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MAGIC

103 WAYS TO MAKE CHRISTMAS SPECIAL AGAIN



BBC www.allabouteve.co.uk

September 1970: three hijacked aircraft are blown up by
At the centre of it all is 26-year-old Leila Khaled, dubbed
On the 30th anniversary of



Palestinian guerrillas at Dawson's Field, Jordan. 'The Hijack Queen' by the world's media. Dawson's Field, how does she feel about it all?

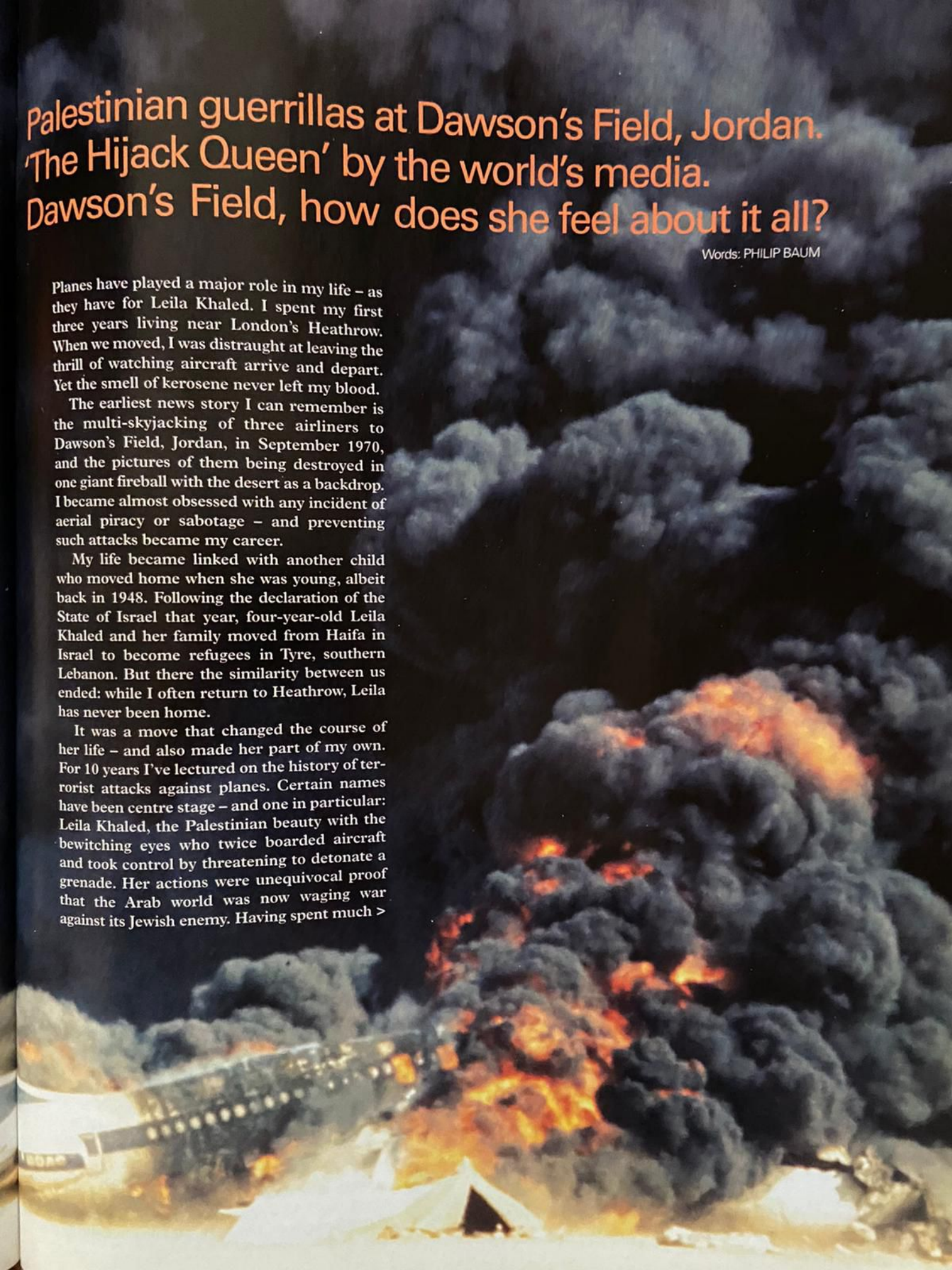
Words: PHILIP BAUM

Planes have played a major role in my life – as they have for Leila Khaled. I spent my first three years living near London's Heathrow. When we moved, I was distraught at leaving the thrill of watching aircraft arrive and depart. Yet the smell of kerosene never left my blood.

The earliest news story I can remember is the multi-skyjacking of three airliners to Dawson's Field, Jordan, in September 1970, and the pictures of them being destroyed in one giant fireball with the desert as a backdrop. I became almost obsessed with any incident of aerial piracy or sabotage – and preventing such attacks became my career.

My life became linked with another child who moved home when she was young, albeit back in 1948. Following the declaration of the State of Israel that year, four-year-old Leila Khaled and her family moved from Haifa in Israel to become refugees in Tyre, southern Lebanon. But there the similarity between us ended: while I often return to Heathrow, Leila has never been home.

It was a move that changed the course of her life – and also made her part of my own. For 10 years I've lectured on the history of terrorist attacks against planes. Certain names have been centre stage – and one in particular: Leila Khaled, the Palestinian beauty with the bewitching eyes who twice boarded aircraft and took control by threatening to detonate a grenade. Her actions were unequivocal proof that the Arab world was now waging war against its Jewish enemy. Having spent much >



STORIES THE WORLD FORGOT

of my working life teaching TWA staff how to react in the face of an attack on a plane, it's not without apprehension that I board a flight to Amman, Jordan, to interview her.

The lobby of the Radisson Hotel is where we have arranged to meet, at 8.30am. I sit outside the Wings Bar, where the walls are festooned with pictures of aircraft from a bygone age. Here I am, outside a celebration of civil aviation, waiting to meet the cause of some of its most tragic moments.

A car pulls up. Out steps Leila in a loose black trouser suit, a small clip in her jet-black hair. It's strangely disappointing, a far cry from the sexy twentysomething terrorist she was once portrayed as. But my first thought is that at the age of 56 she looks – ironically – like a Jewish grandmother.

We shake hands and she takes out a packet of Rothmans cigarettes. In the two hours we spend together, she rarely changes the tone of her voice, and the only emotion she displays is when referring to her children or directly to Palestinian rights, when she makes a fist and hits her right leg.

While she has little recollection of life in Haifa, Leila was politicised from an early age. They moved to Lebanon, but her father stayed behind to fight against the newly formed Israeli state. As if refusing to acknowledge anywhere other than Palestine as home, her mother made the family stay in the basement of her uncle's house and not upstairs, saying, 'Your house is in Haifa, not here.'

In Leila's household there were constant discussions as to what action could reclaim their land. She is critical of those who spoke out but didn't act – she includes the Arab governments in this.

After the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel's victory over its Arab neighbours meant the reality of an independent Palestine was fading. For a people

'By 1967 all of Palestine was occupied, so it was easy to commit totally to our cause. I was prepared to do anything. We were convinced mentally and morally'

who had believed their exile would be temporary, nearly 20 years on the increasingly desperate environment stimulated Leila's conversion from peaceful teenage demonstrator to violent activist.

'By 1967 all of Palestine was occupied, so it was easy to commit totally to our cause. I was prepared to do anything. We were convinced mentally and morally.'

Having moved to Kuwait to teach, Leila joined Dr George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a splinter group from the Palestine Liberation Organisation. She was sent to training camps in Jordan to learn all about guerrilla warfare – which included the basic technology of a jet and enough crew lingo to convince a pilot that she could fly the plane if he didn't comply.

Leila was a willing recruit for her first mission: the hijack of an Israel-bound TWA flight, to fuel publicity for the Palestinians and secure the release of Palestinian and Syrian prisoners. She was prepared to die, but thought it unlikely, as they were hijacking it to a friendly country, Syria. After taking off in New York for Tel Aviv, the plane would stop in Rome and Athens. Leila boarded in Rome. 'There were no security measures like now. It was easy.'

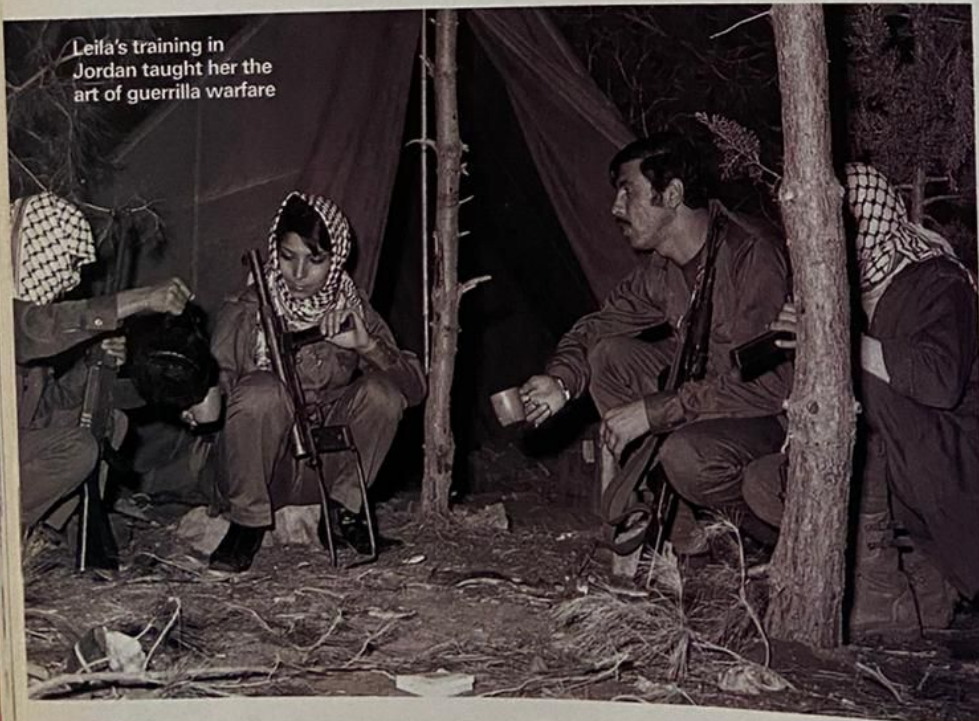
'On the transfer bus to the plane, I talked to a Greek man,' she recalls. 'After living in Chicago for 15 years, he was going to see his mother. I thought he's not going to see her today.' It's eerie listening: for other people's fate, she shows no emotion.

Leila, part of a two-person armed team, stood up in First Class, walked into the cockpit and ordered the plane to change direction. At her request they forced the pilot to fly over Haifa (the only time Leila has seen her birthplace since 1948), eventually landing in Damascus. Once there, the plane was evacuated, blown up and all passengers released, apart from six Israelis used as bargaining tools. Then Leila and her colleagues gave themselves up.

After three days in a Syrian prison and a further 45 under house arrest, Leila, dubbed the 'Deadly Beauty', was released, gaining worldwide notoriety. Fiercely determined, she had plastic surgery to change her famous features. 'I had some changes to my nose and chin. With spectacles and very short hair, it's easy for a woman to make changes.'

So a different Leila Khaled, in September 1970, boarded an El Al flight in Amsterdam bound for New York. She was to take part in one of the most dramatic events in aviation history. On a single day, the PFLP hijacked four aircraft: two to Jordan and one to Cairo. The fourth, the El Al flight with Leila on board, would end in failure.

With two of the four members of the team denied boarding by El Al security, Leila and her Nicaraguan colleague, Patrick Arguello, proceeded alone. Half an hour after take-off, over the North Sea, Leila stood up. 'I had my two hand grenades and I showed everybody I was taking the pins out with >



Leila's training in Jordan taught her the art of guerrilla warfare

my teeth,' she recalls. 'We heard shooting and, as we crossed First Class, people were shouting as well. Patrick told me, "Go forward, I'll protect your back." Leila rushed to the cockpit, but the door was closed – and, despite the stewardess telling the pilot Leila had two grenades, they refused to open it.

'I was screaming: "Open the door, I will count and if you don't open it, I will blow up the plane.'" But she was overwhelmed by the covert El Al security staff who travel on the airline's flights. One grenade slipped from her hand, but miraculously didn't explode. The other was smothered still in her hand, preventing it from detonating. Both pins were replaced. Patrick Arguello was shot, and later died. The plane was diverted to London, where Leila was held at Ealing police station.

Finally I get some emotion from her. She laughs as she remembers an immigration officer coming to her cell to explain that she didn't have a visa to enter the United Kingdom – the same cell where she learnt four days later that the PFLP had also hijacked a BOAC flight to Dawson's Field, Jordan. Their demand? The release of Leila Khaled.

On September 12 1970, the PFLP blew up the three empty aircraft – Swissair, TWA and BOAC – now held at Dawson's Field. On October 1, to secure the freedom of passengers held hostage in Jordan, Prime Minister Edward Heath authorised the release of Leila Khaled. In Jordan, King Hussein, facing Western criticism for allowing the incident to take place on Jordanian soil, expelled the PLO. It was the catalyst for the formation of a new group, Black September, whose actions were to cast a dark shadow over the Munich Olympics two years later.

Looking back, Leila only regrets 'that we lost our comrade Patrick'. She remained in contact with his mother. And, despite the outcome of her El Al hijack, she still views the overall mission as a success. A newspaper cartoon at the time showed flights around the earth above the caption 'PFLP Air Space'. If publicity is oxygen, the Palestinians were taking very deep breaths. 'Of course, there was a big discussion around the world about our acts and we were described as terrorists. But we raised the [Palestinian] question and it was enough. That year the PFLP decided we had to stop hijacking.'

It also heralded a new direction for Leila. She started to channel her energy into the fight for women's rights in the Arab world, notably political rights for Palestinians in Jordan. But her past proved hard to escape – particularly the sex symbol tag, which in 1975 provided the inspiration for a new exotic sidekick for Dr Who, 'Leila', a mix of *The Avengers'* Emma Peel and the hijacker.

Nor could people forget her high-altitude violence. When she appeared as a member of a PLO delegation to a UN Development Fund for Women conference in 1980, the *Indian Express* called her 'the gun-toting Palestinian terrorist girl, who has emerged in Copenhagen as a well-groomed delegate'. It was 'bizarre,' wrote *Aftenposten*, a normally sober



'I'm against killing people. Once the killing began, it became a totally brutal act... In all our actions, the passengers and the crew were kept safe'



Norwegian paper, 'to see Queen Margrethe [of Denmark] chatting to the airline hijacker Leila Khaled, who on this occasion had no visible bombs ['bombs' is Norwegian slang for breasts].'

Nowadays, Leila, whose sons are 14 and 17, is a member of the General Union of Palestinian Women, still fighting for greater women's rights. She becomes animated as she talks about her boys and explains how her son first learned of her past.

'One day he asked, "Mum, are you a thief?" I was horrified at the suggestion, but the teachers in the kindergarten had told him he was the son of the woman who stole a plane. He said, "Where is it? I want to see it." He thought it was a model!'

She adds: 'They are not involved [in fighting for Palestine] but they know their parents are. They must study and get a qualification because through knowledge they can be people. They ask how I'd feel if they wanted to fight for Palestine, and I say, "If you're convinced and when you have the opportunity, don't hesitate." The younger one always says, "And if I die?" I tell him, "I'll be proud because you're fighting for your people and your land."'

When I spoke to Leila, before the escalation of violence in October, the new Palestinian State was on the cusp of completion. How did she view that situation? 'It's not a peace process, it's a political process where the balance of power is for Israelis and not for us. They hold all the cards... The Palestinians are still scattered all over, but the PLO is no longer united. We used to be behind the demands for the right to return to Palestine, for the establishment of a State with Jerusalem as its capital. But when negotiations began, the PLO divided – some for, some against. I'm against the whole process. Egypt and Jordan signed treaties with Israel, making it difficult for us to gain our rights.' She believes that a solution should be based upon a decision by all those directly affected by the conflict – Jewish residents of Israel, Israeli Arabs and the 4.5 million displaced Palestinians. Not, she adds, by the US or the UN.

I am now dealing with a 21st-century politician, not a 1970s hijacker. She still speaks with vitriol of rights and wrongs in today's world, but condemns the actions of other hijackers, such as the 1999 attack on an Indian Airlines jet by Kashmiri militants in which a passenger died. 'It didn't have a goal,' she says. 'I'm against killing people. Once the killing began, it became a totally brutal act.' She feels the same about the Lockerbie bombing. 'In all our actions, the passengers and the crew were kept safe. We didn't hurt anyone.' (Surely more by luck than judgement? After all, hundreds would have died if the grenade she dropped hadn't been faulty.)

Leila is adamant she should be remembered as a 'freedom fighter', not a terrorist. 'We did not plant terror in our area, our enemies did.' Leila still uses her fame to draw audiences, albeit now to publicise the fight for women's rights. But she continues to dream of returning to Haifa. Fifty-two years on. Meanwhile, I pass back through Jordanian security and board a plane for Heathrow... e

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