

# **Egyptian raid on Larnaca International Airport**

On February 19, 1978 Egyptian special forces raided Larnaca International Airport, Larnaca, Cyprus in an attempt to intervene in a hijacking. Earlier, two assassins had killed the prominent Egyptian newspaper editor Yusuf Sibai and then rounded up as hostages several Arabs who were attending a convention in Nicosia. As Cypriot forces were trying to negotiate with the hostage-takers at the airport, Egyptian troops launched their own assault without authorization from the Cypriots. The unauthorized raid led to the Egyptians and the Cypriots exchanging gunfire, killing or injuring more than 20 of the Egyptian commandos. As a result, Egypt and Cyprus severed political ties for several years after the incident.

## **Hijacking**

In the late hours of February 18, 1978 Yusuf Sibai, editor of a prominent Egyptian newspaper and a friend of the Egyptian President, Anwar Sadat, was assassinated by two gunmen at a convention being held at the Nicosia Hilton. The two assassins rounded up 16 Arab convention delegates as hostages (among them, two P.L.O. representatives and one Egyptian national) and demanded transportation to Larnaca International Airport. They also demanded and were supplied with a Cyprus Airways DC-8 aircraft.

Following negotiations with the Cypriot authorities, the hijackers were allowed to fly the aircraft out of Cyprus with 11 hostages and four crew members. The aircraft, however, was denied permission to land in Djibouti, Syria and Saudi Arabia. It was therefore forced to return and land in Cyprus a few hours later.

According to a report in 'Time' magazine, Sadat was aggrieved by the assassination of his personal friend and begged the Cypriot President, Spyros Kyprianou to rescue the hostages and extradite the terrorists to Cairo. The Cypriot President responded by promising to oversee the rescue operation and any negotiations personally, and travelled to the airport himself. According to the same report however, Sadat dispatched an elite anti-terrorism unit (Task Force 777) to Cyprus aboard a Lockheed C-130 Hercules transport aircraft. Cairo merely informed Kyprianou that "*people are on the way to help rescue the hostages*" and did not reveal who was on board nor what their intentions were.

Upon landing in Cyprus, the Egyptian force immediately launched an all out assault, dispatching a single Jeep all-terrain vehicle with three men to race ahead of an estimated 58 troops (another report stated the figure as being 74) moving towards the hijacked aircraft on foot.

### **Egyptian raid**

As the Egyptian troops advanced towards the hijacked DC-8 aircraft and the Cypriot National Guard forces who surrounded it, the Cypriot forces reportedly issued a single verbal warning to halt and submit, though in other reports, the Cypriots issued two verbal warnings, the second a demand for the Egyptians to return to their aircraft. As this occurred, the occupants of the Jeep and the Cypriot National Guardsmen exchanged gunfire, and the Egyptian Jeep was struck by a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) as well as gunfire, killing all three occupants. As the vehicle came to a halt, the Cypriots and the main Egyptian force confronted each other at a range of less than 300 metres and it is variously reported that the Egyptians, who lacked any form of cover, dropped down onto

the tarmac in the prone 'firing position'. At this moment, the two forces engaged each other with heavy gunfire, and the Cypriots opened fire on the Egyptian C-130H aircraft with a 106 mm anti-tank missile, striking it in the nose and killing all three crew on board.

With their aircraft destroyed, the Egyptian force and the Cypriot National Guard exchanged heavy gunfire for nearly an hour in sporadic fighting on the open tarmac. Some of the Egyptian troops took cover in a nearby empty Air France aircraft.

Cypriot President Spyros Kyprianou, who was watching the events unfolding from the airport control tower, was forced to withdraw from the windows and take cover as Egyptian commandos struck the tower with automatic gunfire.