

FBI Chief Ordered Shooting to Halt Jet

ST. LOUIS, Nov. 14 (AP)—

The acting director of the FBI said today it was his decision to shoot out the tires on a hijacked Southern Airways jetliner in Orlando, Fla.

"I made the decision to abort the flight with the full concurrence of Southern Airways," acting director L. Patrick Gray III said at a news conference.

"I elected the means to do it," Gray said, adding that airline officials concurred because of the risk involved.

"It was obvious that the crew and passengers were under considerable tension," he said, noting that the plane had made six landings in the United States, one in Cuba

and one in Canada before the tires were shot out Saturday.

Gray said the action was successful in that it "caused the plane to land and the passengers to be released." He said the hijackers planned to take the plane to Switzerland or Africa and their destination was impossible with the tires shot out. The plane eventually landed a second time in Cuba, where the passengers and crew were released and the hijackers detained.

Gray was asked about reports that the shooting order originated with President Nixon, who was at his residence in Key Biscayne, Fla., at the time.

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"False," Gray replied. "I didn't even talk with President Nixon."

The gunfire has been criticized by passengers, police officials and a pilots' group.

Gray was in St. Louis to address a meeting of the Backstoppers, a group that raises funds to support widows and orphans of local policemen and firemen.

In Washington, meanwhile, the Federal Aviation Administration disclosed that Fidel Castro reportedly praised the airline pilot and assured him the hijackers would be treated as criminals.

An FAA spokesman said the information came secondhand, at an FBI-conducted Miami debriefing of the crew.

Even though the three men who hijacked the Southern

Airways DC-9 after takeoff from Birmingham, Ala., last Friday many face harsh treatment in Cuba, U.S. authorities are seeking their prompt return — along with their reported \$2 million ransom—for prosecution in American courts.

At the Miami debriefing, Southern pilot Bill Haas reported on a conversation with Castro at Jose Marti Airport in Havana, after the hijackers had been detained.

Haas had taken the plane off from McCoy Air Force base, Orlando, Fla., in a hail of FBI bullets that flattened four tires, and then flew it unaided to Cuba after the hijackers shot copilot Billy Johnson, mayor of College City, Ark.

Castro told Haas, the FAA said, that the hijackers were desperados and would be confined as such.

Castro also complimented the pilot on the landing that saved the lives of all aboard — 27 passengers, the four crew members, and the hijackers.

The FAA investigation of the hijacking seeks particularly to find out why passenger and baggage screening procedures at Birmingham failed at least to provide warning of the weapons, if not pinpointing the three men as potential sky criminals.

The FAA declined to comment on details of its study.

However Benjamin O. Davis, assistant secretary of transportation for safety and consumer affairs, said the FAA had told him the three hijackers were selected for special screening as they prepared to board the plane, through application of the FAA hijacker profile.

Davis said the men were allowed to board after going through a weapons-detection check that failed to turn up the hidden arms.

The Air Line Pilots Association also is investigating the circumstances surrounding the hijacking and the shooting out of the tires at Orlando. A spokesman said the association had not gathered sufficient data to make a statement yet.

At a transportation conference in Merida, Mexico, Secretary of Transportation John A. Volpe said plane hijackings have been reduced in the United States but will never be eliminated.

As of two months ago, Volpe said there had been nine successful hijackings in 30 attempts this year. In 1969, he said, 34 out of 40 attempts were successful.