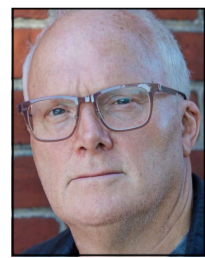


Saddam Hussein used its passengers – and this five-year-old British boy – as human shields. Now a damning new book by a top investigative journalist asks ...

Was Flight 149 allowed to land in a war zone because it was carrying a secret squad of British Special Forces?

By **STEPHEN DAVIS**



AS HE was stuck in traffic on the M3 driving to work at Heathrow, Clive Earthy, a British Airways cabin services director, was filled with a sense of foreboding as he listened to the news. Having flown long-haul for more than 20 years, he was used to dealing with passengers freaking out, drunkenness, fights, even sudden deaths. He had flown through vicious storms and landed in places that he would not choose to visit for a holiday.

However, he was concerned by the news that Iraqi troops were on the border with Kuwait – the Arab emirate where his next flight was due to stop en route to India and Malaysia.

Nevertheless, Clive joined 17 other crew and 367 passengers of numerous nationalities for Flight 149 to Kuala Lumpur on August 1, 1990.

Aware of a widespread anxiety, he announced over the aircraft's PA system that they had been assured by the Government that 'it was safe to fly to Kuwait' and that if there were any problems, the flight would be diverted.

The passengers breathed sighs of relief. Some even clapped. Just before the doors closed, there were two sets of late arrivals. A high-ranking member of the Kuwaiti royal family and then nine or ten muscular, clean-cut young men who took seats at the rear. One passenger recalled that they had a military bearing.

Flight 149 took off at 7.04pm. A few hours later, as the 747 flew across the Mediterranean, Captain Richard Brunyate received a message from another BA pilot flying in the opposite direction. Everything at Kuwait airport was normal. That, though, was not true. Other Kuwait-bound flights were being turned away, warned that Kuwait City airport was closed 'for security reasons'.

IRAQI tanks and support vehicles had moved along the border with Kuwait for as far as the eye could see and gunboats had launched a barrage of explosives.

At 3am Kuwait time on August 2, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's foreign policy adviser, Charles Powell, phoned her at a conference in Aspen, Colorado, to tell her that Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait.

At 4.13am, BA Flight 149 touched down in Kuwait City and the rest is history: Iraqi troops seized the passengers and crew, holding them hostage, only releasing them five months later. Many later suffered post-traumatic stress.

At the time, I was working for a Sunday newspaper in London and was told by a contact that I should investigate the real story.

In doing so over many years, I have listened to a young woman describe how she repeatedly tried to take her life because she never recovered from her ordeal in captivity. I heard a former flight attendant talk of his lifelong battle with crippling fear that ultimately ended his career, and encountered harrowing tales of rapes, assaults, mock executions and near-starvation.

I also learned that weeks earlier, in London and Washington, top-level security briefings had warned that Saddam was likely to invade.

Normally, life for the emirate's summer population of about 15,000 Westerners was a paradise with good, tax-free pay.

However, there was a long dispute between Kuwait and Iraq over lucrative oilfields that straddled their border, overshadowed by a fear that Saddam might threaten the oilfields of nearby Saudi Arabia, so vital to the world's economies. If that happened, Mrs Thatcher was apparently prepared to authorise the use of a tactical nuclear weapon on the battlefield.

It was judged too late to stop Saddam's attack on Kuwait but Western governments had to ensure his invasion did not succeed. So a hand-picked group of men – some military, others employed by the Government in more unofficial roles – was to be sent into Kuwait before the invasion started. They would liaise with a Kuwaiti resistance network, report back on troop movements, fuel supply dumps and military storage depots, and direct air strikes to destroy them.

Detailed discussions had taken place about the best way to get the team into Kuwait. It had to be fast and reliable and avoid border crossings and checkpoints. It was decided to fly direct to Kuwait. The choice was BA Flight 149.

When the jet landed, the young military-looking passengers left

quickly and quietly. Most of the remaining travellers chose not to disembark and dozed as cleaners boarded the plane.

As 12-year-old Jennifer Chappell, who had been flying to India where her father worked, stared out at the darkened airport from her window seat, three fighter planes came into view, flying fast and very low. There was a loud bang. The whole 231ft length of the 747 shook violently. People jumped up from their seats, jostled

each other and shouted: 'Get out! Get out!'

With 57,000 gallons of aviation fuel, the aircraft was a sitting duck as the Iraqis strafed the runway. One hit could have turned it into a giant bomb.

Passengers and crew ran for the terminals as bombs exploded close by.

In the distance, tanks and infantry could be seen. Iraqi forces were surrounding the airport. The passengers were stranded on a

battlefield. Iraqi military quickly took charge, loading everyone on to buses and taking them to nearby hotels.

When BA stewardess Nikki Love opened the curtains of her room in the Regency Palace Hotel, she was spotted by Iraqi soldiers who made a hanging-by-the-throat gesture.

When another stewardess checked under the seats of a bus for BA passengers' belongings, she was blocked by an Iraqi soldier with an AK-47.

He grabbed her, tore at her clothes and raped her.

Fellow steward Tahel Daher heard the struggle and shouted at the soldier to stop. 'He is just having fun,' replied another soldier. 'Fun? This is fun? Raping a girl?' Daher yelled at the man.

After an Iraqi officer arrived and was told by BA purser Clive Earthy what had happened, he asked the stewardess to identify the soldier, who was then hauled away towards

the beach. Minutes later, shots rang out and he was executed.

Some detainees wanted to make a run for it before the Iraqis sealed the border. Others argued that they should all stay in the hope that they would be freed.

Meanwhile, as relatives and friends of the hostages became increasingly anxious, the UK Government remained adamant: don't worry, everyone was being looked after – most in luxury hotels. Journalists who asked why the plane had been allowed to land in Kuwait were told it had arrived well before the invasion had started and it was just 'bad luck' that it had been caught on the ground.

In truth, life for the hostages was increasingly grim. A handful of BA staff, including Capt Brunyate, escaped to a Kuwaiti safe house. For the rest, Iraqi troops ordered them to prepare to leave their hotel: destination unknown.

By now, politicians in London and



PROPAGANDA: Saddam with young Stuart Lockwood. Left: The wreckage of Flight 149 in Kuwait

Washington were trying to establish if the invasion was the endgame or whether an attack on Saudi Arabia was the ultimate objective, giving Saddam a stranglehold over the West's economies.

At this point, a member of a wealthy Saudi family met Kuwait's defence secretary to propose a jihad against the Iraqis. The man, who had fought with the mujahideen in Afghanistan, claimed he could raise an army of 100,000 holy warriors to drive the Iraqis out.

But when the offer was declined, the Saudi – a man named Osama Bin Laden – stormed out of the meeting. When he discovered that a US offer of military support had been accepted, he vowed revenge. On September 11, 2001, he proved to be a man of his word.

Within two weeks of Saddam's invasion, Westerners – those from Flight 149 and long-term Kuwait residents – were scattered all over: to Iraq as human shields; under siege at the US Embassy; driven to Baghdad in convoys; hiding in Kuwait City; or in camps under guard by Iraqi soldiers.

At one camp in the Kuwaiti desert, some hostages tuned to the BBC World Service and each night heard reports of the huge build-up of Allied forces. There was going

to be another Middle East war and they were right in the middle of it.

Then, a broadcast carried some good news. Saddam was going to let all the women and children leave and return home. But the remaining hostages were to be placed at strategic locations to prevent Allied bombing of targets in Kuwait and in Iraq, at nuclear, chemical, industrial and military installations.

BA steward Charles Kristiansen was taken to the Mohammed Salih

‘After the jet landed, young military-looking men left quickly and quietly’

missile base 40 miles from Baghdad, a prime target for an Allied air raid. He and fellow captives were told that if they attempted to escape, they would be shot.

At one camp in Basra, a senior member of Saddam's ruling Ba'ath party, who hated Westerners, took four hostages away at night,

forced them to kneel by a trench and lined his men up behind them.

They heard the sound of weapons being loaded. But no shots rang out: it was a mock execution. The traumatised men were taken back to camp.

Several people were paraded on television in a propaganda operation. A low point was a staged meeting between 25 hostages, some from Flight 149, and Saddam Hussein himself. The dictator called over five-year-old Briton Stuart Lockwood, whose father worked in the oil industry.

Dressed in shorts, Stuart was a picture of innocence. An outraged world television audience saw Saddam pat the little boy on the head as he glanced at his parents and then nervously folded and unfolded his arms.

Later, away from the cameras, another British child kicked Saddam hard in the ankle. The dictator demanded to know who his parents were. But there was no reply, and the child and his family lived to tell the tale.

By December, Iraq had 200,000 troops in Kuwait, well dug in and prepared to repel invaders. Facing them was George Bush's coalition of forces from the West and Arab countries that was eventually to

fied as a man who ran a private security company in East Anglia.

An SAS contact called Pete Warne in Hereford, home of the SAS, explained there had been a secret military team on the 747, working for an ultra-secret group called the Inc, run by MI6. And last year, Anthony Paice, the MI6 officer based at the British Embassy in Kuwait at the time, broke cover by saying he thought the Inc mission had been ordered by Mrs Thatcher with the approval of her friend Lord King, the then BA chairman.

Many passengers and crew from Flight 149 never recovered from their ordeal. Some suffered long-term health problems or needed psychiatric treatment. There have been suicides and attempted suicides. More than half of the hostages lost their jobs or homes.

Jennifer Chappell had been an outgoing 12-year-old with a good school record, but the ordeal led to years of psychological problems

‘You can't tell me they didn't know what was going on – we were used’

and counselling. She tried to kill herself several times. 'It is something I'm still dealing with,' she told me. 'We deserve answers, real answers from BA and our Government. You can't tell me they didn't know what was going on before they sent that plane in. I think we were used.'

The BA 747 was destroyed by US fighter planes at the request of the British. Was this to hide the embarrassment of an 'own goal' or was it to cover up something else? All the tools in the London and Washington governments' arsenal have been used to suppress the truth – from non-denial denials to the obscuring of dates and timelines.

But the cover-up has always rested on shaky foundations and, one by one, the planks have been knocked down.

The world of 1990 was one in which it was easier to hide the truth. There were no mobile phones to photograph or live-stream events, no social media to contradict official statements. It was a world before Putin and Trump, in which it was still possible to believe that Western democracies would not go to war on the basis of misused intelligence, or that leaders would not lie to their citizens.

But after 30 years, it is outrageous the truth has been suppressed for so long and so many lies have been told. It is unforgivable that the story of the human shields – victims of a mass hostage-taking who endured months of terror and decades of suffering – has been covered up.

And then there is the biggest lie of all – that the threat of an Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia justified putting American troops on Saudi soil, foreshadowing death and destruction in the Middle East that have bedevilled us all for three decades.

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● *Operation Trojan Horse*, by Stephen Davis, is published by John Blake (Bonnier) at £20. To order a copy for £16.14, go to mailshop.co.uk/books or call 020 3308 9193 before August 2. Free UK delivery on orders over £20.