizbollah. The four divers and the Major showed their grit when they refused freedom until the other six Americans were released hoping Ingels was among them.

The threat worked and all thirty-nine Americans were released. As could be expected, the four divers rejoiced when they were rejoined by Jeff Ingels. They were taken to the large and modern Summerland Hotel on the coast which was also hosting the major news network teams. They were wined and dined; then the press permitted to meet and film the group. The television cameras rolled showing the captives living in luxury but the Seabees immediately ceased all activities as long as the media remained. They would not be a part of the Amal propaganda game.

The International Red Cross convoyed the Americans to Damascus were

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they boarded an Air Force C-141. It was covered in green camouflage with a big beautiful American flag on the tail. They flew to Wiesbaden, West Germany for physical exams and transportation to the United States. They were met at the air base by their wives and girl friends, flown there courtesy of TWA. They had three or four days in Germany to readapt to the Free World and then they were off for the United States. The trip was a long one - made much longer as the memory of their lost comrade Bobby Stethem remained utmost in their minds.

The hijackers were later identified and one of them, Muhammad Ali Hamadi, 22, was arrested in the Frankfurt airport while carrying three bottles of powerful liquid explosives in the midst of another terrorist plot. He was carrying a forged Lebanese passport but was identified by fingerprints. He is a Lebanese Shia Muslim who lived in Germany from 1982 to 1984. Identified as the person who killed Stethem, Hamadi was tried and convicted of air piracy and murder. He avoided death for Germany is a non-death country. The aircraft pilot, John Testrake of Richmond, Mo testified Hamadi was one of the hijackers. He is currently serving a life sentence in a West German prison.

Bob Stethem was posthumously awarded a Bronze Star for bravery and heroism and the Purple Heart. He was a courageous young man in the face of ultimate danger. He was the type of man that refused to

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break, maintaining his military bearing to the end. After all, he was a Navy Seabee.

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