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Cuba Reported Firm on Jailing Hijackers

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By RICHARD WITKIN

Cuban authorities at José Martí Airport in Havana said the three gunmen who hijacked a Southern Airways jet there over the weekend would spend the rest of their lives in "four-by-four-by-four-foot" boxes, the head of the Federal Aviation Administration, John H. Shaffer, said yesterday.

The Cubans were said to have made clear to Americans on the flight that the hijackers, two wanted in Detroit on rape charges and one a fugitive from a Nashville jail, would be jailed like criminals. They will not be treated as political refugees seeking asylum, the Cubans added.

Argument was building up in the aviation community in the meantime over the shooting

out of the two left tires of the twin-jet DC-9 just before or after it started its takeoff from Orlando, Fla., on the final leg to Cuba Saturday night.

The action was taken by agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, presumably with the approval of officials of the airline.

The predominant view was that there was probably little choice at that juncture in the seemingly endless city-hopping drama except to try to immobilize the plane but that the job had been bungled.

One top official, in a typical comment, said:

"When you do it, you should do a good job to be sure you don't allow the plane to get off the ground and create more danger in the process."

Another highly placed Gov-

ernment expert said modern airliners like the twin-jet DC-9 had so much power in their engines that they could take off even if the brakes were locked.

"The best thing," he said, "might be to drive out a big truck to block the runway or damage the plane before it starts its takeoff run by driving a truck into the nose gear."

The Southern Airways jet, carrying 27 passengers and four crew members (two pilots and two stewardesses) in addition to the hijackers, did take off despite its damaged tires and some apparent indigestion of rubber into one of the engines, which sparked furiously.

Billy Harloyd Johnson, the co-pilot, of College City, Ark., was shot in the left shoulder by

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one of the gunmen, who were infuriated by the shooting of the tires. Capt. William R. Haas of LaGrange, Tenn., finally set the plane down on a foam-carpeted Havana runway, more sparks flying as the rims of the damaged left wheels touched the asphalt. The landing roll was bumpy but the only injuries were to two passengers who hurt themselves in the quick evacuation.

It was the end of a 29-hour 4,000 mile ordeal that had begun while the jet was flying from Birmingham to Montgomery, Ala., and included eight prior stops at seven different cities.

Confiscated Money

The Cuban authorities marched the hijackers away, machine guns aimed at their backs, and confiscated the \$2-million in extortion money they had received, threatening otherwise to crash the plane into the Oak Ridge, Tenn., atomic plant.

All the weary but relieved passengers and crew were flown back to Miami in a sister plane late Sunday.

There was no indication that the Cubans would alter past policy and accede to United States requests for the return of the hijackers or the money. There has been only one previous instance when an American hijacker has arrived in Cuba with extortion money. On that occasion, the \$300,000 was confiscated by the Cubans, saying it was reparations for Cubans funds frozen here.

The State Department, nevertheless, went out of its way yesterday to express the "appreciation" of the United States to Cuba for her cooperation in handling the weekend hijacking.

'Friendly Gesture'

In what other officials described as a deliberate and unusual "friendly gesture" toward Havana, the department spokesman, John F. King, said the department shared the airline's "appreciation for the cooperation shown the aircraft crew and passengers by Cuban officials."

Mr. King said Southern Airways officials had told Secretary of State William P. Rogers that Cuba had been cordial to the passengers and crew, and "most cooperative" in preparing for the emergency landing and allowing technicians to fly to Havana to repair the hijacked plane for return to this country.

On the matter of the controversial tire-shooting in Orlando, much of the criticism came from local officials and airport personnel.

Police Chief Robert Chewning complained of a lack of communications between his department and the F.B.I. agents. He said the local authorities never knew whether local F.B.I. agents were in charge or other agents who flew in on special planes.

The F.B.I. refused to comment on what happened in Orlando or any other aspects of the hijacking.

Another complaint against the F.B.I. came from Michael L. Goff, supervisor for Aircraft Service International, Inc., at the Orlando airport. He had fueled and oiled the hijacked jet and was walking away from the wing, he said, when the F.B.I. marksmen opened fire.

"They never told me there were agents surrounding me and they were going to shoot," he said. "If they had hit the fuel truck, that would have been it for me, the airplane and everything else."