

# The FBI Bungles Hijacking

## Transcript's Tale: Pilot's Plea Ignored, 3 Die

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When Brent Q. Downs taxied his plane to a stop at Jacksonville International Airport this month, he wondered, nervously, where the fuel truck was.

Downs, a 29-year-old pilot from Nashville, Tenn., had every reason to be nervous. His twin-engine Aero Commander had been commandeered in Nashville at gunpoint by a beefy hijacker who was kidnaping his estranged wife.

Ordered to take them to the Bahamas, Downs was in no mood to argue. But he needed more fuel. He radioed his needs to Jacksonville: fuel, charts, flotation gear and two bottles of Chivas Regal. He was assured that he could refuel without interference, that everything, except perhaps for the Scotch, "will be ready as specified."

Instead, the unsuspecting pilot was directed to a parking pad where FBI agents were waiting in the predawn darkness. Abruptly, Downs found another FBI man barking instructions to him from the airport control tower, instruc-

tions that he protested were "endangering lives."

The FBI, it was learned yesterday, heard and repeatedly ignored the captive pilot's desperate pleas.

Within minutes, Brent Downs was dead, shot in the back by the hijacker after FBI agents began pumping bullets into the parked plane's wheels and one of its engines.

The hijacker, a 300-pound Nashville real estate agent named George M. Giffe Jr., then turned his 45-caliber automatic on his estranged young wife and finally on himself. All three were dead or dying when the G-men clambered aboard.

Shortly after the shootings, sources say, someone in the control tower cracked: "You can't win 'em all."

The FBI's refusal to stay away from the plane and let Downs refuel, despite his stammered protests, is contained in a hitherto secret transcript of the last radio transmissions between the pilot and authorities. A copy has been obtained by The Washington Post.

See FBI, A10, Col. 1

# The FBI Bungles a Hijacking

FBI, From A1

The tragedy began early in the morning of Oct. 4 when the 35-year-old Giffe arranged to meet his wife, reportedly on the pretext of saying goodbye before he left the country. According to Nashville police, the couple had broken up a week earlier after a troubled three-year marriage. Mrs. Giffe, police reported, was packed, kicking and screaming, into the back seat of a car that her husband drove to the Nashville airport.

Giffe, who has been quoted by friends as saying he was a sorcerer, leased the plane from Big Brothers Aircraft with the story that he was a doctor and that his wife needed treatment in Miami. But Mrs. Giffe began screaming that she was being kidnaped and Larry Reed, an employee of Big Brothers, asked Giffe for his credentials. At that, Reed said, both Giffe and a friend, Bobby Wayne Wallace, drew pistols and ordered Downs to take off, just before 2 a.m. (CDT).

The police in Nashville reported that Giffe had left five suicide notes in the car he drove to the airport. In one of them, addressed to his father, he said that he had been "ordered to kill."

The FBI was notified after the plane left Nashville and dispatched agents to the Jacksonville airport when the pilot radioed he was landing for fuel and other items.

FBI agents already have been publicly excoriated by relatives and associates of the victims. The transcript, based on tape recordings from the files of the Federal Aviation Administration, suggests that their complaints are based on more than emotions.

According to the transcript, Downs was assured several times — first by Jacksonville Air Traffic Control which is located

about 30 miles north of the airport and then by the regular control tower operator at the field itself — that a fuel truck would be standing by when he taxied his plane, code-named "58 November," to its assigned spot. The transcript includes these exchanges, beginning seconds after the privately owned turboprop touched down.

Pilot (Downs): "Is the fuel truck here?"

Tower: "You say is it a fuel truck?"

Pilot: "I say is the fuel truck here?"

Tower: "Affirmative. Taxi straight ahead to the end, commander 58 November, all the way to the end . . . Okay, that's fine. Right there. Park right where you're at."

Pilot: "(This is) 58 November. They are going to keep this area clear. Is that correct?"

Tower: "That's affirmative."

Pilot: "All right. (Pause) What's the car sitting back off to our right?"

Tower: "It's just an airport vehicle as far as I know, sir."

Evidently MW M imm Downs asked that it be moved away. At this point, another voice, that of an FBI agent, took over the control tower microphone. His words are indicated by capital letters.

Tower: "58 NOVEMBER?. . . 58 NOVEMBER. THIS IS THE FBI SPEAKING. CUT YOUR ENGINE."

Pilot: ". . . This is the captain speaking. We're going to cut the engines and we're gonna need some fuel, but I request that everyone stay away."

Tower: "58 NOVEMBER. ADVISE WHEN YOUR ENGINES HAVE BEEN CUT. 58 NOVEMBER?"

Pilot: "This is 58 November. Uh, this gentleman has about 12.5 pounds of plastic explosives back here and (pause) uh, I got no (pause), uh, yen to join it right now

so I would please expr. . . uh, appreciate if if you would stay away from this airplane."

Tower: "THAT'S A ROGER, 58 NOVEMBER. ARE YOUR ENGINES CUT?"

Pilot: "Negative."

Tower: "STAND BY."

Pilot: "Where's the fuel truck? . . ."

Tower: "THIS IS THE FBI. THERE WILL BE NO FUEL. REPEAT. THERE WILL BE NO FUEL. THERE WILL BE NO STARTER (which Downs had also requested to get the plane airborne 2 again). HAVE YOU CUT YOUR ENGINES?"

(Pause)

Pilot: "Uh (gasp), look, I don't think this fellow's kiddin' — I wish you'd get the fuel truck out here."

Tower: "58 NOVEMBER. THERE WILL BE NO FUEL. I REPEAT. THERE WILL BE NO FUEL."

Pilot: "This is 58 November. You are endangering lives by doing this, and, uh, we have no other choice but to go along and, uh, uh, for the sake of some lives we request some fuel out here, please."

(Pause)

Tower: "58 NOVEMBER. WHAT IS THE STATUS OF YOUR PASSENGERS?"

Pilot: "Ah, uh, well, they're okay, if that's what you mean."

Tower: "ARE THEY MONITORING THIS CONVERSATION?"

Pilot: "Yes, they are."

Tower: "DO YOU HAVE TWO PASSENGERS ABOARD?"

(Pause)

Tower: "58 NOVEMBER. WHAT'S YOUR PRESENT FUEL STATUS ON THAT AIRCRAFT?"

Pilot: "We're down to about 30 minutes."

Tower: "58 NOVEMBER. THE DECISION WILL BE NO FUEL FOR THAT AIRCRAFT. NO STARTER. RUN IT OUT, ANY WAY YOU WANT. PASSEN-

GERS, IF YOU ARE LISTENING—THE ONLY ALTERNATIVE IN THIS AIRCRAFT IS TO DEPART THE AIRCRAFT, TO DEPART THE AIRCRAFT.”

Here, there was a long pause, apparently for some hurried discussions among those aboard the airplane. Besides Downs, Giffe and his 25-year-old wife, Susan, these included co-pilot Randall Crump and Giffe's, friend Wallace, who has since been accused of air piracy and kidnaping for helping Giffe.

At one point, Giffe had urged the two fliers to try to take off without refueling, but, Crump has said, they were afraid to try it in the darkness after looking down the taxiway and spotting a

clump of trees that seemed closer than they actually were. Now, it was decided, Crump would get off the plane and try to talk authorities into letting them refuel.

Pilot Downs cut one of the engines so the prop wouldn't interfere with Crump's departure. The co-pilot hopped out only to be met, he has reportedly said, by armed FBI agents who hustled him into a waiting car some 35 yards away. They do not appear to have been interested in discussing what he wanted to tell them, Crump has been quoted as saying.

The transcript reflects only bits and pieces of all this although the FBI agent in the control tower, named by sources as Frank Burns, was in separate radio contact with agents on the field, led by FBI agent James O'Connor.

Tower: "58 NOVEMBER?"

Pilot: "Yeah."

Tower: "DID SOMEONE DEPLANE FROM YOUR AIRCRAFT?"

Pilot: "That's affirmative. The co-pilot."

(Pause)

Tower: "58 NOVEMBER:"

Pilot: (Muffled reply).

Tower: "THE CO-PILOT IS IN THE CAR AND WILL NOT RETURN TO THE AIRCRAFT. HE WILL NOT RETURN TO THE AIRCRAFT."

A minute or so later, Wallace jumped out, perhaps after having persuaded Giffe that he could succeed where Crump had failed. A pistol reportedly in his belt, Wallace, 32, began moving toward the back of the plane when an FBI agent yelled at him to "hit the ground."

He did as he was told. Meanwhile, agent O'Connor moved to the front of the plane where Giffe spotted him from the cockpit and fired two shots at the FBI man, missing him both times.

O'Connor, sources say, ducked out of range and gave the order to open fire. Bullets sped into the wheels and the engine that was still running, apparently ripping into a fuel line and causing an emergency signal to light up in the cockpit. At this point, co-pilot Crump believes, Downs rushed to cut off the engine and Giffe began shooting again. This time, he didn't miss.

The transcript ends with an unanswered question from the control tower—"58 NOVEMBER?"—and the time, 5:33 a.m.(EDT) Oct. 4.

The "you can't win 'em all" remark, according to sources who asked not to be named, is part of background conversation audible on the FAA's tape recordings though not included in the transcript obtained by The Post.