



Parole for a Terrorist

The man convicted of murdering Robby Stethem is free. German officials from the North Rhine Westphalia state justice ministry have released Mohammed Ali Hamadi, a Lebanese man imprisoned 19 years ago for his part in the 1985 hijacking of a TWA jetliner. Hamadi is known to have savagely beaten at least three of the passengers of TWA Flight 847 during a seventeen-day standoff with international military and law enforcement agencies. One of Hamadi's victims was a twenty-three year-old U.S. Navy diver named Robert Dean Stethem, who was killed on the third day of the ordeal.

On June 14, 1985, Petty Officer Stethem was flying home from an assignment in Greece, when hijackers seized control of the aircraft and ordered the pilot to fly to Beirut, Lebanon. Two days later, Hamadi and his fellow hijackers opened the door of the plane and dumped the young Sailor's body onto the runway of the Beirut airport. Stethem had been blindfolded, beaten beyond recognition, and shot in the head. The nightmare of torture and terror would continue for more than two weeks before the final 39 hostages were released, but — for Robby Stethem — the ordeal was over.

Mohammed Ali Hamadi wasn't captured until 1987, when he was arrested at an airport in Frankfurt, Germany while attempting to smuggle liquid explosives through Customs. His accomplices in the hijacking of Flight 847, Imad Fayez Mugniyeh, Hasan Izz-Al-Din, and Ali Atwa remain at large, and are all on the FBI's list of Most Wanted Terrorists.

At his trial in 1989, Hamadi denied killing Robby Stethem. He blamed the shooting on one of the other hijackers. In all fairness to Mr. Hamadi, it should be noted that none of the hijacking victims actually witnessed him in the act of committing the murder. Several victims remembered seeing Hamadi blindfold Petty Officer Stethem, ridicule him, and beat him viciously. They also remembered seeing Hamadi with the murder weapon in his hand, both immediately before and immediately after the shooting. The plane's flight engineer testified that Hamadi had bragged

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about having killed the young Sailor, but none of the witnesses actually *saw* Hamadi pull the trigger.

Mohammed Ali Hamadi was sentenced to life imprisonment, with no possibility of parole for nineteen years. He became eligible for parole this year, and was apparently released by the very first parole board that reviewed his petition.

The decision to parole Hamadi is causing some friction between Germany and the United States. No one is contesting Germany's right to free the man in accordance with their laws and customs, but Hamadi is under indictment in the United States for air piracy, murder, and other crimes in connection with the hijacking. Officials of the U.S. Department of State were aware that his first parole review was approaching, but had not been informed of the date. They expected to be notified in time to arrange extradition following Hamadi's release from German custody. But the parole review was conducted without notice, and Mohammed Ali Hamadi was released and returned to his native country of Lebanon before our State Department received any word at all.

Now I don't claim to be an expert in international politics or the German system of jurisprudence, but I have to wonder what in the world Hadmadi's parole board could have been thinking. This is a man convicted of piracy, murder, and terrorism by their own courts. This is a man who sorted through the passports of his hostages in order to single out Jewish passengers for special torture. What could have possibly possessed the parole board to commute the sentence of a known terrorist to the bare minimum required by their own courts?

Did Hamadi somehow convince the board that he had mended his ways? I have trouble imagining that they could possibly be naive enough to swallow a jailhouse conversion, no matter how cleverly acted. Surely the officers of the German justice system are intelligent enough to know that prison inmates *routinely* discover religion after the cell door slams shut. Perpetrators of the most hideous crimes are magically transformed into meek little angels when their cases come up for parole review. Even Charles Manson has tried that ploy a time or two, although it hasn't worked for him so far.

Could the parole board have possibly taken Hamadi's life situation into account? His brother, Abbas Ali Hamadi, is currently doing his own stretch in prison for kidnapping a German citizen from a Beirut hotel room shortly after Mohammed Ali Hamadi's arrest. Worried that his brother would be extradited to the United States to stand trial for hijacking and murder, Abbas Ali Hamadi threatened to execute his German hostage if the extradition was approved. Hamadi's known associates are all on international terrorist watch lists. One of them, Imad Fayez Mugniyeh is believed to be the head of the security apparatus for the active terrorist arm of Hezbollah. Can there be any reasonable hope that Mohammed Ali Hamadi will not resume his deadly agenda when he returns to the arms of his family and friends?

Hamadi's associates have come a long way since the hijacking of TWA Flight 847. They've graduated to bombing targets in England, Iraq, Egypt, Spain, and every other country they can get their feelers into. They are in full murderous cry. Is this any time to put a convicted terrorist on the street? I have to ask again, what in the world could those people have been thinking?



Fortunately, Hamadi seems to be in the custody of the Lebanese government, at least for the moment. Lebanon doesn't have an extradition treaty with the United States, so our government is now scrambling to persuade Lebanese officials to hand Hamadi over to U.S. custody. Whether or not that will happen is still anyone's guess. If not, we'll end up searching for him all over again. We've been trying to lay hands on his accomplices for over twenty years, so we may never find him if he's released into the general population.

It's been suggested by the press that the decision to parole Hamadi was an act of retaliation for the CIA's reported use of German territory in transferring suspected terrorists to secret prisons on European soil. It has also been suggested that Hamadi's release could be an oblique political protest against the American abduction of a German citizen, Khaled el-Masri, who was incorrectly identified as a member of Al Qaeda two years ago. I have no idea if either of those rumors is true. I cannot know what was going through the minds of those (as yet) unnamed parole officials when they signed the order to release Hamadi.

I do know that if Hamadi slips through our fingers, there's a good chance that we'll never see him again. We might see his work, the next time an airliner is hijacked or a bomb goes off in a crowded train station. But we probably won't see the man. The grainy old news photos of his face could well be the last glimpses of Hamadi we'll ever see.

There's a certain sort of twisted symmetry in that, because there will never be another photograph taken of Robby Stethem either. The pictures we have of him are all that we'll ever have. We'll never see Robby's wedding photos, or pictures of him cradling his first child in his arms. All of that ended on a runway in Beirut, with a bullet from the gun of a man who now walks free.

I realize that it's probably presumptuous of me to refer to Robert Stethem as 'Robby,' in view of the fact that I never had the pleasure of meeting the man. But I feel a kinship to him that's difficult to explain. Before I retired from active duty, I served my last tour of sea duty aboard USS *Stethem*, the *Arleigh Burke* class guided-missile destroyer named in Robby's honor. I've shaken hands with his mother and father. I stood in ranks with tears leaking onto my dress white uniform the day that Robby's brother, Kenneth, retired from the Navy on the fantail of USS *Stethem*. Like most members of the *Stethem* crew, I almost feel like Robby is a member of my own family. I've stood a thousand hours of watch with his photograph looking over my shoulder. I've heard and told his story a hundred times, and maybe even shared a little of the pain of those who knew and loved him. Somewhere in the middle of all of that, Robert Dean Stethem became my brother in spirit, if not in flesh. His legacy became a part of who I am. And that makes me doubly angry that his killer is about to be free to pick up where he left off.

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