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Many of Hijackers Are Found Driven by Emotional Stress

By Robert L. Jackson

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Thomas James Boynton, a university professor from Michigan, and Willis Jessie, an Army deserter from Kansas, would seemingly have little in common.

Yet each brandished a pistol in the sky over Miami this year to force an American plane to Cuba. The similarities don't end there.

Each landed in prison in Cuba.

A little-known aspect of aerial hijacking is that Americans, not Cubans, have diverted the most planes. And the Americans—usually fugitives or persons with mental problems—find no bed of roses in Havana.

"They're not particularly welcome there," says a State Department official. "From what we can learn, all have gone to jail for anywhere from a few days to several months. Some are still in custody."

Despite the fact that dissatisfied Cuban exiles in the United States have recently hijacked several U.S. airliners, only nine of 23 hijacking attempts since 1961—where nationality has been determined—were made by Cubans.

Twelve Americans, a Puerto Rican and a French citizen accounted for the others. All but four attempts were successful.

The rash of hijacking began shortly after the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion in the spring of 1961.

Although the FBI investigates the hijacking of every American plane (15 so far this year), U.S. officials have had little success in learning whether Cuban hijackers have received the same rough treatment as Americans.

However, persistent U.S. queries through the Swiss Embassy in Havana, which handles American diplomatic matters there, developed information on several hijackers.

Boynton, a 32-year-old sociologist, was taken into custody by Cuban authorities as soon as he reached the island last Feb. 17.

Boynton was apparently suffering emotional stress over a pending divorce and other problems when he hijacked a small sightseeing plane, according to U.S. authorities.

He spent six weeks on a prison farm on the Isle of Pines, chopping sugar cane and cutting weeds. Then he was placed in a psychiatric ward for a time. The latest word is that he is back on the farm and "very, very unhappy with his lot," an official said.

The Castro government refused to extradite Boynton, Jessie and other American hijackers to the United States despite repeated U.S. requests directed through the Swiss.

Jessie, 27, an Army sergeant, reached Cuba last August with his 3-year-old daughter after hijacking a chartered plane.

He spent six weeks in a Cuban jail, then dropped from view. The child reportedly has been placed with a family in Havana.

Jessie picked up the child at the West Virginia home of his wife, from whom he was separated, shortly before the hijacking. His crime ended a commendable 15-year Army career.

"His case is a puzzle," an FBI official said.

Alben B. Truitt, grandson of the late Vice President Alben Barkley, is another American hijacker whom the Swiss Embassy succeeded in tracking for the State Department.

Since hijacking a small plane last Oct. 23, Truitt has been jailed in Havana, according to information received here Nov. 29. Letters from his wife are being delivered to him, but the family has had no response from Truitt.

The fate of other American hijackers, including two with criminal records, is unknown.

Lawrence Mahlon Rhodes Jr., a West Virginia armed robbery suspect, escaped FBI pursuit last February by hijacking an airliner from Chicago with 102 passengers.

Similarly, Louis Gabor

Babler, whose criminal record includes kidnaping, assault, car theft, forgery and ball jumping, staged a hijacking last year and has disappeared from view.

Psychiatric problems seem to account for the actions of many hijackers and would-be hijackers.

Last July 12, for example, Oran Daniel Richards, 33, tried to hijack an airliner carrying 48 passengers, including Sen. James O. Eastland (D-Miss.). A flight engineer convinced him that what he was doing was wrong.

Richards, a former mental patient from Ohio, had drawn a gun and told passengers, "I'm a sick man." He has since been committed to a mental hospital in Missouri.

Strengthening the punishment for air piracy has apparently had little deterrent effect. Congress did this in September, 1961.

The offense is punishable by a minimum of 20 years imprisonment and a maximum of death.

Only one hijacker, Leon Beardon, has been convicted since 1961. He received 20 years. Beardon hijacked a flight from Los Angeles on Aug. 3, 1961, but was captured by border patrolmen in El Paso, Tex., when he permitted the plane to make a fuel stop.

The FAA has no evidence of a conspiracy directed by Havana. Publicity about hijackings may spawn some of the crimes, officials believe.

FAA Administrator David Thomas said his agency is exploring "every possible avenue both domestically and on the international side for curbing this vicious crime."

One project calls for the use of electronic weapons detectors. Most airlines, however, are wary of any device that would alarm passengers.

Deputy U.S. marshals, known as "sky marshals," have been riding some southbound airliners to try to preclude hijackings. But no hijackings have yet been attempted on their flights.