

HIJACKING VICTIMS RETURNED AS CUBA HOLDS 3 SUSPECTS

31 Passengers and Crew
Back on Southern Plane
—Co-Pilot in Hospital
—NOV 13 1972
29-HOUR ORDEAL ENDED

Source of Injury Disputed
— Havana Confiscates
Extorted \$2-Million

NYTimes

By RICHARD WITKIN

A Southern Airways jet landed in Miami last night with 31 exhausted passengers and crew members of a sister plane hijacked to Cuba by three heavily armed gunmen in a 29-hour melodrama that frequently seemed on the edge of catastrophe.

Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation were waiting at the Miami field to interview the returning passengers and crew members on their perilous experience—a nightmare marked by the shooting out of the plane's tires in Orlando, Fla., the wounding of the co-pilot and a final emergency landing on a foam-covered Havana runway.

The three hijackers were reportedly taken into custody by the Cuban authorities in Havana, who also were said to have assumed charge of the reported \$2-million in ransom received by the hijackers.

Traveled 4,000 Miles

The co-pilot of the hijacked plane, Billy Harloyd Johnson, who was shot in the shoulder as the twin-jet DC-9 left Orlando Saturday night for the final lap to Cuba, was taken to a hospital in Hialeah, Fla.

It was not known immediately whether he was shot by one of the hijackers or by a stray bullet from one of the F.B.I. agents who had fired at the tires in hopes of preventing the take-off.

The three hijackers were being held yesterday by the Cuban authorities at an undisclosed location. The commandeered plane, which had hydraulic troubles as well as flattened tires, was being repaired at the Havana Airport.

After the take-off, and a long period of circling in the Havana area to burn off excess fuel, the hijacked jet came in wheels down, generating a spray of sparks as its main-wheel hubs hit the asphalt.

For the passengers and crew, who had been forced to go on a circuitous trip in which they had landed nine times, at eight different airports, it was safety at last. Their journeys had been interrupted about 7:20 P.M. Friday when the three hijackers, two wanted in Detroit on rape charges and one a fugitive from a Nashville jail, took over the jet while it was on its way from Birmingham, Ala., to Memphis.

Cubans Question 3 Men

In the next 29 hours, they shuttled more than 4,000 miles, setting down at Jackson, Miss., Cleveland, Toronto, Lexington, Ky., Chattanooga, Tenn., Havana for an initial two-hour stay, Key West, Fla., Orlando, and finally Havana again. It was at Chattanooga that the airline handed over a reported \$2-million or more of extortion money. The hijackers had originally demanded \$10-million.

The Cuban radio announced after the second and final landing there that:

"The three authors of the incident [the hijackers] were quickly apprehended by the Cuban authorities and taken to a small room at the airport, where they were interrogated by officers of the Interior Ministry."

The French news agency France-Presse said the Cubans had also taken custody of the extortion money. It quoted well-

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informed sources as saying the amount was \$2.5-million.

The broadcast, monitored in Miami, said that three persons had been treated at a hospital. One was the co-pilot, a 37-year-old resident of College City, Ark.

The other two were an '83-year-old passenger originally thought to have possibly had a heart attack but later reported suffering only from nervous shock; and a passenger with a fractured foot, possibly suffered in sliding down an escape chute after the Havana landing.

The Havana radio reported the shooting out of the jet's tires by F.B.I. agents in Orlando, adding that as a result "the landing was carried out under the strictest emergency conditions."

F.B.I. Move Criticized

It added that a young woman, reported still pale from her ordeal and carrying her 2-year-old child, "commented with other passengers that the F.B.I. shooting at the plane was a criminal act that put all of their lives in danger."

Indeed the F.B.I. action seemed to be the element in the entire episode that touched off the most intensive second-guessing in the industry.

Neither F.B.I., other Government, nor airline officials would reconstruct the decision-making or say who had finally given the order to shoot out the tires.

But what industry experts were asking was why the action was taken, particularly since it did not abort the take-off, since it might have jeopardized the safety of the landing in Havana and since it might have produced a violent reaction from the jumpy hijackers.

Possible Atlantic Flight

One explanation being offered was that officials finally decided that the situation was getting desperate and that it was safer to try to stop the plane than to let the hijackers continue with what looked like an open-ended flirtation with disaster. The hijackers were talking at the time of forcing the small twin-engine jet to fly in short North Atlantic hops to Switzerland.

An airline source, commenting on the usefulness of the F.B.I. action, said:

"They didn't go to Switzerland, did they?"

A Southern spokesman discounted the danger from a landing with blown tires, saying it would logically be rough but no worse than what happens when an auto travels along a road with flattened tires.

A second major question be-



Associated Press
Billy Hal Johnson, airliner's co-pilot, lies wounded in hospital bed in Hialeah, Fla.



Associated Press
Passengers ride escalator to airport customs area



Associated Press
F.B.I. agents armed with rifles at McCoy Air Force Base in Orlando Saturday.

ing asked in the industry was how the hijackers—officially identified as Melvin C. Cale, 21 years old (the fugitive); Lewis D. Moore, 27, and Henry D. Jackson, 25—had been able to elude the screening system when they boarded at Birmingham.

Southern did have the system in operation. It is based on checking passengers to see if they show behavioral traits that have been found common to most hijackers.

If so, they must be further checked in at least one of three ways. Metal detectors may be used to check for weapons on their persons or in their luggage. They may be asked for identification. They may, ultimately, be frisked by law-enforcement officers.

Searched With Detector

Well-informed sources in Washington said that all three hijackers had betrayed the tell-tale traits and that all had been subjected to scrutiny with a hand-held metal detector.

What was not yet determined was whether the detector did not work or whether its readings were ignored by Southern employes rushing to complete boarding of the flight.

The relief plane that brought the passengers and crew back from Havana yesterday landed at Miami's airport at 5:26 P.M.

Four of those debarking, all men and one of them elderly, were taken off on stretchers. They were put in ambulances, and taken to hospitals in the area.

A spokesman at Hialeah Hospital identified the four as the co-pilot, Mr. Johnson; J. Frank Robinson, 47; Gale Buchanan, 35, and Alvin Fortson, 83, of Trumann, Ark.

The two stewardesses, Mrs. Donna A. Holman and Mrs. Karen E. Chambers, both of Memphis, emerged with locked arms. One of them was crying.

When Alex Halverstadt of Key Biscayne, Fla., emerged, his wife waved happily and told a bystander:

"When we get home, I'm going to fix him the biggest dinner he's ever had, and a tall martini."

A Weight Lifted

She said she felt as though the weight of the world had been lifted from her shoulders.

While many details of the hijacking remained to be cleared up, some facts were clarified.

"White House Not Involved"

There had been reports that President Nixon, spending the weekend in Key Biscayne, Fla., might have given the orders for the F. B. I. to keep the hijacked plane from taking off from Orlando.

A spokesman at the Florida White House, asked about the reports, said:

"The White House was not involved in that."

The spokesman also dis-

closed that the hijackers, on two occasions during the hijacking, had asked to speak directly to the President. He added that several White House aides had been informed of the request but had felt "a conversation would not be productive."

The White House did offer to make other officials available to talk with the hijackers on the air-to-ground radio. But they evidently were willing to settle for no one less than Mr. Nixon.

The President was kept informed of the hijacking, the spokesman said.

Cuba's Premier, Fidel Castro, was somewhat more directly involved. He came to Havana's José Martí Airport the first time the hijacked Southern jet landed there, and was reported by the Reuters news agency to have tried to talk with the three gunmen aboard.

The attempt apparently failed because the nervous hijackers wanted him to come aboard the plane instead of going out to meet him on the ramp. Cuban security guards forbade this.

Cubans Balk at Conditions

One of the hijackers, wearing a bulletproof vest obtained along with the extortion money and covered by the guns of his colleagues, did at one point leave the plane to pursue negotiations with Cuban officials. The three men were demanding certain conditions before agreeing to debark, and the Cubans evidently balked. After two hours of fruitless talks, the hijackers decided to depart, and forced the plane to take off for Key West.

In the aftermath of the hijacking, officials in Washington expressed strong criticism of the widespread use by broadcast media of tapes of air-to-ground conversations recorded as the drama unfolded.

They argued that this created difficult problems of crowd control as the curious rushed to various airports to watch what was happening. They said the broadcasts had been particularly unfortunate in spreading the news that the hijackers had threatened to crash the plane into the atomic facility at Oak Ridge, Tenn., if their demands were not met.

"The whole town was in an uproar," one official said. "We could have taken care of any required evacuation with quiet preparations. Instead, we got panic."

Trial in 10th Week

FAIRFIELD, Calif., Nov. 12 (UPI) — The trial of Juan V. Corona in the deaths of 25 farm workers will begin its 10th week tomorrow. The prosecution is in the third portion of its 10-phase case.