

**Yasir and Me**  
By John Dickerson

In November 1974, I was the JFK manager of public services for the Port Authority. My division was in charge of all the public areas at the airport. We handled all parking, the International Terminal Building, all public functions and the airport police unit. Our police section consisted of 300 officers. One day, we were advised that none other than Yasir Arafat would be speaking at the United Nations and would arrive through the airport.

Planning for the arrival of VIPs was always a big event, whether they wore white hats or black hats. Our primary goal was to handle them on airport property and expedite their onward trip. Some VIPs can be quite controversial and we had to plan accordingly. Presidential arrivals are always sticky, but some arrivals are emotional events and politicians and movie people something else. The Arafat arrival had a lot of everything.

The 1974 arrival was to be top secret as far as the PLO was concerned. They told us nothing, including flight time, airline or even what day. The only clue was the announced date of his speech. My thought was "don't let them shoot him on our turf."

We had had a number of strategy meetings all week to make things as tight as possible, working around the two unknown key elements -- when and how. The primary route into the United Nations would be military helicopter, with a motorcade backup plan. The backup was for bad weather and involved New York City Police covering the route, including all overhead bridges, temporary tunnel closures and a massive motorcade.

I arrived at JFK the morning of the day before the scheduled speech and went directly to the police building for a meeting. I was the highest-ranking civilian there. Representatives of the State Department, Secret Service, FBI, Port Authority and New York City Police, Customs, Immigration, Plant Quarantine, FAA Security and Traffic Control and U.N. Security attended the meeting. A lot of thoughts can be generated at a gathering like that.

Important information surfaced. Somebody found out that Arafat was in Libya. Actually, it was in the newspaper. The FAA said that their Atlantic Watch group would let us know of any Libya to JFK flight plans, but none had been filed at that time. The waiting began!

For some strange reason, I teamed up with either a State Department or Secret Service guy (after 27 years, some details are lost) during the waiting period. We made repeated trips to the Atlantic Watch room. Finally, we got a break. There were three flight plans from Libya to JFK, but no clue as to which was Yasir's.

Around 4 a.m. -- well past my bedtime, we were able to discard two of the flights, which left us with a Sabena (Belgium) charter.

More strategy meetings resolved that our VIP would get truly special handling. The passenger would deplane at the end of the runway and be escorted to a waiting helicopter. When the plane landed, we began the transfer. The helicopter pilots were not very happy as it was quite windy and the U.N. landing could be tricky. A certain amount of arm rotation took place.

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I was still tagging along with my security guy, and he decided to go aboard the plane as soon as the helicopter took off. I said, "I'm with you," and he said "Let's go." We climbed up the stairs and entered between a PLO SWAT team and an Algerian SWAT team. My leader said he wanted to speak to the pilot and I chimed in "ALONE." Adrenaline can do strange things to anyone. Both teams backed away, and we got to talk to the pilot. He was quite disturbed with his passengers. They had him up all night to make sure he did not do anything to harm Yasir. Also, he was so far beyond his allowed flying time; he wouldn't even taxi the plane off the runway. Sabena had to tow the aircraft to our secure area.

We spent the next few hours with the PLO team trying to find out when Arafat would return home. They were most evasive saying such definite things as don't know, soon and maybe tomorrow. With a large contingent of security people from all the agencies mentioned earlier, everyone's budget was receiving a major jolt.

Being such a well-loved person in New York, a city with a large Jewish population, security had to remain tight. Most of us had now been on our feet for well over 24 hours. The airport commanding officer, Captain Ralph Combariati, and I lived a few towns apart in New Jersey. About 8 p.m. we were driven home by one of the detectives who would contact us if Yasir wanted to leave. We now felt sure that he would stay overnight in New York City. It was now 30 hours with no sleep, and I went directly to bed.

Five hours later, I received a wake up call. Our "guest" was ready to go, and a car would pick me up to take us the 25 miles back to the airport. When Ralph and I got to JFK, the entry road was lined with police, and our own airport escort with Secret Service outriders took us to the police building. It was a most impressive sight.

One Spanish-speaking person had been taken in custody as Yasir Arafat's motorcade was approaching the airport. It was now the early hours of the morning. Our car was whisked to a remote part of the airport to the Sabena Charter. I have never seen so much coverage and so many weapons. Everyone, but "guess who" was armed. The aircraft was destined for Cuba, and the man taken into custody was the Cuban ambassador. His identity had just been established and he was rushed to the site. We now had two unarmed people there -- I think.

Moments later the motorcade arrived and Yasir's group boarded. The plane taxied out for takeoff flanked by all the airport fire and rescue equipment. At 6 a.m. the tower reported "Wheels up." In the simplest of terms that meant:

**If anything happens to him now, it wasn't on our turf!**

That's how I remember Yasir Arafat 27 years later. I was very early for work!