

Airwest Duped by Fake Extortion Plot

By Jack Anderson

For a few tense hours last September, a small plane circled over a lonely area of the Southwest waiting for a signal to toss out a satchel stuffed with cash.

The plane was secretly dispatched by phantom billionaire Howard Hughes' airline, Airwest, to stop an extortionist from blowing up a passenger plane in midair.

The bizarre extortion plot, which authorities tried to hush up, began with an anonymous typed letter which arrived at Airwest's Phoenix offices.

Though confusing on some points, the letter indicated that a pressure-sensitive bomb, set for a certain altitude, was on board an Airwest jet. It was timed for an explosion 150 hours after Airwest received the letter.

To learn its location, the airline must within three days collect more than \$100,000 and send it aboard a small plane over a prearranged course over the barren stretches of the Southwest. The extortionist said he would signal when the satchel was to be dropped from the plane.

Once the satchel was received, promised the letter, the airline would be notified which plane was rigged with the bomb.

Wild as the scheme was, Airwest took it seriously. To risk a midair explosion with passengers and crew aboard was unthinkable.

The airline has 20 jets operating over 9,000 miles of routes. As fast as they hit the ground on overnight stops, they were searched from nose to tail, from wheel well to cabin roof. Once searched, each plane was kept under 24-hour surveillance to prevent a bomb from being sneaked aboard.

Despite these precautions, the airline, taking no chances, assembled the cash. It was packed into a satchel and flown aboard a Cessna-150 over the designated course. The crew, ready to drop the satchel, watched for the signal which never came.

Footnote: Out of the incident has come both recriminations and constructive action. The Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association has protested that its mechanics were kept ignorant of the danger by

the airline, FBI and FAA during the bomb search. Union safety director James Sparling is using the September scare to ask the FAA, FBI and Congress for guidelines in future cases. He is also asking the Labor Department to make it a rule that employees must be notified of bomb and hijack danger.

Washington Whirl

Nixon's Nephew—President Nixon's 28-year-old nephew, Donald A. Nixon, has made the front pages, despite patient efforts by the White House to keep him out of trouble. He has turned up as a personal aide in the Bahamas to financier Robert Vesco, who has been accused by the Securities and Exchange Commission of attempting to divert \$224 million in mutual funds to his personal use. The White House was apprehensive when young Nixon went to work for Vesco's company last year. The President had given his trusted aide, John Ehrlichman, the delicate, confidential assignment of keeping a wary eye on this branch of the family. So Ehrlichman took the Nixon nephew aside and spoke

to him for a couple of hours, urging him to behave himself on the new job and do nothing to embarrass the President. There's no evidence that young Nixon was involved in any way in Vesco's alleged fraud. But Vesco paid him generously and tried to capitalize on the fact he had the President's nephew on his payroll.

Phony Environmentalists—Two conservation-minded congressmen, Henry Reuss (D-Wis.) and John Dingell (D-Mich.), have caught the federal government trying to pass off strip-miners as environmentalists. They discovered the National Coal Association, which has contributed so much to ecological spoilage, listed in a new federal directory of environmental organizations. Reuss and Dingell wrote to environmental czar William Ruckelshaus that "if the National Coal Association qualifies," then so do the oil, gas and other nature-destroying lobbies. They asked Ruckelshaus to halt distribution of the directory until the coal lobby was stricken from it. Ruckelshaus sheepishly complied, acknowledging that his agency had goofed.