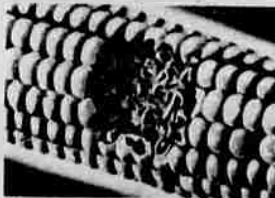


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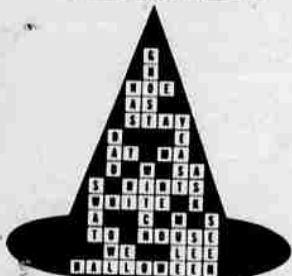
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# I Was Hijacked Twice!

The pilot whose jet recently was pirated tells of a similar —a game of bluff and counterbluff with a firing squad

THE CABIN DOOR suddenly opened, and the hostess and a stranger burst into the cockpit of my Boeing 707. I started to ask what was wrong but got the answer before I could open my mouth.

"I've got a gun on this girl, Captain," the stranger said, "and you're flying us to Cuba or else. I'm not kidding."

You probably know the end of this hijacking adventure which happened last August. I convinced the gunman I had to land my jet at El Paso, Texas, for fuel. The hijacker and his son, Leon and Cody Bearden, held me, my crew of five, and four passengers as hostages for 10 hours. Before Bearden could force me to take off again, U. S. marshals, border patrolmen, and FBI agents rushed out on the field. Over the roar of the engines, I could hear the sharp staccato of machine-gun fire.

Good night, I thought, are they really trying to hit us? Actually they were puncturing our tires to cripple the plane—but some of the slugs blasted through our cabin, and I sweated out the possibility of one exploding 90,000 pounds of aviation gasoline under us.

After the shooting, we all played the waiting game inside the crippled plane. Would we get the Beardens, or would they get us? The hours dragged by: each side threatened, cajoled, bluffed. But the Beardens were unwavering, and we waited for some miracle. It came when something distracted Leon Bearden's attention. His gun wavered, and a passenger-hostage, Leonard Gilam, an off-duty border patrolman, socked the hijacker, then locked him in a full nelson. Bearden's son was jumped by my second officer Norm Simmons and FBI agent Francis Crosby. That ended the melee, and I relaxed for the first time since seeing the dull metallic glint of a gun in Bearden's hand.

And I also reminisced. This had been the second time in my flying career that I'd been a victim of hijackers. I don't think any other pilot can say that—or would want to.

My mind went back to 1931, a big year in my life. I was just 21, and I'd won my big break—jockeying a flight between Lima, Peru, and Santiago, Chile—2,000 miles of stop-skip-

and jumping over some of the most rugged terrain in the hemisphere. Nowadays a pilot would blanch at a schedule like that, but my wife and I weren't tied down with children, and I'd gone into flying for excitement—so why not South America and unknown adventure?

On February 21, 1931, that unknown adventure became painfully familiar. I had set down my Ford trimotor plane at Arequipa in southern Peru, right near the jagged 20,000-foot peaks of the Andes. I was taxiing along when a gang of men dashed from a dilapidated hangar and started shouting—"Stop! Halt!" I saw one level a rifle and aim right at my head. I could have given it full throttle and tried to escape—but one slug in me or the controls would doom the plane and the eight people aboard. I cut the engine.

The gun-toting Peruvian greeted me formally as I stepped from the plane. "My country is in revolt, Captain," he explained. "I am a lieutenant in the revolution, and I have orders to detain any flight not on a rebel mission."

HE TOOK ME to the local prefect, who was very blunt. "You and your crew will join our air force," he said. "If you refuse, we will stand you against a wall and shoot you."

The lieutenant shoved his ever-ready rifle into my ribs; the flesh on my spine tightened and tingled. "If you shoot me," I said, "you'll end up fighting the United States, too. This plane is from the U. S., and so is the mail."

The lieutenant's rifle sagged; so did the prefect's bravado. I demanded that he permit the mail to proceed as scheduled in a small plane. The prefect agreed—provided that I, in turn, agreed to drop propaganda leaflets on Lima.

"First the mail," I said, "then we'll talk about leaflets." The swarthy prefect frowned. "All right, Captain. We will allow the mail to go through. If you do not repay our courtesy—then the firing squad."

The next days were like those hours I spent with the Beardens 30 years later: torturous hours of waiting, with one side and then the other bargaining, threatening, bluffing—but how much can you bluff against desperate men with arms?



By Capt. BYRON D. RICKARDS as told to Peer J. Oppenheimer

adventure 30 years ago awaiting the loser



Byron Rickards (l.) & Norman Simmons after Texas hijack.

The rebels didn't jail me. The town of Arequipa was a jail itself. There was no U. S. consul and only one telegraph line to the outside world—and it was controlled by the rebels. I went to the local British consul and asked advice.

"They mean business," he told me. "Don't try to play the hero. If it's life or death, fly the plane and drop the leaflets. However, I'll draw up a legal document which says you are doing this under duress. Insist they sign it before you take up your plane."

THIS WOULD BE a last resort, I told myself. First I'd try to bluff these rebels into leaving me and my crew out of their fight. Each day I barged into the prefect's office and noisily demanded our freedom, invoking the name of the U. S. Marines and other fearful thunderbolts. I managed to drag on the stalemate. Each encounter, though, was a harder test of wills, and after six days I was sure the breaking point had come.

I found the prefect's office filled with armed guards, sullen and belligerent, and I knew something important was stirring. Before I could loose my daily harangue, the prefect began talking. "It is vital that some of our leaders reach the fighting. You, Captain, will fly them to..."

I reminded him I could not put my plane at the disposal of nonauthorized groups. The prefect went rigid behind his desk, and the guards watched him hungrily, I thought, for a final command. I remembered the British consul's warning—don't be a stubborn hero. After all, transporting some passengers is no crime, particularly if the con-

sul's document was signed by the rebels. Still, I resented being bullied and had to play one more card. "I'm sure this flight is important," I said, "but is it so important that you can risk U.S. intervention? Anything you've won would be lost."

I didn't know it then, but I'd struck the only responsive chord in this tough old rebel's make-up. The rebels were advancing all along the seacoast, and foreign interference was the last threat to their success. As much as they needed me and my plane, they couldn't gamble on a new enemy.

"Get out of here," the prefect growled. On March 2, shouts and gunfire ripped the somnambulant town. As I trotted toward the plaza to investigate, I heard, "¡Viva la revolución!" and I knew the rebels had won. Augusto Leguia y Salcedo, dictator of Peru since 1919, had been overthrown.

A celebration burst out—for the victorious rebels and for a liberated gringo pilot. The prefect, my friend now, slapped my back jovially in the excitement. "You are a good fellow, amigo," he conceded. "You and I—we saved the revolution, keeping those North Americans out, eh?"

I was feeling too good to argue. I even agreed to fly one rebel chief to Lima; it didn't matter now. My wife was upset, of course, when I told her about flirting with a firing squad, but I felt pretty cocky about winning my battle of wills.

"Don't worry," I told her, "something like this happens only once in a lifetime." I wish somebody had told the Beardens that.

I was taxiing along when a gang of men dashed out. I saw one level his rifle at me.



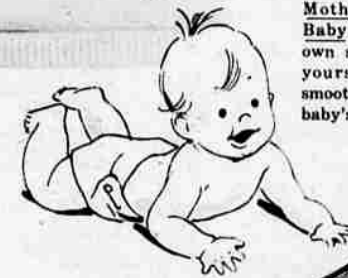
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