

Thank you God, thank you Malta

JACKIE PFLUG is no ordinary American tourist. A survivor of the Egyptair hijacking at Luqa airport in 1985, her visit to Malta has particular significance. Charlot Zahra caught up with her before she left the island

Jackie Pflug is very happy to be back in Malta

Almost 21 years ago, she was lying in a hospital bed in St Luke's Hospital fighting for her life after she was shot by a hijacker at Luqa Airport.

On Saturday, 23 November 1985, Ms Pflug was flying to Cairo from Athens where she had attended a volleyball tournament with a group of students

At the time, she was a special education teacher at the Cairo American School. Ten minutes into EgyptAir Flight No MS 648, three men calling themselves The Egypt Revolution, hijacked the flight.

A gun battle ensued when the terrorists took control of the plane at an altitude of 35,000 feet. The plane, with 91 passengers and six crew members on board, was forced to land at Luqa Airport.

The hijackers began to execute one passenger every 15 minutes until their demands for fuel were met. Like four passengers before her, Ms Pflug was shot at point blank range, thrown from the plane onto the tarmac and left for dead.

For five hours, she drifted in and out of consciousness until an airport ground crew picked up her body to take to the morgue and discovered she was still alive. Fifty-nine passengers died in that terrible disaster.

Ms Pflug spoke to The Malta Independent on Sunday about her life since the hijacking 21 years ago.

I was in hospital here for two weeks, after which I was transferred to Germany to recuperate in an army hospital there and later flown back to the United States.

I lost a lot of my vision after being shot in the head, my short-term memory was heavily impaired, and I started having epileptic fits

Some 20 years later, I have come into myself and accepted the hijacking.

For the last 10 years it was about healing and coming back, trying to find the meaning of life. I was grieving, having a hard time with nightmares and things like that. Now I am a happy, happy woman. I'm married and have a little boy, she said.

Ms Pflug said she has longed to return to the island.

It's been my dream for the past 20 years to come back to Malta to say thank you to those who saved my life. This is not a trip of sadness but a trip of happiness. We went to the airport on Monday and to the control tower where everything happened.

I even sat down on the runway where the plane had been parked and said a prayer of



thanksgiving to God. I also met the people who were there that day, she said.

Initially, she was bitter about the whole experience, but then her outlook changed.

You know that's kind of part of the whole healing process. The bitterness and the anger were always directed at the hijackers, never at Malta or Egypt. It was just the hijackers and what they did to me. The last 20 years was all about that.

I just wanted to come back, not to talk about my hijacking experience or my experience as a hostage in those two days, because that's not what this trip is about for me.

I've done plenty of those interviews back in the United States. I wanted to come back and do interviews about forgiveness and acceptance, say to those Maltese people who were involved thank you from the bottom of my heart, Ms Pflug said.

Neither is she bitter about Malta

Oh gosh no. I never was bitter about Malta, despite the fact that I think the Maltese people believe that. I was bitter about the people who hijacked the aircraft, I was mad at them. I was never mad at anyone else other than the people who had taken us hostage.

In my opinion, I think the Maltese did a good job, the best they could do... they were

just in the middle of it all. So I wanted to come back and give thanks, and I'm full of happiness. It's my honour to be here and it is my gift from God to be here, she said.

Ms Pflug was unable to return to her job after the hijack.

I am a teacher by profession. At the time I was teaching at the Cairo American school, and had taught in the United States and Norway before that.

When I returned to the United States I couldn't go back to teaching. I lost a lot after being shot in the head, so I started a new career.

I am a motivational speaker now. That's someone who inspires people. I go to different companies, businesses and associations to talk about my experience. I talk about the hijacking for the first 15 minutes, and then I talk about lessons learnt and forgiveness. So that's my job now, and I love it, she said.

Ms Pflug learnt a couple of good lessons from her hijacking experience.

Oh, it's lessons for myself like being patient with others and not taking life for granted. I think when people go through times like this, tragic times when you're part of a tragedy, they come out with more love for life and faith. My mother, who died at the age of 99, a year before

the hijacking, always told me: Remember, good always comes from what appears to be bad. And it has for me good has come from something so terrible.

Has Ms Pflug forgiven the hijackers?

As far as the hijackers are concerned, I have taken the initiative to make sure that the surviving hijacker, Omar Mohammed Rezaq, will stay in prison. Well, forgiveness is not saying what you did to me is okay. Forgiveness is about letting go and moving on, accepting and taking responsibility for my life.

So when I got shot in the head, I was not responsible for that act. I couldn't help him shooting me in the head but I

could help what I would feel afterwards, how I'm going to treat others and how to act towards them, she told The Malta Independent on Sunday.

Jackie Pflug has published a book about her experience, Miles to Go Before I Sleep: A Survivor's Story of Life After a Terrorist Hijacking. It can be ordered from her website, www.jackiepflug.com

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