

Summary Overview


Cooper

An American Mystery Undone

By Scott Patrick Lavy

A BULLETIN FROM THE F.B.I

FOLLOWING IS AN ARTIST CONCEPTION OF THE HIJACKER WHO EXTORTED
\$200,000 FROM NORTHWEST AIRLINES ON NOVEMBER 24, 1971.



THIS MAN IS DESCRIBED AS FOLLOWS:

RACE	WHITE
SEX	MALE
AGE	MID 40'S
HEIGHT	5' 10'' TO 6'
WEIGHT	170 TO 180 POUNDS
BUILD	AVERAGE TO WELL BUILT
COMPLEXION	OLIVE, LATIN APPEARANCE, MEDIUM SMOOTH
HAIR	DARK BROWN OR BLACK, NORMAL STYLE, PARTED ON LEFT, COMBED BACK; SIDEBURNS, LOW EAR LEVEL
EYES	POSSIBLY BROWN. DURING LATTER PART OF FLIGHT PUT ON DARK, WRAP-AROUND SUNGLASSES WITH DARK RIMS
VOICE	LOW, SPOKE INTELLIGENTLY; NO PARTICULAR ACCENT, POSSIBLY FROM MIDWEST SECTION OF U.S.
CHARACTERISTICS	HEAVY SMOKER OF RALEIGH FILTER TIP CIGARETTES
WEARING APPAREL	BLACK SUIT; WHITE SHIRT; NARROW BLACK TIE; BLACK DRESS SUIT; BLACK RAIN-TYPE OVERCOAT OR DARK TOP COAT; DARK BRIEFCASE OR ATTACHE CASE; CAR- RIED PAPER BAG 4" X 12" X 14"; BROWN SHOES.

IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION WHICH MIGHT LEAD TO THE IDENTITY
OF THIS INDIVIDUAL, PLEASE CONTACT THE NEAREST FBI OFFICE WHICH
WOULD BE FOUND IN THE FRONT OF YOUR TELEPHONE DIRECTORY.

Preface

There comes a moment when every story must be told. A point at which the tale itself can lie dormant no longer. Its questions unanswered. Its truths denied. That time has come for one of America's most enduring mysteries. A favored legend that has stubbornly refused to give way to reality. It is time to dismiss the flawed conclusions of the past and remember that the truth has traced an indelible path through time that can never be completely concealed.

As Reported

On November 24th, 1971, a middle-aged white man purchased a one-way ticket to Seattle, Washington, aboard Northwest Airline's flight 305 out of Portland, Oregon's International Airport. As the plane raced down the runway, the business traveler passed a note to stewardess Florence Schaffner at the back of the plane. The note indicated that he had a bomb concealed in his briefcase and that he would destroy the plane and all on board if his demands were not met. The note directed her to take the seat next to him. The young airline hostess maintained her composure as she quietly complied.

The traveler gave the name Dan Cooper to the counter agent who sold him the ticket. The suspect was well groomed and neatly dressed in business attire. According to the FBI Bulletin, he carried with him a black attaché and a brown paper sack. The hijacker spoke American English, absent any discernable accent, and presented a calm, non-hostile demeanor. He dictated his demands to Schaffner before he opened the briefcase to reveal what appeared to be a large explosive device. Ms. Schaffner relayed the demands, \$200,000 in cash, four parachutes, and fuel for the

jet, to the flight crew in the cockpit. Everything was to be ready in Seattle before he would allow the big jet to land.

Captain William Scott declared an emergency and alerted Air Traffic Control (ATC) of their situation. ATC in turn alerted the authorities on the ground. Airport security, local police, and the FBI all responded as controllers diverted the jetliner into a holding pattern over Puget Sound. Two and half hours later flight 305 touched down with thirty-six passengers, six crew members and Dan Cooper on board.

The ransom was promptly delivered to the suspect, but ground crews could not get the jet refueled, and Cooper rejected the parachutes brought from nearby McChord Air Force Base. Three different trucks were needed to fill the fuel tanks. Replacement parachutes were procured from a local skydiving school. The hostages waited on the plane while these corrections were made. Once Cooper was satisfied that his demands were met and that he wasn't being double-crossed, he released the thirty-six passengers and two members of the crew. He kept four crew members on board to operate the plane while he made his escape.

He chose Mexico City as his desired destination. The crew explained that the distance to Mexico City required more gas than they carried. A stop in Reno, Nevada to refuel was added to the flight plan. They departed Seattle on Victor 23, an old air route that was no longer in use. Before they left the suspect insisted that the aft stairway remain down while they took off.

Airport safety officials refused to clear the jet with the stairway deployed. They cited safety concerns for their refusal. An agitated Cooper insisted it was safe. After a lengthy debate the suspect relented and said that he would lower the stairs in-flight. He communicated further instructions directly to the crew. The plane was not to exceed 10,000 feet in elevation. The flaps were to be set at 15°. The landing

gear was to stay in the down position, and the air speed reduced to its lowest point that would allow the aircraft to remain airborne without stalling the engines.

The four crew members on board were Captain Scott, First Officer Bill Rataczak, Flight Engineer Harold Anderson, and Stewardess Tina Mucklow. The three-member flight deck crew took their assigned positions in the cockpit while Tina Mucklow and the hijacker were the only occupants of the passenger cabin. The 727 departed Seattle well after dark in a cold steady November rain.

Once underway Mucklow showed Cooper how to access the aft stairway. He then ordered her to the cockpit where she stayed for the rest of the flight. Around 8:00 PM the crew felt a change in the cabin air pressure. An indicator light for the aft stairway flashed on, and then off. The captain used the intercom to query the hijacker, "Hey, do you need any help back there?"

"No!" came the shouted reply. The indicator lamp came back on and stayed on. The plane pitched sharply forward. Such that Captain Scott had to correct it back to level flight. They continued to Reno without further incident. The aft airstair, still extended, showered sparks down the length of the runway. The stairway was damaged during the landing and required significant repair before the jet could be flown again.

The FBI and local law enforcement encircled the plane immediately with their guns drawn. The crew cautiously emerged from the cockpit to find the cabin empty. The money, two of the four parachutes, and the hijacker were gone. At that point it was assumed by all that the daring outlaw had strapped on two of the parachutes, secured the money to his body, and jumped from the extended stairway. The suspect, Dan (D.B.) Cooper, was never seen or heard from again.

Key Observations

- FBI lead investigator Ralph Himmelsbach had every bill in the ransom photocopied to microfiche before it was delivered to Cooper. Hence, authorities had a comprehensive list of the serial numbers.
- Himmelsbach also had the hijacked plane followed by two fighter jets out of McChord, while he pursued it in a helicopter borrowed from the Air Force Reserve. The fighter jet's sophisticated air-to-air radar were used to spot an open parachute canopy, but none were reported.
- Cooper was familiar with the operating parameters and capabilities of the Boeing 727.
- The 727 was the only commercial jetliner in service from which a person might attempt to skydive. Before flight 305 was hijacked it was unknown whether Cooper's daring escape was even possible.
- A winter storm that reduced visibility to zero blew in off the North Pacific.
- Once they had departed, Cooper was uninterested in the plane's position, speed or the elapsed time.
- The suspect had no gear or attire appropriate to make the jump. He lacked a helmet, boots, gloves, or goggles. And did not request any.
- Below 10,000 feet the plane did not pressurize. It was also below the long-range radar of the ATC. South of Seattle there were four mountain peaks that exceeded that elevation.
- Despite an extensive FBI canvas in Portland, Himmelsbach never determined how Cooper arrived at Portland's International Airport.
- Nine years later three bundles of deteriorated ransom money were discovered partially buried on the banks of the Columbia River in southern Washington State.

- Years later it was revealed that D.B. Cooper was not the first person to attempt to skydive from a commercial jetliner.

The Jump

The crimes of air piracy and extortion occurred aboard flight 305. And suspect Dan Cooper was a real person who purchased a ticket and boarded the plane in Portland, Oregon. That much was confirmed. But it was very unlikely that he escaped by jumping from the plane. If he attempted the jump, he undoubtedly died in the attempt. Extensive ground searches afterward; the next day, and in the months and years that followed, turned up no body or skeletal remains, believed to be that of the suspect. Neither of the missing parachutes were recovered. The money that was found on the banks of the Columbia River nine years after-the-fact, and the instruction placard from inside the stairwell (also discovered years later) were the only items of evidence from inside the plane that were ever found.

Cooper's lack of gear and proper attire for such a stunt, coupled with his disinterest in the elapsed time and the relative position of the aircraft, all suggested that no such attempt was planned or made. If he was foolish enough to try, the weather conditions outside the plane were formidable. The air temperature was near 0° in a steady freezing rain. Without gloves or goggles, traveling at one hundred fifty knots, the suspect was immediately blinded. His hands froze and were rendered useless after just a few seconds. The daredevil bandit couldn't actuate the ripcord release on his parachute even if he saw the ground rushing up at him in the pitch-black night.

Furthermore, the jump from that plane on that night defies basic logic. If you planned to become the first person in history to skydive from a commercial jetliner

and you could choose from any airport, any destination, at any time, on any day, would you select a flight that forced your first and only attempt to be made at night, during a winter storm, over some the most rugged wilderness terrain in the country? The answer to that question was clearly negative. Dan Cooper did not make that jump. He didn't have to.

If no one jumped from that plane on that night, and the hijacker was not on board when the plane landed, it must be concluded that he was not on the plane when it left Seattle. And that meant the four crew members who flew the jet to Reno lied to investigators about Cooper's presence on the plane. That observation implicated the four in a conspiracy to extort \$200,000 from their employer. With the cooperation of the crew, Cooper was able to affect his escape in Seattle with the money, completely unnoticed.

In his post-retirement memoir *NORJAK* (the original case file name), Ralph Himmelsbach went into detail about the FBI canvas that was conducted in Portland. His team interviewed every cab driver, every bus driver and every crew member from every inbound flight that arrived before Northwest 305. Twice! Not a single possible sighting of the suspect was reported. Every car left in the parking area was accounted for.

The veteran FBI agent lamented, "It was as if the guy materialized out of thin air."

There was, however, one possibility that Himmelsbach failed to consider. And that was that Dan Cooper had arrived at Portland's International Airport aboard flight 305 itself.

The Escape

If the suspect used a different alias to board flight 305 at its origin in Washington D.C., that name appeared on the flight manifest as one of the passengers held hostage. The suspect wore a disguise to conceal his true appearance. The plane was refueled as scheduled in Portland. Consequently, the culprit had time to deplane, change out of his disguise, purchase a second ticket, and reboard the aircraft as Dan Cooper. He carried the elements of his disguise, cowboy boots and a Stetson, in the brown paper sack noted by the counter agent. He reboarded the plane via the aft airstair and took the assigned seat near the back of the passenger cabin.

The cabin crew tallied the on-board headcount. Tina Mucklow marked the “cowboy” present up front even though he had exited the plane. Florence Schaffner counted Dan Cooper present at the back of the plane. Together this inflated the on-board headcount by one, to thirty-seven passengers. The passenger count on the flight manifest was also falsely inflated to thirty-seven when Cooper bought the second ticket in Portland. The two passenger counts correlated at thirty-seven, but there were only thirty-six passengers including Cooper on the plane.

While the unsuspecting hostages waited in the dimly lit plane in Seattle, Cooper transferred the bulk of the ransom to a carry-on bag that he brought with him that morning. The bag was empty except for the false bottom that he used to conceal the cash. He had Tina Mucklow stow the carry-on bag while he grabbed the paper sack. The clever bandit then slipped into the aft lavatory and quick-changed back into the cowboy. He exited the lavatory and rejoined the other waiting passengers. All of whom had been moved forward from their original seats. That was away from the bomb-wielding hijacker. The captain used a false claim of mechanical problems to explain their delayed arrival and the request that they all move forward in the cabin. When the fatigued passengers were finally

given the go-ahead to collect their belongings and deplane, the suspect, dressed as the cowboy, was among them. Tina Mucklow retrieved the carry-on bag and handed it over to the disguised suspect. The clothes that he wore as Dan Cooper were dumped in on top to cover the false bottom. All except the narrow black clip-on tie. That item missed the carry-on and was inadvertently left behind.

The thirty-six released passengers were escorted to Northwest Airline's VIP lounge where they were each briefly interviewed by waiting FBI subordinates. Each passenger's name was called and checked off a copy of the flight manifest. The cowboy boarded in Washington D.C. for travel booked through to Seattle. The agents fully expected him to be among the released hostages. So, the agents dismissed him as a potential suspect.

More importantly, Florence Schaffner was one of the two crew members released. She was not a part of the conspiracy. And she was the last person to get off the jetliner in Seattle. Florence was absolutely certain the hijacker was seated at the back of the plane talking with Tina Mucklow as she (Schaffner) left the plane. The FBI agents had no reason to doubt the sincerity of her claim.

However, it was not the suspect Dan Cooper that Schaffner saw at the back of the darkened cabin. It was First Officer Bill Rataczak impersonating the suspect. The copilot came to the back of the plane to discuss details of the flight plan with Cooper. Instead, he removed his flight jacket and cap, put on the dark sunglasses the suspect had worn throughout the ordeal, and slumped down in the seat previously occupied by the hijacker. The copilot's airline uniform was indistinguishable from the attire Dan Cooper wore. Including the narrow black clip-on tie held in place with a tie tack. When the suspect changed back into the cowboy, Dan (D.B.) Cooper effectively vanished. The subordinate FBI agents in

the VIP lounge asked the cowboy a few routine questions, took a cursory look in his carry-on bag, and sent him on his way.

The Cooper Paradox

Himmelsbach knew time was of the essence. He had police sketch artists draw up composite sketches as soon as he could get them. The artists worked from the recollections of the two primary eyewitnesses, Florence Schaffner and Tina Mucklow. Schaffner described the hijacker as she recalled him. But, Tina Mucklow, as a co-conspirator, was compelled to provide details that differed from those of Dan Cooper. She did, however, select elements from the composite kit that were familiar to her. Consciously or unconsciously, the young airline hostess described a man who bore a striking resemblance to the person she became life-long friends with. First Officer Bill Rataczak. It was never disclosed whether there was more to their relationship than mere friendship or not, but the body language in the photographs taken at Reno Airport suggested that there was.



Regardless, when Himmelsbach chose to use the sketch drawn with Tina Mucklow's help it created a paradox. The copilot could not have been the hijacker, and the hijacker could not have been the copilot, but that was the face that was

presented to the public. That was the face that the entire world identified as D.B. Cooper. And it was the wrong face.



Florence Schaffner later claimed that the image used on the FBI Bulletin did not look like the suspect that she recalled. She also recalled a bizarre incident that occurred several years after the hijacking. A stranger followed her onto several flights that she worked. When she finally confronted the man, he claimed to know D.B. Cooper. That he had met him in prison. The stranger also claimed that Cooper had worked for the CIA and had been involved in training Cuban Freedom Fighters for the Bay-of-Pigs invasion of Cuba. Schaffner was shaken by the incident, but nothing further came of it.

In 2016 the FBI finally decided to quit the case. The Bureau uploaded the entire case file to an online archive and announced that, without any new evidence, they would not be actively pursuing D.B. Cooper. Page 3, Volume I, of that online archive showed the two composite sketches labeled “Initial” and “Revised”. The initial sketch was the image drawn with Florence Schaffner’s help. The revised sketch was drawn from Tina Mucklow’s recollection. Mucklow’s sketch was the familiar image printed on the FBI Bulletin. The two sketches were clearly of two

different men. The initial sketch was the only image that represented the real hijacker. The face in the initial sketch presented a square jaw with a prominent cleft. This was the man that Schaffner described as “swarthy”.

The Secret War

In November of 1971, the United States was still embroiled in the military conflicts of Southeast Asia. Overtly in Vietnam. Covertly in Laos and Cambodia. While the U.S. Military fought the war in Vietnam, the Special Activities Division of the CIA was responsible for the covert actions in Laos and Cambodia. It was revealed more than a decade later that Dan Cooper was not the first person to attempt to skydive from a commercial jetliner. The CIA used three modified Boeing 727s to air-drop tons of food and other humanitarian aid to Laotian refugees displaced by the massive U.S. bombardment of the Ho Chi Minh trail that ran through Northern Laos. The “trail” was a labyrinth of roads and pathways that China used to supply North Vietnam and their allies in the south.

The bulk of the displaced refugees were peasant farmers. Hmong villagers whose homeland was secluded in the mountains of Northern Laos. The Kingdom of Laos was allied militarily with the U.S., but the Royal Lao Army (RLA) could not consistently hold the area of the Ho Chi Minh trail against the much stronger North Vietnamese Army. Defense of the Hmong homeland fell largely to militias recruited from local villages by RLA General Vang Pao (Hmong himself). The Hmong militias were allied with the RLA but often fought independent of regular

army command. These ununiformed units of combat irregulars were collectively known as the Meo.

The Meo were combat guerillas who became experts in jungle warfare out of necessity. Often trapped behind enemy lines they were fierce in defense of their homeland. Cunning and deadly the Meo units terrified the Laotian communists, the Pathet Lao. The newest recruits, however, were untrained and without arms. The Special Activities Division supplied weapons, munitions, and military advisors who trained the raw recruits. The Agency delivered the advisors via the same 727s that dropped humanitarian aid to the refugees. The day after D.B. Cooper hijacked flight 305 the American public sat in awe. The FBI was perplexed. But the CIA knew they had a problem. Because they were the only organization in the world that had trained personnel to skydive from a Boeing 727. And Cooper clearly had knowledge of how that was done.

The Politics

In late 1971 Richard M. Nixon, President of The United States, prepared for the final campaign of his long political career. By far the greatest threat to his bid for re-election was America's continued involvement in the military conflicts of Indochina and the home-grown opposition to it. Six months before flight 305 was hijacked government employee Daniel Ellsberg leaked a top-secret Pentagon report to The New York Times. The Time's publication of portions of that report reignited anti-war demonstrations at home. While Nixon desperately sought to extricate the U.S. Military from Vietnam.

The publication of The Pentagon Papers prompted Nixon's White House staff to organize a group of political operatives who were to prevent such leaks in

the future. And to mitigate the damage that was already done. CIA Officer John Paisley was the Agency's liaison to the group. Headed by former CIA Officer E. Howard Hunt and former FBI Special Agent G. Gordon Liddy, the clandestine operatives were known informally as the Special Investigations Unit, and colloquially as The White House Plumbers. The group disbanded at the end of 1971, when most of its members transitioned to The Committee to Re-elect the President (CRP).

Paisley was Assistant Director of the Office of Security at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. He became aware of their problem the morning after flight 305 was hijacked. On Thanksgiving Day, 1971, every newspaper in the country published the wire service photo of the hijacked 727 as it sat on the tarmac in Seattle. Alarmed, managers at the CIA's aircraft maintenance base at the former army airfield outside Marana, Arizona, brought their suspicions to Paisley's attention. As a senior level CIA Officer, he was in a unique position to compartmentalize the crisis.

The airfield outside Marana was the maintenance base for all CIA owned airlines. As such it was the state-side maintenance and logistics hub for Air America. Air America owned and operated the three modified Boeing 727s used to deliver aid to the Laotian refugees and military support and supplies to the Meo.

Adjacent to Marana Army Airfield was Pinal Air Park, the largest aircraft salvage yard in the world. It was revealed in the 1980s that 80% of the aircraft stored at Pinal were registered to Northwest Airlines, even though Northwest never enjoyed more than a sixth-place position in the domestic airline market. Not surprisingly, no planes parked at Pinal were registered to the CIA or any of its affiliates. The use of the 727s to deliver aid to the Kingdom of Laos was a military secret in a time of war. That classified that information as Top-Secret and thus

made it a matter of National Security. John Paisley used that designation to intercede into the investigation.

Paisley identified Cooper immediately from the initial sketch. He reached out to Director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover and without giving specific details notified him of the “National Security” issue. Hoover, a devout anticommunist, agreed to remove the crew from the Bureau’s investigation on those grounds. Himmelsbach received notice that the crew was not to be questioned and to publicly dismiss them as suspects for any reason other than the National Security matter. Ralph, a veteran himself, reluctantly complied. At that level no official channels or paperwork were needed.

In *NORJAK* Himmelsbach glossed over any potential crew involvement with claims that the crew didn’t know one another that well, and that they had no control over which flights they were assigned to work. Consequently, the airline employees were dismissed as potential suspects without any investigation whatsoever. Both of those claims were factually inaccurate.

Air America’s planes traveled to and from the Asian theater via the Aleutian Arch. A route that began in Seattle, then continued north through Alaska, over the Aleutian Archipelago, and down the Eastern seaboard of Asia to Taiwan (Formosa). To reach Seattle from Marana they would refuel in Reno, Nevada. The flight plan incorporated the retired air route Victor 23. No one jumped from that plane on that night, but someone on board knew that it was possible. The conspirators set the stage to convince the authorities, and subsequently the rest of the world that that was what had occurred.

To complete the charade the four-member crew had to deploy the aft airstair in flight. This was a risky task. But it had to be done to jettison two of the

parachutes, the briefcase, and a small portion of ransom cash held back for that purpose. Collectively, this was to lead investigators out into the wilderness in search of their man. Bill Rataczak carried out this dangerous assignment. He opened one of the parachutes and cut several shroud lines from the canopy. He twisted the thin cords together to fashion a make-shift tether that he used to anchor himself to the plane while he climbed down the open stairway and tossed out the false trail of evidence. In his haste the First Officer neglected to unbundle the cash as planned. The money failed to disperse over a wide area. Consequently, none of the evidence was found for years. As it turned out, that made no difference. Because it was not the FBI that Cooper needed to evade. It was the CIA.

The Central Intelligence Agency was in a jam. The release of the Pentagon Papers had ratcheted up calls for Congressional scrutiny of the Vietnam Conflict and how it was funded. As the election loomed large, The Administration could ill afford to have America's clandestine activities in Laos brought to center stage. International treaties banned outside interference in the Laotian Civil War. And in 1970, four student protestors were shot and killed on the campus of Kent State University by National Guard Troops. The protest was an antiwar demonstration sparked by the disclosure of clandestine Marine incursions into Cambodia. The protestors claimed the war was being expanded, not reduced, as Nixon claimed. Management at the CIA knew they needed to capture D.B. Cooper, whoever he was, before the rank-and-file civilian authorities caught him. And that meant now!

Paisley put together a covert team to hunt down and capture the hijacker. That team quickly realized the escape was hoaxed. They also deduced that the crew was involved in the crime. Their pursuit paid off. They captured the suspect along with his crew of conspirators before they made off with the loot. But their apparent success left the CIA literally holding the bag. The Agency had no means to

prosecute the perpetrators. They also had no way to return the money without answering a lot of questions that they would rather not answer. If the funds were diverted to any other purpose and they were traced back to them, it would look as if the CIA had initiated the crime for that purpose. Paisley couldn't take that chance. He chose the only course of action that preserved the top-secret information *and* maintained plausible deniability for the Agency. He released the airline employees under threat of future prosecution if the truth was ever revealed. He then ordered all the evidence, the money included, destroyed. His team complied with those orders. Not a single \$20 bill from the ransom was ever recovered from circulation. In other words, not one cent of that money was ever spent on anything, by anyone, anywhere, for any purpose.

That left John Paisley with one loose end, Dan Cooper. A contracted mission specialist whose disappearance would not be questioned by anyone. However, the individual involved was not to be outdone in his efforts. The man who hijacked flight 305 was not your run-of-the-mill criminal. He was far more resourceful and cunning than the original story of a lone hijacker suggested. And he was prepared for any contingency.

Captured by the team sent to apprehend him, the suspect pulled a political grenade from his pocket. A last-minute fail-safe that even John Paisley could not subvert. It was a horrific secret hidden in plain sight. Intel that was beyond U.S. control and therefore, could not be classified. It was a reality so heinous that no one dared speak of it. And yet, there it was. An unavoidable consequence of a war The United States was not supposed to be involved in. A black truth that evolved organically within the cauldron of hell that was Indochina of the 1960s. The suspect faced off with the CIA, prepared to pull the pin. Paisley flinched. He knew the Administration could not take the chance on the eve of Richard Nixon's final

campaign. Resigned to the greater fate and shielded with a valid claim of National Security, John Paisley compartmentalized the entire matter. That meant he had to let the suspect go free with the others. But again, not without condition.

Frank

Frank Fiorini lived a life cut from the pages of an action hero novel. He was born in Norfolk, Virginia in 1924. In 1942 he joined The United States Marine Corp at the age of seventeen. He shipped out to Burma as a Marine Raider to combat Japanese forces that occupied that region during World War II (WWII). In Burma his unit fought in conjunction with Chinese forces that were commanded by General Mao Tsung. Mao's units adopted commando style tactics. This was highly effective in jungle warfare. The young Marine learned to emulate those tactics, and they served him well over the course of his adult life. Before WWII ended, Frank became involved with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a forerunner to the CIA. At the end of the war, he was honorably discharged as a Corporal and returned home to Norfolk, Virginia.

As a civilian he enrolled in school but opted out after a year. The former Marine joined the Norfolk Police Department and was soon disillusioned by the corruption he witnessed. For the next year and a half he managed a tavern in Norfolk. In 1947, he enlisted in The Naval Reserve and was trained as a pilot. When he joined the U.S. Army in 1948, he was immediately posted to Berlin where the Soviet Union had blocked all ground access to the city.

As a member of General Lucius Clay's Honor Guard, Frank earned top-level security clearance. He was assigned to an intelligence gathering unit that focused on the Soviet Union. He was a fully trained combat Marine turned wannabe spy.

When the blockade lifted, he returned home and was honorably discharged from military service.

In 1952 Frank Fiorini legally changed his surname to that of his stepfather, the man who raised him, Ralph Sturgis. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Officer and prolific author E. Howard Hunt used the name Hank Sturgis for the main character in his 1949 novel *Bimini Run*. In the early 1950s Sturgis was contracted to train guerilla soldiers in jungle warfare in Guatemala. He moved to Cuba in 1956 and traveled extensively throughout South and Central America. In 1957 Sturgis relocated to Miami where he was introduced to a group of Cuban exiles who plotted the overthrow of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. Frank and a friend smuggled arms to Fidel Castro's growing rebel force in Cuba. While there he began to train Castro's men in guerilla tactics and other strategies useful in jungle warfare.

The former Marine Raider hit it off with Fidel Castro and continued to train his men. He also continued to smuggle guns into Cuba. Often in partnership with mobster Santos Trafficante. Frank was also a CIA informant in Cuba; He was once arrested for illegal possession of weapons but released without charge. After Castro seized power, the new Cuban leader made Frank Sturgis Chief of Cuban Air Force Security and gave the young American authority over Cuba's mob-controlled gambling industry. When Castro's communist affiliations became apparent Frank defected back to the United States. The wannabe spy took the head of Cuban Air Force with him. A furious Castro publicly condemned Sturgis, calling him, "The most dangerous man in the CIA."

Frank Sturgis was a hired gun. A mercenary who trained men for guerilla warfare around the globe, but he considered himself a spy. A self-taught expert on the aerial supply of isolated commando units, he consulted and advised rebels and

governments alike. He was innovative and fearless. Sturgis felt betrayed by Castro and longed for an opportunity to even the score. He again trained Cuban rebels to liberate their country from the grip of a dictator. He was extremely distraught over the debacle at the Bay-of Pigs. The former Marine was disturbed by the lack of resolve of the newly elected American President, John F. Kennedy. He felt that The United States abandoned the Cuban Freedom Fighters at the last minute. Without the promised U.S. air support the rebel forces were trapped on the beaches where they landed. The attempt to oust Castro turned into a rout of the rebel forces. Many of the men Frank trained paid for that blunder with their lives.

Howard Hunt also helped prepare for the failed Bay-of-Pigs invasion. The Cuban fiasco dogged Kennedy's early Presidency. Those who were involved in the preparations dispersed within the Special Activities Division. Hunt was reassigned to logistics support in the "Secret War". There was no record of Frank Sturgis' involvement in Laos. In fact, from 1967 to 1972 there was no record of Frank Sturgis' activity at all. Anywhere! The mercenary disappeared entirely. Frank's biographer (and nephew) Jim Hunt left this five-year period completely blank in Frank's biography, *Warrior*. The author offered no reference or explanation for the omission.

In Laos the CIA needed a novel solution to an intractable problem. How to covertly deliver thousands of tons of humanitarian aid to the huge number of refugees displaced by the U.S. bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail. While the Meo militia, who often fought as isolated commando groups, also needed resupply and training. The unique approach of modified commercial jetliners to accomplish both tasks most likely originated with Frank Sturgis. If so, he visited the Boeing fabrication facility outside Seattle to advise and evaluate the progress of the

modifications. This was where the tie left behind by Cooper picked up the microscopic particles of titanium that were later found on it.

Training guerilla fighters in jungle warfare was Frank Sturgis' stock and trade. Howard Hunt was assigned to Laos, and the Meo needed exactly the training he provided. So, it was hard to imagine that Frank Sturgis was anywhere else. Either way, the *Warrior's* whereabouts on November 24th, 1971, were unknown. His square jaw and cleft chin matched the initial composite sketch. And the rarely used descriptor, "swarthy", was a solid fit for the veteran jungle fighter. Frank trained troops for the Bay-of-Pigs invasion. He spent time in prison for his role in the Watergate burglary. So many little details fell neatly into place that it was impossible to ignore Frank Sturgis as a prime suspect in the hijacking of flight 305.



Initial Sketch
FBI Archive '71



Frank Sturgis '72-'73

The Meo

The militias of Northern Laos were unique in their role. The Hmong villagers were mocked and maltreated by the Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao. The deep resentment the Hmong peasants had for the communists allied them with the Royal Lao Government and the U.S. Military. The indigenous units fought to preserve their homeland and their way of life. Inherently passive, the Hmong did not go to war. The war came to them. The Meo militia was their response.

Recruited from the local villages by popular RLA General Vang Pao, who was Hmong himself, the young men learned quickly. They adapted the commando style training to their intimate knowledge of the jungle covered mountains of Northern Laos. The jungle fighters were cunning, fierce, and determined. The Meo could not retreat, nor surrender. Losing the war was never an option. The loose bands of disheveled peasants evolved into formidable guerilla fighters. The Pathet Lao were terrified of them. The often-barefoot troops moved through the jungle

with remarkable stealth. They were silent and incredibly lethal. The Meo incorporated psychological elements of fear and misdirection into their tactics. They took jungle warfare to a new level. All together at their maximum the Meo militias numbered 30,000 fighters.

The Politics of War

Richard Nixon realized that the war in Vietnam was an unwinnable conflict that would doom any American leader who pursued victory. Opposition to the war demoralized and defeated the Democratic Party in the 1968 election. Nixon took office in 1969 determined to extricate American forces from Vietnam before the next election cycle brought him up for re-election. However, to preserve his legacy he chose a roundabout strategy. One that he believed would save face on the world stage. Consequently, the American military strategy in Indochina changed. The massive bombardment of Hanoi was redirected to Laos. The number of U.S. combat troops in Vietnam was steadily reduced. But, at the same time, military and financial support to South Vietnam increased exponentially. Nixon's plan was to build up South Vietnam's ability to defend itself. In theory, this would permit the withdrawal of American forces, "with honor."

By 1970 the intent was clear. American military and political leaders no longer sought to win the war. Instead, they searched for an exit to the conflict. The roundabout strategy ultimately failed. But Frank Sturgis saw the writing on the wall. When he realized America was no longer fighting to win, he concluded that his men were destined to be abandoned on the field of battle, just as the Freedom Fighters were abandoned on the beaches in Cuba. Again, a lack of resolve by American politicians foretold disaster for the troops he had trained. The veteran

jungle fighter couldn't stomach another betrayal of his men. The politicians and the bureaucrats could make all the excuses they wanted, but the Warrior was not going to give up and walk away. If the Meo could not quit the fight, then neither could Frank Sturgis. He searched for a solution on his own.

On the field and off, Frank Sturgis was a resourceful and innovative fighter. He enjoyed a wide range of established contacts and resources around the globe. Some were legal. Others, not so much. But when it came to his men in the trenches, his loyalty was beyond question. As a military "advisor" Frank was technically an independent contractor, with emphasis on "independent".

Laos of the late 1960s was a poor land-locked country that had but one cash export. Opium. In the northern region was an area known as The Plain of Jars. A reference to the prehistoric stone jars that littered the landscape. The soil and the climate were perfect for the cultivation of the opium poppy. At the time, The Plain of Jars produced the largest opium crop in the world. That area was of little military significance and therefore remained under the control of the Meo. Sturgis' plan was to tap into this resource. He figured to access the raw product at its source. Then trade large quantities of it for processed heroin just over the border in Thailand. He had the means to smuggle the processed drugs into the U.S. where he could sell them to his underworld contacts. A ten-fold increase in value at each step meant that a \$100,000 cash investment ballooned into \$10,000,000. With which he intended to purchase arms and supplies for the Meo. That kind of capital would sustain a small war. If successful, the plan could be repeated. All Frank needed was the start-up capital. He enlisted the help of the Northwest Airlines crew with an offer of a 50-50 split.

The Crew

It was impossible to determine where or when Frank Sturgis first encountered the crew of flight 305. Captain Scott had earned his wings in the United States Army Air Corps during WWII. He may have encountered Sturgis as a young Marine in the Asian-Pacific theater. After the war ended Scott did not return immediately to the U.S. His whereabouts from 1945 to 1950 were unknown. It was known that flyers who wished to continue in the pilot seat, had little opportunity to do so back in America. Domestic air travel in the United States was still the domain of big business and the rich. Which did not produce high demand for the fledgling airline industry. Consequently, pilots returning from the war were forced to choose a different vocation. There was, however, an alternate opportunity made available outside the domestic U.S. market.

Following WWII, war hero General Claire Chennault cobbled together a private start-up airline ostensibly to serve the Chinese domestic market. In truth, Civil Air Transport (CAT) was an OSS/CIA venture put together to lend support to the Kuomintang government of Chiang Kai-shek. CAT's operations loosely coincided with the period 1945-1950. Chennault recruited pilots and air support personnel for CAT from recently discharged U.S. Airmen who wanted to continue flying. CAT became the unofficial airline of the Chinese government and fell under the direction of Chiang's English-speaking wife Madame Chiang.

During the war Chennault organized the Flying Tigers, a U.S. fighter/bomber squadron formed to strike back at the Japanese following their sneak attack at Pearl Harbor. CAT operated up thru 1950, but once Chiang's Nationalist were forced to flee the mainland, demand for CAT's services dried up. The elements of Civil Air Transport were shut down, broken up, and mothballed. The airmen of CAT returned to the United States. Captain Scott was hired by

Northwest Airlines in 1951. With twenty years of service, he was a senior pilot with the airline at the time flight 305 was hijacked. Seniority gave him his choice of routes to fly. So, it was an open question as to why he was assigned the detested “milk run” (for its frequent stops), as 305’s route was known. That route was also used to train newly hired pilots for the same reason. The dormant components of Civil Air Transport were later re-assembled into another startup airline in the Asian Theater. Air America.

If Scott flew in the Air Transport Command (ATC), which flew “the Hump” (the Allies’ supply route over the Himalaya between India, Burma, China) during WWII, he was among the flyers from which Chennault solicited potential pilots for CAT. This was also the area where young Frank became involved with the OSS.

Flight Engineer Harold Anderson was Captain Scott’s preferred navigator. The two men had a history of working together. Anderson’s role aboard flight 305 could not be taken for granted. Victor 23 was a retired south-southeast air-route out of Seattle that passed near four mountain peaks that exceeded 10,000 feet. With zero visibility, and flying below the long-range radar of ATC, flight 305 was reliant entirely on the skill set of the navigator to avoid flying into the side of a mountain. The slightest miscalculation and the crew would not even see it coming. It was interesting that airport safety officials refused to let the jet leave with the stairs deployed but allowed the dangerous maneuver of flying at Alpha-max, while nearly blind, along such a treacherous course. Had the hijacker given those instructions to the safety personnel on the ground the plane would not have been allowed to leave. But the three-man crew at the controls of Northwest 305 were confident in their ability to fly that hazardous route under those conditions. The airmen who commuted aircraft to and from Marana Army Airfield or piloted any of the 727s over Laos also had that kind of confidence.

Scrutiny of the photographs taken of the crew in Reno revealed some rather interesting observations. Tina Mucklow was never more than a few feet from First Officer Bill Rataczak. She appeared attached by an invisible tether to the man who would become her close life-long friend. No relationship beyond the bond formed during this harrowing ordeal was ever disclosed, but if a conspiracy among the four airline employees existed it was almost certainly Rataczak who lured her into it. The photo of the four under the “Reno” sign was especially telling. Mucklow fights the urge to latch onto Rataczak. While Captain Scott appeared amused by something the First Officer whispered out of the side of his mouth. Telling was the stone cold glare that navigator Harold Anderson locked on the two. Whatever the joke was, Anderson was clearly unhappy about it.

Bill Rataczak received his flight training in the military. He was of the right age to have served with Air America in Indochina. But his very distinctive last name does not appear on any of the declassified records maintained by The Air America Museum and Archives housed at McDermott Library on The University of Texas at Dallas campus in Richardson, Texas. In fact, his name does not appear on U.S. Military records anywhere. If he was trained to fly while enlisted in the U.S. Military, the record of it was classified. All Air America personnel had their service records declassified in the 1980s. Captain Scott’s and Harold Anderson’s military records were similarly unavailable. There were no records that linked Sturgis to the flight crew, but there were plenty of places where their paths may have crossed.

Conclusion

The CIA knew almost immediately that D.B. Cooper was one of their contracted military advisors in Laos. The “Initial” sketch identified Sturgis as the man they were after. The team that was assembled to track and capture him quickly deduced that his escape was hoaxed and that the crew was involved. With that information the CIA posse captured them all and recovered the ransom, less the portion the crew tossed from the plane. But the Central Intelligence Agency lacked the means to prosecute them. If turned over to the civilian authorities, the crew might expose the Agency’s covert activities in Laos. John Paisley initially believed that the Agency was free to do whatever they pleased with Frank Sturgis.

As a contracted military advisor on clandestine missions in a war that the U.S. was not supposed to be involved in, his disappearance would go unnoticed. But Frank Sturgis was aware of that fact. Consequently, he prepared a fail-safe plan that would cause the CIA to think twice before they eliminated him.

General Claire Chennault divorced his first wife in 1946, and married his second wife, Anna, in 1947. Anna Chennault was a young Chinese war correspondent. Thirty-six years younger than the General. After the communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, Gen. Chennault returned to the U.S. with his Chinese bride. Because their marriage was illegal in his home state of Louisiana, Claire and Anna chose to live in Washington D.C.

Anna Chennault went on to become a well-known journalist and a leader in the powerful China Lobby in Washinton. In 1968, she was instrumental in Richard Nixon’s very narrow victory over Hubert Humphrey. In the closing days of the campaign Anna used her influence with the China Lobby to thwart a Democratic Party peace initiative. With her help Nixon won the Presidency.

Nixon immediately began work on his own strategy to bring U.S. involvement in Vietnam to an end. By 1970, it was clear that he was moving toward a negotiated withdrawal of American troops and that the U.S. would soon recognize the Communist Regime of Mao Tsung as the legitimate government of China. Anna felt used and betrayed by the sitting President. Any intelligence that tarnished his image or smeared his bid for re-election in 1972 would have been eagerly disseminated by her. And she was a popular and prolific journalist. As the widow of a genuine war hero, she was beyond reproach.

Frank's fail-safe plan threatened to disclose a sinister reality that evolved in the heart of the Indochina wars. The fact that the U.S. had bombed large swaths of Laos was classified Top-Secret. As were the use of the 727 jetliners to deliver humanitarian and military aid to the Hmong. As such, that information was cloaked by National Security. But the darkest, most disturbing detail was beyond the reach of U.S. military and political control. A malignant truth that was obscured within the ranks of the Meo.

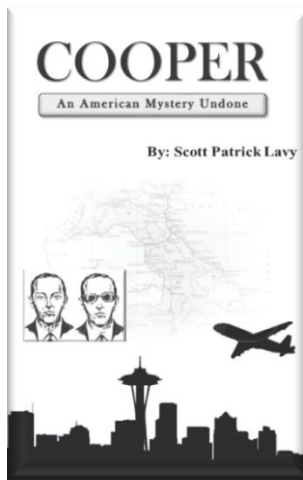
The militias defended the Hmong villagers against the communist Pathet Lao. The militias evolved over time into fiercest, cunning guerilla fighters. They were rumored by some to be blood thirsty and vicious. The enemy was terrified of them. What the world didn't know was that twelve years of intense civil war had decimated the indigenous tribes. The number of fighting age men dwindled and yet Gen. Pao continued to fill the ranks of the Meo with new recruits. As a result, by 1970 fully one third of the Meo fighters were underage combatants. Some as young as thirteen. These barefoot, school-aged children had been equipped and trained by U.S. sponsored military advisors. That was the horrific fact that no one dared speak of.

When the contracted advisors objected to the young age of the new recruits, Pao explained that this was their home. Not fighting meant the loss of everything, the destruction of their families, and an end to their way of life. The new recruits would stay and fight with or without the U.S. sponsored training. Because they had no other choice. The militias were not under U.S. military command. The advisors chose to look the other way. The nightmare was accepted as an inevitable consequence of the war. The contractors armed and trained some of the most feared combat guerillas the world had ever seen, and they were children. This was the fact that stopped John Paisley in his tracks. That information could not be allowed to go public. Especially not five short weeks before Nixon's final campaign was to begin. Sturgis intimated his connection to Anna Chennault who remained unaware of that horrific truth. The fearless jungle warrior held the match to the powder keg and dared the CIA Officer to blow it out.

Paisley vacillated. He couldn't take the chance. He agreed to let the crew go, but under threat of prosecution should the truth ever become known. Management at Langley had no love for Frank Sturgis, but they also could not eliminate him. They had to let him go as well, but not without condition. They needed a short leash and company eyes on Frank. Consequently, Sturgis was turned over to his former CIA handler E. Howard Hunt. Hunt, recently retired from the CIA, oversaw a newly formed group of clandestine operatives engaged in political espionage for the White House. Hunt convinced Frank that Cuban agents had infiltrated the DNC, and that the group's objective was to gather intelligence that would expose the connection between the DNC and Fidel Castro's government. Frank was skeptical but was given no choice. He had to join Hunt's team or else. Six months later he was one of five men arrested during a break-in at the DNC Headquarters

located in the Watergate Office Complex in Washington D.C. And the rest, as they say, was history.

The National Security claim was valid for the use of the 727s over Laos, and for the CIA's covert involvement in the Secret War. That information and anything associated with it was legally withheld from the American public. J. Edgar Hoover died in his office of a massive heart attack six weeks before the Watergate break-in. The subsequent scandal sent Nixon loyalists running for the document shredder. The implosion of the Nixon Administration buried any detail that may have shed light on CIA involvement in the Cooper investigation. When the dust finally settled, all that remained were the legendary feats of the ingenious daredevil outlaw, D.B. Cooper. And those were left to stand on their own.



The version of the events presented here in the genre of Historical Fiction are an alternative to the events as they were reported. The underlying framework of established facts remains the same. Speculation and conjecture were used to fill in the gaps and to tell the story in a different light. But, no claim or assertion known to be false was made.