

Why FBI Shot Out Tires Of That Hijacked Jet

Washington

The FBI believes that if the flight of the hijacked Southern Airways jet had not been aborted last weekend, the drama would have ended with the certain death of all 34 persons aboard.

So convinced was acting FBI director L. Patrick Gray III of that prospect, after the three armed hijackers demanded maps and charts for a flight to Africa or Europe, that he made a crisis decision last Saturday night to sacrifice the lives of some passengers and bureau agents if necessary to save the rest.

DECISION

That decision was based on the FBI's belief that the DC-9 jet was severely disabled by an oil shortage, that the pilot was physically and emotionally exhausted, and that the aircraft could not

possibly complete the long-distance flight envisioned by the hijackers.

The bureau had also been told by the Federal Aviation Administration, the airline and pilots not on board that the plane could not possibly take off again after its tires had been shot out in Orlando, Fla.

After the plane was immobilized, according to the plan devised by Gray and other key FBI officials, agents were to board through its emergency exits and shoot it out with the hijackers.

This plan could not be carried out, however, because despite the odds against it, the hijackers demanded and Southern pilot Bill Haas managed a takeoff on the damaged tires.

The FBI has declined to comment publicly on the hijacking events of last weekend, which have provoked

charges by airline pilots and others that agents acted irresponsibly by shooting out the tires as the plane prepared for takeoff.

But the Washington Post obtained the bureau's version of the crisis from qualified FBI sources.

TIRES

The Bureau insists for example, that passengers and others who have made public statements are wrong when they contend that the tires of the jet were shot out while the aircraft was actually moving.

According to the FBI, eyewitnesses are unanimous in their assertions that the plane was "motionless" when the shots were fired.

Gray told a St. Louis press conference Tuesday that he personally made the decision to shoot out the tires.

That decision was based on advice from aviation experts, including the FAA, and concurred in by top officials of Southern Airways.

It is the FBI's view that the pilot could not possibly have been consulted, in view of the fact that one of the hijackers was holding a gun to his head at the time and was listening to all radio communications.

PLANE

Recent inspection of the hijacked airplane apparently contradicts reports that there were several bullet holes in its fuselage as a result of the FBI assault in Orlando. The only exterior damage that could be found was a dent on one wing and a bullet hole in one wheel flap from when the tires were shot out.

But the inspection in Havana reportedly confirmed the FBI's fears that a mechanical disaster was imminent if the plane took off for Europe or Africa.

It is estimated that at the time of the attempt to disable the plane in Orlando its left engine had four to eight quarts of oil and the right engine eight to 12 quarts. The minimum safety standard used by Southern and other airlines for such a DC-9 is 12 quarts of oil in each engine.

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