

## **My First Direct Involvement with a Hijacking**

By John Dickerson

The world seems to be jumping from one violent action calamity to another these days. I remember reading about Billy the Kid, Jesse James and even reading reports of John Dillinger, Al Capone and the Valentine's Day massacre. I guess there is no question that I am a senior citizen!

If I tell you that I went to my first "on the ground aircraft hijacking" in the early 1970s, I don't know what you would say about me. I have been through a number of these adventures in my 37-year career in airport management, but like a first child, the first hijacking does stand out. We had been the starting point of a number of in-flight hijackings prior to this event, and they had all ended in Cuba. Since they started while the aircraft was in flight, they were not as involving.

As one of the senior managers of JFK Airport, with the on airport police unit a part of my division, I was always on call (twenty- four/seven). One day, it was my good fortune to get a wake up call at my home from our police unit, that a TWA 707 was inbound with a hijacker calling the signals for the crew. My day had started and I made the 23- mile trip to the airport in record time.

Our general manager was at the airport when I arrived, and he had summoned a large contingent of people to the conference room. I think this was the first time a hijacker was to bring a plane into a United States airport.

It seems to be public policy or KYAC policy that events of this type are best handled if you invite all those involved, or think they should be involved, to a briefing and action program. If that is the criterion, I think we covered all the bases. It has been over 30 years since this meeting, so I may miss a few attendees -- but I recall the following agencies attending with their second and thirds in command:

- Port Authority "on airport staff" for its four operating divisions.
- FBI with a full support staff
- FAA staff for the control tower, security, and flight operations center
- New York City Police Department -- various units
- New York City Fire Department
- U.S. Customs-enforcement and inspection
- U.S. Immigration Service
- U.S. Public Health
- U.S. Plant Quarantine
- TWA operations and security
- Catholic chaplain
- Protestant chaplain
- Rabbi chaplain
- Two people that served coffee

Now that you have met the players, here is what we knew. The TWA 707, an older model meant for domestic service only, was taken over by a passenger of Italian extraction as it departed Chicago. His plan was to get the aircraft to Italy with a stopover at JFK for fuel. The crew had told him that this was a domestic aircraft, and they had no charts to take them to Rome. He could not be dissuaded and his gun very persuading. The crew passed the word to the TWA flight center. Hence the big meeting that I was invited to attend.

The meeting, as you would expect, produced much in the way of innovative ideas, but no positive solutions until the following items of “turf” came into play. Here is the ground rule breakdown:

1. If the aircraft is on the ground, the local police (Port Authority) are in charge.
2. Until the FBI arrives and takes over, they are supported by all other agencies in sight.
3. If the aircraft is in the air, the FAA is in charge, until it lands and steps 1 and 2 start again

The plan was to bring the aircraft to a remote part of the airport to comply with the refueling demand and offload any passengers the hijacker would release. Efforts would be made to have a negotiating team try to talk him out, or get him in a position for the sharpshooters to stop him.

It was a straightforward plan until my boss, the general manager, who was also of Italian extraction, suggested that the chaplains might be better able to try to talk him out.

Now you and the chaplains know why the chaplain’s were there! They all responded as follows:

- Rabbi-“Not one of mine”.
- Protestant-“Not one of mine”.
- Catholic-“Thanks, hope to do the same for you sometime”.

It would appear that this fellow was of some other faith, because he turned the priest down and there was no chance to disarm him or shoot.

The aircraft that wasn’t certified to cross the Atlantic had already been refueled, and the crew, with a gun at their heads, took off. They did make it to Rome and the lad was taken into custody after receiving a hero’s reception. The Italians never returned him to the United States much to the consternation of the American authorities.

They never told me why he wanted to go to Italy!