

Hijack survivor retraces drama

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Jackie Nink Pflug, an American woman who survived being shot in the head and thrown off a plane in the Egypt Air hijack at Luqa Airport 20 years ago, leaves Malta today after her first visit following the hijack.

During her time here, which she wanted to spend away from the glare of the media, she has met several people who had lived through those horrendous moments.

In fact, yesterday she had an emotional encounter with Lawrence Zrinzo, the neurosurgeon who carried out a life-saving operation to remove a bullet from her head, and Sylvia Zrinzo, Mr Zrinzo's wife, who then was a radiologist at St Luke's Hospital.

Mrs Pflug visited Park 4 at the airport, where the ill-fated Boeing was parked after it was forced to land in Malta in November 1985. She also visited the control tower where she spoke to one of the controllers who was on duty during that terrifying drama.

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Jackie Pflug, who was shot in the head during the ill-fated Egypt Air hijack 20 years ago, with Lawrence Zrinzo, the neurosurgeon who saved her life.
Photo: Matthew Mirabelli

'Thanks for your part in saving my life'

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She also visited St Luke's, where she was shown the ITU and the ward she was in while receiving treatment. Later on in the morning she visited the Department of Health, where she met John Cachia, Medical Superintendent, and Charles Messina, the hospital's administrator at the time. She also met Dennis Vella Baldacchino, who then was a medical student at the Casualty Department.

She talked to various police and former police officers who were on duty during the hijack, including former Supt Charles Cassar and Supt Raymond Zammit, who then formed part of the Special Mobile Unit and who had concealed themselves under the hijacked plane.

Another of her encounters was with Forensic Inspector John Ellul, who had gone to Washington to testify against Ali Rezaq, the hijacker who had survived the storming of the plane by Egyptian commandos.

There were 96 people on board the ill-fated plane, including the crew. Fifty-six people died in what was supposed to be a rescue operation,

two from bullet wounds and 54 from smoke inhalation.

The hijackers had shot five passengers before the plane was stormed. As each passenger was shot, they were thrown off the plane, but three miraculously survived both their injuries and the fall.

At The Times newsroom, Mrs Pflug met Michael Testa, who was one of the reporters who had covered the dreadful event and who recalled seeing the hijackers shooting hostages and pushing them off the aircraft.

Mrs Pflug was visibly moved during most of her encounters. Tears rolled freely down her face as she uttered "thanks for your part in saving my life", whenever she met someone who played a role in the hijack drama.

"I knew I would be back one day but I did not know it would be so wonderful," she said.

She listened attentively as Mr Zrinzo answered her questions about the operation he had performed on her.

Mrs Pflug was accompanied by Supt Pierre Calleja, who has trained in negotiation techniques.

Now a motivational speaker, she lectures on boosting morale and inspiration in people.



Jackie Pflug discussing details of the hijack with The Times journalist Michael Testa.