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FOR SPECIAL SERVICES

John Gardner



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THREE ZEROS

Euro air traffic Control Centre, at Maastricht on the Belgian–Dutch border, passed British Airways Flight 12 over to London Control, at West Drayton, just as the aircraft cleared the coast a few miles from Ostend.

Frank Kennen had been on duty for less than ten minutes when he accepted the flight, instructing the Boeing 747 Jumbo to descend from 29,000 feet to 20,000. It was only one of many aircraft showing on his radarscope – a green speck of light, with its corresponding number, 12, together with the aircraft's altitude and heading.

All appeared normal. The flight was entering the final phase of its long haul from Singapore via Bahrain. Kennen automatically began to advise Heathrow approach control that Speedbird 12 was inbound.

His eyes remained on the huge radarscope. Speedbird 12 began its descent, the altitude numbers reducing steadily on the screen. 'Speedbird One-Two cleared to two-o; vector . . .' He stopped in mid-sentence, only vaguely aware of Heathrow approach querying his information. What he now saw on the scope made his stomach turn over. With dramatic suddenness, the indicator numbers 12 – 'squawked' by the Boeing's transponder – flicked off and changed.

Now, instead of the steady green 12 beside the blip, there were three red zeros blinking on and off rapidly.

Three red zeros are the international 'squawk' signal for hijack.

His voice calm, Frank Kennen called up the aircraft. 'Speedbird One-Two you are cleared to two-o. Did you squawk affirmative?'

If there was trouble on board, the wording would sound like a routine exchange. But there was no response.

Thirty seconds passed, and Kennen repeated his question.

Still no response.

Sixty seconds.

Still no response.

Then, ninety-five seconds after the first 'squawk', the three red zeros disappeared from the screen, to be replaced by the familiar 12. In his headset, Kennen heard the captain's voice, and breathed a sigh of relief. 'Speedbird One-Two affirmative squawk. Emergency now over. Please alert Heathrow. We need ambulances and doctor. Several dead and at least one seriously injured on board. Repeat emergency over. May we proceed as instructed? Speedbird One-Two.'

The captain could well have added, 'Emergency over, thanks to Commander Bond.'

2

NINETY SECONDS

A little earlier, James Bond had been reclining, apparently relaxed and at ease, in an aisle seat on the starboard side of the Executive Class area of Flight BA 12.

In fact, Bond was far from relaxed. Behind the drowsy eyes and slumped position, his mind was in top gear, his body poised – wound tight as a spring.

Anyone looking closely would also have seen the strain behind the blue eyes. From the moment James Bond had boarded the flight in Singapore, he was ready for trouble – and even more so following the take-off at Bahrain. After all, he knew the bullion had come aboard at Bahrain. So did the four undercover Special Air Service men, also on the flight, spread tactically through the first, executive, and tourist classes.

It was not simply the tension of this particular trip that was getting to Bond, but the fact that Flight BA 12 from Singapore was his third long-haul journey, made as an anti-hijack guard, in as many weeks. The duty, shared with members of the SAS, had come following the recent appalling spate of hijackings that had taken place on aircraft from a dozen countries.

No single terrorist organisation had claimed responsibility, but the major airlines were already suffering from a shrinkage in passengers. Panic was spreading, even though companies – and, indeed, governments – had poured soothing words into the ears of the general travelling public.

In each recent case, the hijackers had been ruthless. Deaths

among both passengers and crew were the norm. Some of the hijacked aircraft had been ordered to fly to remote airfields hidden in dangerous, often mountainous, European areas. There had been one case of a 747, instructed to make a descent near the Swiss Bernese Alps, on to a makeshift runway hidden away in a high valley. The result was catastrophic, ending with no recognisable bodies – not even those of the hijackers.

In some cases, after safe landings, the booty had been offloaded and taken away in small aircraft, while the original target was burned or destroyed by explosives. In every case, the slightest interference, or hesitation, had brought sudden death – to crew members, passengers, and even children.

The worst incident, to date, was the theft of easily movable jewels, worth two million sterling. Having got their hands on the metal cases containing the gems, the hijackers ordered a descent and then parachuted from the aircraft. Even as the passengers must have been breathing sighs of relief, the aeroplane had been blown from the sky by a remote control device.

Major United States carriers, and British Airways had borne the brunt of the attacks; so, following this last harrowing incident – some six weeks before – both governments had arranged for secret protection on all possible targets.

The last two trips in which Bond had participated had proved uneventful. This time he experienced that sixth sense telling him that danger was at hand.

First, on boarding at Singapore, he had spotted four possible suspects. These four men, smartly dressed, expensive, and carrying the trappings of commuting businessmen, were seated in the executive area: two on the port side of the centre section, to Bond's left; the other two forward – about five rows in front of him. All had that distinctive military bearing yet stayed quiet, as though at pains not to draw attention to themselves.

Then, at Bahrain, the trouble had come aboard – almost $2 billion worth of gold, currency and diamonds – and three young men and a girl embarked. They smelled of violence – the girl,

dark-haired, good-looking, but hard as a rock; the three men, swarthy, fit, with the compact movements of trained soldiers.

On one of his seemingly casual walkabouts, Bond had marked their seat positions. Like the suspect businessmen, they sat in pairs, but behind him, in the tourist section.

Bond and the SAS men were of course armed, Bond with a new pair of throwing knives, balanced perfectly and well-honed, developed from the Sykes-Fairbairn commando dagger. One was in his favourite position, strapped to the inside of the left forearm, the other sheathed, horizontally, across the small of his back. He also carried the highly-restricted revolver developed by an internationally reliable firm for use during in-flight emergencies.

This weapon is a small, smooth bore .38 with cartridges containing a minimal charge. The projectile is a fragmentation bullet – lethal at a few feet only, for its velocity is spent quickly, so that the bullet disintegrates in order to avoid penetration of an airframe, or the metal skin of an aircraft.

The SAS men were similarly armed and had undergone extensive training, but Bond remained unhappy about any kind of revolver being on board. A shot too close to the sides, or a window, could still possibly cause a serious depressurisation problem. He would always stick with the knives, using the revolver only if really close up to his target, and by 'close' he meant two feet.

The giant 747 banked slightly, and Bond registered the slight change in pitch from the engines, signalling the start of their descent. Probably somewhere just off the Belgian coast, he judged, his eyes roaming around the cabin, watching and waiting.

A statuesque blonde stewardess, who had been much in evidence during the flight, was passing a pair of soft-drink cans to two of the businessmen a few rows in front of Bond. He saw her face and in a flash sensed something was wrong. Her fixed smile had gone, and she was bending unusually low, whispering to the men.

Automatically Bond glanced to his left, towards the other pair of neatly-dressed men. In the seconds that his mind had focused on the stewardess, the two other men had disappeared.

Turning his head, Bond saw one of them, carrying what looked to be a can of beer, standing behind him in the aisle near the small galley at the rear of the executive class section. By this time, the stewardess had gone into the forward galley.

As Bond started to move, everything began to happen.

The man behind him pulled the ring on his beer can, tossing it down the aisle. As it rolled, dense smoke started to fill the cabin.

The two men, forward, were now out of their seats, and Bond caught sight of the stewardess back in the aisle, this time with something in her hand. On the far side, he glimpsed the fourth businessman, also hurling a smoke canister as he began to run forward.

Bond was on his feet and turning. His nearest target – the man in the aisle behind him – hesitated for a vital second. The knife appeared in Bond's right hand as though by some practised legerdemain, held down, thumb forward, in the classic fighting pose. The hijacker did not know what hit him, only a sudden rip of pain and surprise as Bond's dagger slid home just below the heart.

The whole cabin was now full of smoke and panic. Bond shouted for passengers to remain seated. He heard similar cries from the SAS men in the tourist class, and forward, in the first and so-called 'penthouse suite'. Then there were two small explosions, recognisable as airguard revolver shots, followed by the more sinister heavy bang of a normal weapon.

Holding his breath in the choking fog of smoke, Bond headed for the executive class galley. From there he knew it would be possible to cross to the port side and negotiate the spiral stairway to the 'penthouse' and flight deck. There were still at least three hijackers left, possibly four.

On reaching the galley, he knew there were only three. The stewardess, still clutching a Model II Ingram submachine gun, in

the swirl of smoke, lay sprawled on her back, her chest ripped away by a close-range shot from one of the airguard revolvers.

Still holding his breath, knife at his side, Bond sidestepped the body, oblivious to the screams and coughing of terrified passengers throughout the aircraft. Above the noise came a loud, barked order from overhead 'Orange One. Orange One', the signal, from an SAS man, that the main assault was taking place on, or near, the flight deck.

At the foot of the spiral staircase, Bond dodged another body, one of the SAS team, unconscious and with a nasty shoulder wound. Then, from the short turn in the spiral, he spotted the crouched figure of one of the businessmen raising an Ingram, shoulder stock extended.

Bond's arm curved back, and the knife flickered through the air, so razor-sharp that it slid into the man's throat from the rear like an oversized hypodermic. The hijacker did not even cry out as blood spurted in a hose-like jet from his severed carotid artery.

Crouching low, Bond clambered, cat-silent, to the body, using it as a shield to peer into the upper area of the aircraft.

The door to the flight deck was open. Just inside, one of the 'businessmen', a submachine gun in his hands, was giving instructions to the crew, while his back-up man faced outwards from the doorway, the now familiar Ingram – capable of inflicting a great deal of damage at a fire rate of 1,200 rounds per minute – swinging in a lethal arc of readiness. Behind the upper galley bulkhead, some six feet from where the hijackers stood, one of the SAS men crouched, airguard revolver clutched close to his body.

Bond looked across at the SAS man and they exchanged signals: the teams had worked together over a hard and concentrated week at Bradbury Lines, 22 SAS Regiment's base near Hereford. In very short order, both men understood what they had to do.

Bond edged to one side of the slumped man on the narrow stairway, his hand reaching for the knife sheathed to his back.

One deep breath, then the nod to the SAS man who leaped forward, firing as he went.

The hijacker guard, alerted by Bond's movement, swung his Ingram towards the stairwell as two bullets from the SAS air-guard revolver caught him in the throat. He was neither lifted nor spun by the impact. He simply toppled forward, dead before he hit the ground.

As he fell, the hijacker on the flight deck whirled around. Bond's arm moved back. The throwing knife spun, twinkling and straight as a kingfisher to carve into the hijacker's chest.

The Ingram fell to the deck. Then Bond and the SAS man, moving as one, were on the hijacker, frisking and feeling for hidden weapons or grenades. The wounded man gasped for air, his hands scrabbling for the knife, eyes rolling, and an horrific croaking rattle coming from the bloodstained lips.

'All over,' Bond shouted at the aircraft's captain, hoping that it was, indeed, all over. Almost ninety seconds had passed since the first smoke bomb exploded.

'I'll check below,' he called to the SAS man who knelt over the wounded hijacker.

Down in the main section of the aircraft, the smoke had almost cleared, and Bond grinned cheerfully at a white-faced senior stewardess. 'Get them calmed down', he told her. 'It's okay.' He patted her arm, then told her not to go near the executive class forward galley.

He went himself, pushing people away, firmly ordering passengers back to their seats. He covered the dead stewardess's body with a coat.

The two remaining SAS men had, rightly, remained in the rear of the aircraft, covering any back-up action which might have been laid on by the terrorists. Walking the length of the Boeing, James Bond had to smile to himself. The three tough-looking young men and the girl who had become his suspects when boarding at Bahrain looked even more pale and shaken than their fellow passengers.

As he mounted the spiral staircase again, the quiet tones of the purser came through the interphone system, advising passengers that they would shortly be landing at London Heathrow and apologising for what he called 'the unscheduled unpleasantness'.

The SAS officer shook his head as Bond emerged into the penthouse suite. The hijacker who had been the target for Bond's second knife was now laid out over two spare seats, his body covered with plastic sheeting. 'No way,' the SAS officer said. 'Lasted only a few minutes.'

Bond asked if the man had regained consciousness.

'Just at the end. Tried to speak.'

'Oh?'

'Couldn't make head or tail of it myself.'

Bond urged him to remember.

'Well . . . Well, he seemed to be trying to say something. It was very indistinct, though. Sounded like "inspector". He was rattling and coughing up blood, but the last part certainly sounded like that.'

James Bond became silent. He took a nearby seat for the landing. As the 747 came whining in, flaps fully extended and the spoilers lifting as the aeroplane rolled out, touching down gently on runway 28R, he pondered the hijacker's last words. No, he thought, it was too far-fetched, an obsession out of his past. *Inspector. In . . . spector.* Forget about the 'In'.

Was it possible after all this time?

He closed his eyes briefly. The long flight and the sudden, bloody action at the end must have scrambled his brains. The founder, Ernst Stavro Blofeld was dead beyond a doubt, SPECTRE as an organised unit had expired with Blofeld. But who could tell? The original organisation spanned the world and, at one time, had its fingers into practically every major crime syndicate, as well as most of the police forces, security and secret intelligence services, in the so-called civilised world.

Inspector. In . . . spector. SPECTRE, his old enemy, the Special

Executive for Counterintelligence, Terrorism, Revenge and Extortion. Was it possible that a new SPECTRE had risen, like some terrible mutated phoenix, to haunt them in the 1980s?

The 747's engines cut off. The bell-like signal told the passengers to disembark.

Yes. James Bond decided it was highly possible.