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Hijack Pilot Says the FBI Nearly Caused Shootout



UPI Telenphoto

Cook kissed stewardess Tracey Coleman upon their arrival in New York

Tactics Held Peril to Crew, Plane

New York Times

New York

Captain Donald J. Cook Jr., 31, the commander of Trans World Airline's wayward Flight 85, complained bitterly Saturday that agents of the FBI had seriously jeopardized the lives of himself and his crew when the hijacked jetliner landed at Kennedy International airport Friday morning.

"The FBI plan was damned near a prescription for getting the entire crew killed and the plane destroyed," the pilot said.

"We had arranged that there would be a minimum ground crew when we landed at Kennedy and taxied to the

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designated area on Runway 22. When we got there, there was the car with the replacement crew but there were also many other vehicles and many other men.

"Some of them were carrying weapons and wearing military type flak jackets."

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Raphael Minichiello, the AWOL Marine lance corporal who had hijacked the plane over California, saw the agents as they approached the plane, the captain said.

"This boy was no dope," he went on. "He was a very intelligent young man. He panicked and he started to scream, 'Get those people away from the airplane.' I said, 'Can I open the window?' and he said, 'Do you have to?' I said I did, so he said, 'O.K.' and I stuck my head out and started screaming, 'We want everyone away from this plane. This boy is going to shoot us.'"

But, Cook said, the agents ignored him and continued to move in on the plane. At one point, he said, he hollered down to a man standing under the wing in a TWA maintenance outfit, whom he was

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sure was not a maintenance man.

"We've got to get out of here. Get us moving," I said," he recalled. "And this clown — I wish I could get my hands on him — shouted back, 'We'll get you moving when we're ready to.'"

As the minutes dragged on, Cook said, the young man's panic mounted. When he realized that the fueling of the plane hadn't even begun, he exploded, "I'm going to kill you bastards" and "You mothers double-crossed me. Get me out of here."

Finally, he fired a shot into the ceiling of the cockpit. Cook said he was sure that was meant as a warning to the agents outside the plane. "I'm sure he already knew I was convinced he meant business," he said.

John F. Malone, the assistant director in charge of the FBI office in New York, refused to comment on Cook's charges.

The other crew members, including stewardess Tracey Coleman of Kansas City, supported Cook's charges.

"We had the boy pretty well under control until Kennedy Airport when he didn't seem to care if he killed anyone or got killed himself," said Flight Engineer Lloyd V. Hollarh, 32.

"I'm convinced he would have shot all of us if the FBI had not moved out," said Miss Coleman. She said that Minichiello later relaxed.

"He was very relaxed, very much at ease and we spent a lot of time listening to music," she said.

When the plane took off from New York, Minichiello kept the entire crew in the cockpit at gunpoint, the captain said.

After about 20 minutes, Cook managed to convince Minichiello that the crew had not been responsible for the FBI's actions. "I said, 'Raphael, you ought to know that. We've been with you long enough, for three take-offs and three landings, and you ought to know that our

only interest is in keeping ourselves safe and our airplane in one piece."

"After that he treated us real well."

During much of the flight, Cook said, Minichiello fussed with his carbine, loading and unloading it, and even taking it apart to clean it. Sometimes he would walk away and leave it behind him on a seat, within Cook's reach, as if daring him to make a grab for it.

But Cook had seen a knife and pistol stock sticking out of the cartridge belt the young man was wearing. He said he didn't know what kind of combat training Minichiello had received in the Marines and that he never was sure whether the rifle was loaded as it lay within reach.

If it wasn't loaded and if he had gone for it he was afraid he might have been killed. If it was loaded, he was almost sure that he would have to kill Minichiello.

Cook said the young man talked expectantly about the

shootout he would have with the police when the plane landed in Rome and he talked about how he would get away. Soon after the hijacking he had told Cook that Rome was his destination, but he insisted that the pilot report that it was Cairo in order to mislead his pursuers.

He thought he might need hostages in Rome and worried about which members of the crew to select.

Minichiello reminded Cook that he, Minichiello, was single and, therefore, free to risk his life. "No matter what happened," the captain recalled, "he said he only had one or two days to live."

Minichiello kept himself awake by taking No-Doz tablets and offered some to Cook. "I told him No-Doz not only keeps you awake but it makes you nervous and that I was already nervous enough," the captain said.

Even after Minichiello started to work out his plan to take a policeman as hostage in Rome, he remained solicitous about what would

happen to the crew members there. At one point he told them that he would see that they stayed in the best hotel if they came with him. At another point, he worried aloud about whether he could afford to give them money.

Cook said he told Minichiello not to worry because TWA flew to Rome regularly and would be able to make reservations for them at a hotel.

"I've given you guys an awful lot of trouble," Minichiello said.

"That's all right," Cook recalls saying. "We don't take it personally."

"What if the FBI finds out about how you didn't take the gun away?" Minichiello asked.

"Don't worry about that," Cook replied. "It's my duty to look after the safety of the crew and the plane."

By the time Minichiello disembarked in Rome he was on a first-name basis with the crew. "So long, Don," he said. "I'm sorry I caused you all this trouble."

"I said, 'Good luck, Raphael,'" Cook recalled.

The young man took with him Cook's card with his Kansas City address so he could write him and tell him how he finally made out. The crew was very relieved, Cook said, to discover Minichiello had been captured without being killed.

The crew members thought Minichiello should be treated as someone who is emotionally disturbed and not as a criminal, Cook said.

"The Rome police put the FBI to shame," the captain said. "The FBI just thought they were playing Wyatt Earp and wanted to engage in a shootout with a supposed criminal and bring him to justice. They would have wound up unnecessarily killing this boy and, probably, completely destroying a \$7 million airplane and wounding or endangering the lives of four crew members."

"The fact that all this was finally prevented proved out our point of view. It cost less in gunpowder and more in gasoline."