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Cincinnati-area man recalls '72 Miami hijack scene

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Associated Press

The capture of an American fugitive in Portugal has a northern Kentucky retiree reliving the day when he put on too-small swim trunks to help deliver an old suitcase bulging with \$1 million to hijackers he said had just made chilling threats of violence.

"Talk about a blast from past," said Bernard "Buster" Cooper, a retired Delta Air Lines employee who lives in Florence, Ky.

After fugitive George Wright was arrested last month in a seaside village where he lived under a new identity, Cooper started hearing from relatives wondering whether it was the same man from the 1972 hijacking scene in which Cooper became an indelible figure.

Cooper was a 27-year-old Delta Air Lines ramp supervisor in Miami the day Wright - who had escaped two years earlier from a New Jersey prison while serving time for a 1962 murder - allegedly was among Black Liberation Army militants that hijacked a Delta flight from Detroit to Miami. Hijackings to Cuba weren't unusual then, so FBI agents soon swarmed into place at the Miami International Airport while Cooper and other Delta managers headed to their operations center, he recalled in a telephone interview Friday.

They had the pilot land the plane and park at the far reaches of the airport and soon learned the hijackers wanted \$1 million ransom for the 86 passengers. That wasn't such a big challenge; a local bank kept cash set aside for such a crisis, Cooper said.

Instead of a drawn-out affair, "it was just A-B-C-D," said Cooper. "They got the money out to the airport expeditiously."

FBI agents kept up radio conversations with the cockpit, and Delta operations had a separate frequency to communicate with the captain and cockpit. The communications sounded friendly, Cooper said, but then there was a lull. Suddenly he and the others in Delta operations heard a hijacker's voice rising in a startling outburst that has stayed with Cooper: "If you don't hurry up and get me the million dollars, I'm going to start throwing some 'mother-(expletive)-ing' heads out the 'mother-(expletive)-ing' door!"

"Everybody took a step back and said, Whoa! We've got a planeload of passengers and a captain with a gun to his head," Cooper said. "The FBI agent started talking to him again and calmed him down."

When the money arrived, an FBI agent asked if Cooper could drive the mobile passenger stairway to the plane with an agent to deliver the money and, they hoped, rescue the passengers when they were released.

Cooper said he didn't hesitate and wasn't thinking about the possible danger. Employees pulled an old suitcase out of lost-and-found and stuffed it with the cash; Cooper worried it might pop open.

The hijackers demanded that the men delivering the cash wear nothing but swimming shorts so they couldn't

easily conceal weapons. Cooper said someone ran to the airport men's store and bought two pairs. His was a couple of sizes too small.

He drove the gate toward the plane, concerned when he saw the FBI agent with him had a snub-nosed revolver. Cooper urged him to keep it down and out of sight, which he did. A station wagon with FBI agents and a Delta official tailed them, he said.

The plane's crew dropped down an emergency rope, which was used to pull the suitcase into the plane, Cooper said. Soon after, they got word from the hijackers that the passengers could leave the plane.

A bus rolled out. Cooper pushed the stairway to the plane and watched the passengers coming out. He had wanted to retrieve their luggage, but the FBI said there wasn't time.

"I was thinking about all these people in Miami without any of their clothes, but I guess that was secondary," Cooper said.

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The plane was fueled and took off for Boston, then on to Algeria.

"I went back to operations; just got back into the swing of things for the rest of the day," Cooper said. "From the perspective of an airline employee, as far as safety, it couldn't have gone any smoother. It was all well-coordinated."

Cooper, who moved to northern Kentucky in 1986 as Delta was expanding its Cincinnati regional hub, retired in 2001. He was stunned to hear about Wright's capture - "I couldn't believe they were still looking for him" - and then was surprised when The Kentucky Enquirer contacted him at his Florence home for his first discussion of the incident in years.

Wright's associates were arrested and convicted in France in 1976. He has been released to his home in Portugal under electronic monitoring and is contesting extradition to the United States.