

Hijacked Northwest Airlines Flight 305 sits on a runway for refueling at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

FBI

HIJACKED!

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

On Nov. 24, 1971 — 55 years ago — a mild-looking man in a business suit and a clip-on tie hijacked a Northwest Orient Airlines jet headed from Portland to Seattle-Tacoma. He demanded and got $200,000 to allow the passengers to go free. Later that night, he jumped from an open rear door of the airplane into southwestern Washington state. Some of his ransom money would be found nine years later. But the man who called himself Dan Cooper was never seen again.

THE ONLY UNSOLVED HIJACKING CASE IN THE HISTORY OF COMMERCIAL AVIATION

2 P.M.

A man calling himself Dan Cooper walks up to the Northwest Orient Airlines ticket counter at Portland International Airport and buys a one-way ticket to Seattle-Tacoma Airport for $18.52 in cash.

He's assigned an aisle seat, 18C, for Flight 305, a 30-minute flight that afternoon — the day before Thanksgiving.

Cooper — a quiet-looking man wearing a business suit, a white shirt and a black tie — takes his seat, orders a bourbon and soda and calmly smokes a cigarette.

2:50 P.M.

The Boeing 727-100 departs Portland with 36 passengers and six crew members aboard.

Shortly after departure, Cooper hands flight attendant Florence Schaffner a note. Assuming the man is trying to give her his phone number, Schaffner drops the note into her purse.

The next time Schaffner passes by him, Cooper leans toward her and says in a low voice: "Miss, you'd better look at that note. I have a bomb."

Schaffner retrieves the note, reads it and shows it to senior flight attendant Tina Mucklow.

In neat, all-capital letters written with a felt-tip pen, the hijacker demands:

- $200,000 in "negotiable American currency."
- Two sets of parachutes — two primary chutes and two reserve chutes.
- These are to be delivered on arrival at Seattle-Tacoma airport.
- In addition, a fuel truck is to stand by to refuel the 727 upon arrival.
- If these demands aren't met, the hijacker threatens to blow up the plane.

Everyone who sees the note later says Cooper had used the phrase "no funny business."

The flight attendants take the note to the pilot, Capt. William Scott. Scott informs air traffic control that Flight 305 is being hijacked.

Air traffic control, in turn, alerts the Seattle police, the FBI and the management of Northwest Orient Airlines. The airline president urges authorities to comply with whatever the hijacker demanded.

When Schaffner returns to Cooper, he's wearing a pair of dark sunglasses and he has moved over to the empty window seat. Cooper beckons for Schaffner to sit in his aisle seat. He then gives her a peek inside his briefcase, where Schaffner sees eight red cylinders attached with wires coated with red insulation and a large battery.

Cooper tells Schaffner to instruct the captain to not land until the money, parachutes and fuel truck are ready. Schaffner relays this to the captain, who then announces over the intercom that the plane had a minor mechanical problem and would circle Seattle for a while before landing.

No other passengers seem aware of what's unfolding.



FBI

Investigators constructed these sketches of hijacker Dan Cooper from descriptions by the flight crew. The name Dan morphed into "D.B. Cooper" when a reporter for a national news wire erroneously used that name and then other national news outlets copied that error.



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The crew of Flight 305 at Reno International Airport about 2½ hours after their jet landed there. From left to right: Capt. William Scott, First Officer Robert Rataczak, flight attendant Tina Mucklow and Flight Engineer Harold Anderson. Flight attendants Florence Schaffner and Alice Hancock had been released in Seattle, along with the passengers.

Cooper had demanded $20 bills with random, rather than sequential, serial numbers. The FBI complies, but makes sure every serial number begins with the code letter L. Naturally, the agency keeps track of every serial number.

McChord Air Force Base offers to supply the parachutes, but Cooper declines this, demanding civilian parachutes with user-operated rip cords. The owner of a nearby skydiving school reopens his business in order to provide the kind of chutes Cooper demands.

5:24 P.M.

Officials on the ground indicate the demands have been met. The flight crew passes word along to Cooper.

5:39 P.M.

Flight 305 finally lands at Seattle-Tacoma Airport, more than an hour after sunset and more than two hours behind schedule. Cooper orders the captain to taxi to a remote, well-lit area and to have the person bringing the cash and the parachutes to approach the plane alone. He also orders the cabin lights dimmed.

A Northwest employee drives to the 727 in a company car, climbs the plane's built-in stairs and delivers the money and the parachutes. Once Cooper verifies his demands have been met, he allows the passengers, Schaffner and one more flight attendant to leave the plane.

As they wait for the plane to be refueled, Cooper requests instructions on how to lower the aft stairs in flight. He tells the captain he wants to go to Mexico City, but he wants the plane to fly below 10,000 feet and under 150 knots (173 mph).

The captain tells him that even with a full tank of 52,000 gallons, at that speed and altitude, the plane would need to refuel again in Reno, Nevada. Cooper settles on Reno as their next stop.

7:46 P.M.

Captain Scott takes off with only his first officer, his flight engineer, flight attendant Mucklow and Cooper aboard.

Cooper instructs the crew to gather in the cockpit, to close the door and to not come out until they arrive in Reno. He also instructs the crew to depressurize the cabin.

8 P.M.

A warning light flashes inside the cockpit, indicating the aft door and stairs have been opened. Scott uses the intercom to ask Cooper if there was anything they could do for him.

"No!" he yells.



8:13 P.M.

The aircraft lurches suddenly, about 25 miles north of Portland. Scott levels the flight, but it's apparent that Cooper has jumped. Nevertheless, the crew obeys Cooper's directive to remain in the cockpit.

10:15 P.M.

With its aft airstair still deployed, the Boeing 727 lands at Reno Airport. Cooper is not aboard, nor is the ransom money. He left behind his black necktie — which turns out to be a clip-on tie.

AFTERWARD

Authorities perform an extensive search of the area where Cooper jumped from the plane. They find no trace of him, his parachutes or the money.

NOVEMBER 1978

A laminated placard with instructions on how to lower the aft stairs of a 727 are found by a deer hunter near Castle Rock, Washington — along the path Flight 305 had taken that night.



FBI

Part of the ransom money found in 1980.

FEB. 10, 1980

An 8-year-old boy vacationing with his family in a campground 9 miles from Vancouver is raking to clear space for a campfire when he uncovers three packets of money: Two packets of 100 $20 bills and a third packet of 90 — badly disintegrated but still bundled with rubber bands. The FBI determines the money is part of the ransom that had been paid to Cooper.

Sources: FBI, CrimeMuseum.org, Biography.com, New York magazine, Rolling Stone, Encyclopaedia Britannica, the Spokesman-Review files, History.com