

How to thwart a gunman at 29,000 feet, by the only pilot who ever did

With world attention focused on MH370, Uri Bar-Lev recalls how he saved his El Al passengers from an attempted skyjacking, and says other pilots should have been trained to do the same — on 9/11 and in countless other cases

BY MITCH GINSBURG | March 24, 2014, 2:14 pm |

With the world's attention focused on Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, a retired El Al pilot, a veteran of five armed hijacking attempts and plots, including one movie-worthy standoff at 29,000 feet, splashed some local brandy into his afternoon tea.

"When you don't know, you just don't know," Uri Bar-Lev said of the fate of the airliner, speaking two weeks after it dropped off the radar.

Then, while he was folding the Hebrew paper, which was splayed open to the MH370 story of the day, came an endearingly familiar routine, the ritual dance performed by so many Israelis of Bar-Lev's 1948 generation: Why do you want to hear this story? What's so special about it? It's been told before. Haven't you read it? Why would people want to hear it now?

The Times of Israel mentioned the missing plane and hinted at his heroics. We said there might be a lesson to be learned or simply a tale worth re-telling. He waved his hand dismissively, but, fresh from Pilates and in a rush to finish his chores before setting off for Chile the next day to visit a newborn grandson, the 83-year-old pilot agreed to deliver the abridged version of events.

On September 6, 1970, Bar-Lev, who had flown as a 16-year-old in the 1948 War of Independence and later during the 1956 War, was picked up from his Amsterdam hotel and brought to Schiphol airport to fly the second leg of El Al Flight 219 from Tel Aviv to New York. Before take-off, El Al's security officer on duty at the airport told the pilot that there were four suspicious people seeking to board the flight. Two held Senegalese passports with consecutive numbers; two others, a couple, carried less suspicious looking Honduran passports, but all had ordered their tickets at the last minute.

Bar-Lev, in consultation with the security officer, barred the Senegalese passengers from boarding and demanded that the local security officers closely inspect the two Honduran nationals before allowing them to board.

Although at the time he did not know that no such inspection had been performed, he stopped at seat 2C and had a chat with Avihu Kol, one of the two armed security officers on the plane. "I told him, I want you in the cockpit with me," Bar-Lev said.

Kol was alone in first class. He might as well have been wearing a sign that said air marshal. "Someone could just come up behind him and shoot him in the head," Bar-Lev said, recalling that Kol had warned him about just such a scenario two weeks before.

Skyjackings were not a new phenomenon. During the previous year alone, dozens of planes had been hijacked. Yet El Al was the only airline in the world to field armed guards and re-enforced steel cockpit doors — precautions that had been put in place after the 1968 hijacking of an El Al jet to Algeria, the only time Israel's national carrier has been hijacked. Kol, though, initially resisted Bar-Lev's demand that he sit in the cockpit, saying it contradicted his orders. Finally, Bar-Lev pulled rank.

At 29,000 feet, with the plane still climbing, the emergency light flashed in the cockpit. False alarm, one of the crew members said. It happened often. Flight attendants sometimes grazed against the warning panels, sounding the alarm. "No," Bar-Lev responded, "we're being hijacked."

Seconds later a flight attendant's voice came through the intercom: two people, armed with a gun and two grenades, wanted to enter the cockpit. If he didn't open the door, they would blow up the plane.

Bar-Lev sent flight engineer Uri Zach to look through the peep hole. The "Honduran" man, Nicaraguan-American Sandinista supporter Patrick Argüello, a former Fulbright scholar operating on behalf of George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), was holding a gun to a female flight attendant's head. Uri, she said to the pilot through the locked door, they are going to kill me if you don't open up.

According to the International Air Transport Association rules, Bar-Lev said, a pilot is responsible "for the welfare of his passengers" and therefore must acquiesce to the demands of terrorists. His thinking was just the opposite: acceding will only further endanger the passengers. Giving voice to an unformed thought, he said aloud, "We are not going to be taken hostage."

Sitting in the right-hand seat, having let the co-pilot handle the take-off from Amsterdam, Bar-Lev recalled his mandatory training on the Boeing 707 at the company headquarters several years earlier. The certification training was eight hours long. After six hours, the company instructor told Bar-Lev he was cleared to fly and wondered if he had any other

questions. He did. He wanted to know the outer limits of the plane's capacity. The instructor, a Korean War vet, walked him through some of the maneuvers and explained that the passenger plane was very strong and could endure more than it would seem at first glance.

The plane began to plummet, dropping 10,000 feet in a minute

Bar-Lev told Kol, the air marshal, to hold on tight. He was going to throw the plane into a dive. The negative g-force, akin to the feeling one gets on the downhill section of a roller coaster ride, would accomplish two things: it would lower the plane's altitude, reducing the pressure difference between the inside and outside of the plane, which would make a bullet hole or a grenade explosion less dangerous; and it would throw the hijackers off their feet. The passengers, he said, were all belted in and would be fine.

Bar-Lev lifted the nose of the aircraft, dipped one of the wings, and then tilted the nose down to earth. The plane began to plummet, dropping 10,000 feet in a minute. When he pulled out of the dive, Kol charged through the door and killed Argüello.

The second terrorist, Leila Khaled, a Palestinian veteran of previous skyjackings, rolled a grenade forward but it didn't explode. In her memoir, Bar-Lev said, Khaled claimed to have been violently subdued, but the air marshals found her passed out from the dive and quickly arrested her.

"The whole thing took two and a half minutes," Bar-Lev said.

But it was far from over. Three other planes, in what Bar-Lev called a more complex attack than 9-11, had been hijacked. The two men carrying Senegalese passports had commandeered a Pan Am flight and flown it to Egypt. TWA and Swiss Air flights were flown to Jordan. The Shin Bet, via an El Al dispatcher, sent Bar-Lev a terse command: About face. Come home.

On board he had two armed Shin Bet officers — Kol, and a second agent who was at the back of the plane — plus a dead man and an internationally wanted terrorist. Pivotaly, though, he also learned that Shlomo Vider, the chief flight attendant, had charged the hijackers and been shot several times. Before responding to the Shin Bet's orders — Bar-Lev didn't know and wasn't told about the other hijackings — he called for a doctor to come forward and examine Vider. The most qualified person was a dentist. He ruled that Vider was in stable condition. "I didn't think so, though," said Bar-Lev. Vider was pale and though he had been shot, he didn't seem to be bleeding out, raising concerns about internal bleeding.

Bar-Lev told Tel Aviv that Vider didn't have five hours left in him. He was going to request permission to land in London.

Headquarters again ordered him to return to Israel, but Bar-Lev contacted the British authorities and began to descend. En route, he heard the voice of an El Al pilot preparing to

take off from Heathrow to Israel. "I told him to switch to the internal frequency," Bar-Lev said.

Speaking quickly and in Hebrew, he told the other pilot the situation and the plan: he would land near him. In the commotion, no one would notice if the two armed Shin Bet marshals slipped through the flight engineer's maintenance door between the wheels and quickly boarded the Israel-bound plane in the same way. The last thing he needed was for the two to be arrested by the local authorities and possibly charged for killing Argüello.

He insisted that he had simply flown the plane throughout and did not know how the Nicaraguan terrorist had died

Bar-Lev had good reason for concern. In February 1969 a Shin Bet air marshal named Mordechai Rachamim had fought off a squad of terrorists attacking an El Al plane in Zurich. After jumping out of the airplane door under fire, apprehending three of the terrorists and killing the fourth, the Swiss authorities, before finally exonerating him, first put him on trial for manslaughter.

After Bar-Lev slowed the plane to a stop, the crew welcomed an emergency British medical team on board. Vider, he later learned, reached the local hospital an estimated five minutes from death. But when Bar-Lev tried to close the door and head back to Tel Aviv, several armed agents from the British secret services drew their sidearms and said, "Do not shut that door. You are on the soil of Great Britain."

Bar-Lev and the rest of the crew were taken for interrogation. Asked what he told the British authorities, he said, "I told them nothing." He insisted that he had simply flown the plane throughout and did not know how the Nicaraguan terrorist had died.

An El Al security officer, in the meanwhile, printed tickets for the two Shin Bet air marshals who had slipped onto the Israel-bound flight and, after going through the passenger list repeatedly, the British authorities were forced to let the plane take off.

Bar-Lev and the crew were released the following day. The British authorities knew they were lying but could find no proof. Leila Khaled remained in the United Kingdom. She was let out of British custody three weeks later, after a British jet was hijacked on September 9, en route from Bahrain, expressly in order to secure her release.

For Bar-Lev, though, the ordeal was *still* not over. Upon return to Israel, a man he did not recognize took him into a side room and began asking questions: Why had he insisted on bringing the sky marshal into the cockpit? Why had he refused a direct order to return to Tel Aviv? Why had he dismissed the dentist's assessment?

The next day, El Al Director General Mordechai Ben-Ari told him that the Shin Bet would not provide security for Israel's national air carrier so long as he remained an active pilot. Ben-Ari tried to convince him to take a year off, to pacify the Shin Bet, and then return to service.

“In those days, though,” Bar-Lev said, “you could still call the prime minister.”

He phoned Golda Meir and asked to explain his side of the story. After giving his version of events to Meir, Moshe Dayan and the head of the Shin Bet at the time, he was given a two-week holiday and then reinstated, with honors for bravery.

Several months after that, then-transportation minister Shimon Peres helped pass a new law that gave pilots the right to resist hijackings and immunity against foreign lawsuits, such as the one Pan Am filed against Bar-Lev for not alerting the airline to the danger posed by the two Senegalese men and the one the British authorities briefly pursued – to charge Bar-Lev as an accomplice to murder.

Today, though, he said, despite the thousands of deaths caused by airline terror since that day in September 1970, there is still not a consensus among airlines that pilots are part of the inner circle of protection against terror. Lamenting the tragedy of 9/11, and the way 2,977 innocent people were killed by 19 hijackers wielding household objects such as penknives, he said the “formula for prevention” is for the crew to be trained, in mind more than in body, to resist.

“As long as you know you’re not going to allow it to happen, then you’ll find the way,” he said.

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