

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

*On the importance of contacts,
influence, and judgment*

ASSIGNMENT: SKYJACKER

Thomas Polgar

On 2 July 1971, Braniff Flight 14, a Boeing 707, left Acapulco for Mexico City, San Antonio, Dallas, Washington and New York. It was hijacked over the U.S.-Mexican border by a man and a woman, both carrying pistols.

The hijackers ordered the pilot to land in Monterey, Mexico, where Braniff paid a ransom of 100,000 U.S. dollars to free the passengers and all but five of the crew. The plane then proceeded to Lima, Peru where it was refueled. Also, the tired original crew was replaced with a fresh and volunteer crew consisting of four men (three pilots and a flight engineer) and two Peruvian stewardesses. The Peruvian authorities made no effort to impede the hijacker, a U.S. citizen named Robert Lee Jackson, and were tolerant enough to permit the airport doctor to provide Jackson with the pep-pills he requested.

The hijacker intended to take the plane to Algeria, where the government reportedly agreed to provide asylum. The Boeing 707, however, did not have sufficient range for a non-stop flight from Lima to Algiers. Accordingly, it was decided by Braniff that the plane would refuel in Rio de Janeiro prior to the long over-water hop to Africa. As the plane landed in Rio the Brazilian authorities, without consulting with Braniff, undertook to prevent the takeoff through the firing of smoke bombs. Unfortunately, these Brazilian measures were taken while the plane still had full engine power, and the hijacker drew the obvious inferences: he ordered the plane to take off, which was accomplished with less than half of the takeoff strip free.

At this point, the big jet had fuel for less than four hours' flight, sufficient within safety margins to reach only three capitals: Asuncion, Paraguay, Montevideo, Uruguay and Buenos Aires, Argentina. In only one of these cities was there both a Braniff station and an Algerian representation: in Buenos Aires. Therefore Braniff, which was still anxious to get the plane and the crew safely to Algiers, suggested to the hijacker that Buenos Aires would be the logical place both to service the plane and to obtain safe-conduct from the Algerian

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

Assignment: Skyjacker

Ambassador. Jackson agreed to this, and the plane landed at Buenos Aires Ezeiza International Airport shortly after 1 P.M. on Saturday, 3 July. It had travelled about 7,500 miles, an all-time record for long distance hijacking, about 600 miles more than the previous record of Marine Corporal Rafael Minichiello, who took a TWA 707 from San Francisco to Rome.

The following is an account of what happened in Buenos Aires in connection with this hijacking.

Mission Assigned

At approximately 1300 hours on 3 July 1971 Mr. Barall, the Deputy Chief of Mission, asked me to proceed to the airport to assume responsibility for liaison with the Argentine authorities in connection with the hijacked Braniff Boeing 707. Mr. Barall said my primary mission was to ensure that the Argentine authorities not take any measures with respect to the airplane or its occupants without consultation and coordination with the U.S. Embassy.

I arrived at Ezeiza Airport a few minutes before 2:00 P.M., by which time the hijacked Braniff airliner was on the ground. Mr. John Wachter, Legal Attaché, and his assistant Mr. Robert W. Scherrer were already on the scene, established in the office of Mr. Harry Marples, Braniff Director.

I found the situation as follows: Mr. Marples had obtained informal agreement of the Argentine Air Force, Buenos Aires Area Command, represented by Air Force Brigadier General Roberto Donato Bordot, and confirmed by telephone conversation with Lt. General Alberto Rey, Commander-in-Chief of the Argentine Air Force, to refuel the hijacked Boeing 707, which was expected to depart for Algiers as soon as possible. Mr. Marples was also in continuing contact with the Ambassador of Algeria in Buenos Aires, Mohamed Messaoud Kellou, who indicated a willingness to provide safe conduct, provided that the Ambassadors of the United States and of Mexico concurred in such step and would support his efforts with the Argentine Foreign Ministry.

I was informed by Mr. Marples and his associates that there was tremendous pressure from Braniff headquarters in Dallas to provide safe conduct for the plane, that it was felt that prompt refueling and takeoff for Algeria would best safeguard the lives of the crew, and that the situation on board the aircraft was "ugly." Mr. Wachter and I took turns to relay this information to Mr. Barall and to the Duty Officer at the Embassy, Miss Josephine Ferguson.

Command Confusion

At approximately 1435 hours 3 July, refueling of the plane was halted by orders of the Federal Police, which also moved trucks into position to prevent a possible takeoff by the Boeing 707. This move came as complete surprise to the Argentine Air Force representatives on the scene, including Brigadier General Bordot. A few minutes later Major General Jorge Caceres Monie, Chief of Federal Police, arrived in Braniff operations and in my presence issued instructions to Brigadier Bordot that he—Caceres Monie—was in full charge, that he was receiving his orders directly from the President, General Lanusse, and that his orders were to prevent the takeoff of the aircraft. After checking with Lt. General Rey, Brigadier Bordot subordinated himself to General Caceres Monie (and played no significant role in subsequent proceedings).

General Caceres Monie was accompanied by Alberto Villar, Inspector General in charge of Criminal Investigations; Jorge Colotto, Chief of the Guardia de Infanteria (Combat Police); Alberto Caceres, Chief of Federal Security (Intelligence); Colonel Alberto Vallejos, chief of his personal staff, and other senior officers. Initially he set up his office in Braniff operations but subsequently took over the Pepsi Cola VIP lounge as his command post.

Our immediate problem with Caceres Monie was to talk him out of storming the plane, which he had the firm intention of doing. He had developed several plans, including putting nauseating gas into the plane through the air-conditioning system, introducing police dressed as mechanics and policewomen dressed as stewardesses into the plane, and straight physical assault. Eventually we prevailed on Caceres Monie to take it easy, and he agreed to undertake no action unless specifically instructed by the President. He was adamant in not permitting the plane to refuel or to receive any other type of ground support, and it took all the persuasive ability of Mr. Marples and myself to talk the General into continuing the supply of electricity to the plane, essential for communications as well as for cabin comfort.

A specific proposition from which we dissuaded Caceres Monie was to broadcast to the hijacker a statement that if any member of the crew were harmed, the hijacker would be put to death through slow torture.

While all this was going on, Mr. Wachter, Mr. Scherrer and I took turns communicating with Mr. Barall, with Political Counsellor Sowash, who by this time was in the Embassy on an open line with State Department, and with the Ambassador. In the meanwhile

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

Assignment: Skyjacker

Senor Jose Alvarez Tovar, Braniff Flight Supervisor, was in constant radio dialogue with the hijacker and succeeded in establishing a rapport with him which turned out to be of immense value in subsequent developments.

By this time—about 1700 hours—the hijacker was getting increasingly irritated and concerned about the delay of refueling and the display of police around the aircraft. He demanded to speak with Braniff manager Marples, who boarded the plane and returned about one-half hour later convinced that the hijacker meant business and that the only way out was to obtain the Argentine Government's concurrence for the takeoff of the hijacked Boeing 707. Marples at this point again talked with Lt. General Rey, Commander-in-Chief of the Argentine Air Force, who stated that the matter must be handled through regular diplomatic channels, that the Foreign Minister was in his residence awaiting contact from the U.S. Ambassador, and that a diplomatic note reflecting the views of the U.S. Government should be delivered without delay. A few minutes later I was called by Ambassador Guillermo de la Plaza, Director of Political Affairs of the Argentine Foreign Ministry, who conveyed suggestions as to the wording of the note and the manner of its delivery. This information was then telephoned to the Embassy where the Political Counsellor and the Duty Officer were maintaining an open line to Washington, to the Ambassador and to Mr. Barall. In the meanwhile Mr. Marples and his staff were maintaining an open line with Braniff in Dallas, Texas, which was being kept informed of all developments.

The next few hours were spent in a climate of intense expectation, waiting for the note to be signed, to be delivered and to be answered by the GOA. The hijacker, Bob Jackson, still appeared to be determined, in full control of his faculties, insistent on having his demands complied with, and demanding the presence of the Ambassador of Algeria. Throughout this period, from the Braniff office, and through the dedicated services of Jose Alvarez Tovar and the chief mechanic, Oswald Madonia, Jackson was being kept occupied with conversations about the conditions of the plane, the flight plan to Algiers, comparison of the characteristics of the Boeing 707 with a possibly available DC 8 and so forth. (These talks were monitored by the press and by the police and—apart from their news value—provided us with valuable information about Jackson's actual state of mind and psychology.)

The minutes and the hours were passing, and tension was building. Braniff was proceeding on the assumption that once the note was delivered to the Argentine authorities, the takeoff would only be a

question of refueling and technical preparation. Therefore, in addition to consultations and examination of the possibilities concerning the long over-water flight of the 707 to Algiers, an alternate DC 8 was being readied, and a special crew was being flown in from Rio de Janeiro, inasmuch as no Braniff relief crew was available in Buenos Aires. While Braniff was proceeding in good faith with plans for a possible change of aircraft, the police authorities were planning measures to capture or kill Jackson during the process of transfer from one aircraft to another. (Although he made no statements to the effect, General Caceres Monie was obviously anticipating a negative decision by the GOA on the U.S. request to permit the plane to proceed.)

At about 1930, Braniff notified General Caceres Monie that the ground generator supplying power to the plane was about to run out of gasoline and requested authority to change generators. Caceres Monie first denied this request, but upon hearing arguments from Mr. Marples and from me—to the effect that providing another generator would simply maintain the status quo, but that the discontinuation of electric power would unnecessarily provoke Jackson and might also limit our future options—he agreed. To effect the change in generator connections, Mr. Robert Williams, Flight Engineer, descended from the plane, was interrogated by Braniff and by the police and subsequently talked on the telephone with Ambassador Lodge, who by that time was at the Presidential Residence in Olivos.

Request from the plane to empty the chemical toilets was refused by General Caceres Monie.

At around 2145 the scheduled Braniff non-stop to New York was cancelled to have the plane available for a possible flight to Algiers.

At around midnight Braniff communications passed several messages to the hijacker originating with his family in the United States. Jackson appeared to be moved by the content of these messages and requested written confirmation.

The Governments Disagree

Word was beginning to spread that President Lanusse had decided not to comply with the request in the U.S. note, but official word was not received until about 0100 on 4 July that the Argentine Government demanded the unconditional surrender of the hijacker. (Although not stated, this implied definitively that the takeoff for Algiers would not be authorized. Accordingly, the stand-by crew was sent to bed, and the DC 8 was reserviced for a passenger flight to New York.)

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

Assignment: Skyjacker

A dramatic turn in the events came at around 0300 hours, when Captain Schroeder of the hijacked 707 was permitted by Jackson to leave the aircraft to mediate between the hijacker and the authorities. Schroeder said that Jackson appeared to be nearing the end of his resources and had concluded from the long delay that the plane would not be permitted to take off. Jackson was ready to negotiate. Schroeder urged that we send "Joe" Alvarez—the Braniff flight supervisor—to discuss personally Jackson's demands, but this suggestion was rejected by General Caceres Monie, who repeated the Argentine demand for unconditional surrender. The general also rejected suggestions that he negotiate directly with the hijacker because of the "no negotiations" policy of the GOA, but agreed to put to President Lanusse the possibility that a non-Argentine personality talk to the hijacker face to face.

At about 0335 General Caceres Monie asked to speak to me alone. The general said that President Lanusse agreed that a non-Argentine should negotiate with Jackson with a view to bring about his surrender and that Lanusse had asked that I undertake that mission. I said that I would be pleased to do so, but would have to check with my embassy. I telephoned Mr. Sowash, explained the circumstances and obtained his authorization to board the plane.

(In the meanwhile, the Braniff Security Officer, Mr. Pfizer, took an adamant position that Captain Schroeder should not return to the plane and invoked the authority of Dallas, which also ordered Schroeder not to return. Schroeder took the position that he gave his word of honor that he would return, that he wanted to be with his crew and that his refusal to return, i.e., violation of his word of honor, could not but prejudice my mission. After Marples and I supported Schroeder's position, Commissioner Inspector Colotto of the Federal Police overruled the objections of Mr. Pfizer.)

Through Braniff communications, Jackson was notified that Schroeder accompanied by an Embassy official would return to the plane. Jackson said he did not wish any traps, that he first wished to talk with Schroeder alone and that the Embassy officer should board the plane exactly five minutes after Schroeder.

Chat With a Skyjacker

Shortly before 0400 hours, 4 July, I boarded the aircraft, in accordance with the time specifications made by Jackson. I found Jackson in the co-pilot seat and Schroeder in the pilot's seat. I sat directly behind Schroeder and talked with Jackson, who turned around in his chair for the purpose. (Jackson already consumed some

of the beer which Captain Schroeder took on board. We obtained clearance for the beer from General Caceres Monie after explaining to him that the beer should not be considered as support to Jackson, but, on the contrary, a weapon which would help to defeat him. This was stated on basis of medical advice received from Braniff, Dallas, that beer on top of pep pills would act as a depressive agent.)

I opened discussion with Jackson by stating that he could take it from me, if he had not already so concluded from the long delay, that the plane would not be allowed to take off. I assured him that, on the basis of my knowledge of the Argentine generals' psychology, it would be unrealistic to expect a reversal of that position; that while his position was unfavorable in that sense, it was relatively favorable in another sense, i.e., he had not yet committed any major crimes under the jurisdiction of Argentina; and, while he should certainly expect to be tried and sentenced, I could guarantee that his life would be saved. I said that I could not offer him any deal but I wanted to hear his side of the story; I would relay his proposals to the appropriate authorities, and I was prepared to provide counsel to him, both personally on the spot, and legal counsel to assist him with the Argentine authorities. I said that while what he had done was not right, it could have been far worse, that I knew that he had treated the crew decently, that we all rejoiced that so far no lives had been lost, and that the time had come to start acting reasonably.

The above remarks started a long discussion with Jackson, which need not be reproduced in detail. He was coherent enough but with an astonishing lack of logic and an obvious failure to realize the gravity of his deeds or the consequences thereof. He did show great susceptibility to flattery, a certain warmth of personality and a sense of humor, perhaps exaggerated by his many hours of wakefulness and the effect of pep pills. Our conversation resulted in Jackson putting down on paper the following points and/or requests on which he wanted clarification:

- a. A copy of the extradition treaty between Argentina and the United States;
- b. The nature of the charges which he would have to face in Argentina;
- c. The bail system in Argentina;
- d. The future of his children; specifically, in exchange for the safety of the crew, he wished to have his children brought to Argentina;
- e. Safe conduct from Argentina for his girl friend, Ligia Lucrecia Sanchez, to whatever place she wished to go from Argentina;
- f. Co-determination with Braniff on the disposal of the \$100,000 which he obtained in Monterey. He did not expect to keep that sum, but wished that part of the sum be used for his legal defense, for the transportation and

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

Assignment: Skyjacker

maintenance of his children in Argentina, and the rest he wished to donate to a suitable charity, such as a children's home. He said he disliked the word "orphanage."

g. If and when he decided to surrender, he wished to do this to the senior officer present, without newspaper representatives witnessing the act, and he asked not to have handcuffs put on him.

I explained to Jackson the broad outlines of the extradition treaty between Argentina and the United States, dated 1898, on which I had previously been briefed by Mr. Wachter. The most important feature of this treaty—from Jackson's point of view—was that it contained no provisions for hijacking, there being no planes in 1898. Jackson insisted on seeing a copy of the treaty. I said it would take at least two hours to obtain it from the Embassy, assuming we could locate it at this time on a Sunday morning. He said he had plenty of time.

I explained the Argentine bail system to him, but added that this was a matter for judicial decision. We discussed all the other points, but I stated that these were all within the jurisdiction of the Argentine authorities and/or Braniff, and I could not speak on their behalf. I would, however, relay his words faithfully. I said that I acted in good faith in coming to see him alone and unarmed at this hour and in a pouring rain; that he had inconvenienced a great many people and that it was time for him to show some good faith by releasing the crew members, particularly the two Peruvian stewardesses. Jackson said that he was willing to release the crew, except the Captain. He accepted that the plane was not going to take off and that he did not need a crew at this point, but he wished to keep a hostage to prevent the plane being rushed by the police. However, the crew could not go until I gave him a binding answer on points "a" and "b" above. As for the stewardesses, they were now asleep. There was no point in waking them to go out in the driving rain in the dark. When they woke up, they would be free to go. I then asked for a car to come pick me up, which was accomplished at 0450. I had spent about 50 minutes talking with Jackson.

Back at the terminal, I reported my findings to General Caceres Monie. I said that in my opinion Jackson was ready to surrender, the only real question was the timing. We should not push him too much at this point but keep him busy talking details until we could obtain a copy of the extradition treaty, at which time I would go back to talk with Jackson again. This was accepted by the general, who wrote out in long hand the charges which Jackson would have to face in Argentina: deprivation of liberty, illegal entry, and illegal

carrying of weapon. He asked me to read these to Jackson over the radio, which I did from the Braniff communications room.

Back to the Plane

In the meanwhile Mr. Wachter took steps to obtain from the Embassy the text of the Extradition Treaty of 1898 and have it sent to the airport. After being assured by Mr. Sowash, Political Counsellor, who was at the Embassy, that the treaty was on its way, I contacted Jackson on the radio again at around 0600 hours to advise him that the treaty should be available in a matter of minutes. He then permitted the stewardesses and all the crew except Captain Al Schroeder to get off. With the Extradition Treaty and a can of beer in my hands I again boarded the plane around 0700 hours. I told Jackson that I was prepared to spend all the time necessary with him in reviewing the treaty and to discuss his personal problems, but I wanted to start out by suggesting that he let Captain Schroeder off the plane. I was as good a hostage as Schroeder, the Captain was not a young man, he was dead tired, needed to go to the toilet but all toilets were overflowing (true!), and his presence now served no useful purpose. Jackson agreed and Captain Schroeder left. I was now on board alone with Jackson and his girl friend. I said we did not need her either, and we called for another car to pick her up. She started to pack her two suitcases and took off as soon as the car came. I was left alone with Jackson in the plane with an unexpected emergency on our hands. After the Captain left, there was nobody to open the plane door for Miss Sanchez except Jackson. He did so, and he had to open it wide to permit her passage with the suitcases. After that he could not get the door closed and struggled with it to no avail. (He tried to wrench the door free with both hands, giving a perfect target with his chest against the metal door to all the police below. They showed commendable discipline by not opening fire.) It was cold outside and rain, driven by the high wind, started to pour into the plane and Jackson started to worry about the carpeting of the plane as well as about the drop of temperature for which he was not dressed. So we had to call for a mechanic to come to fix the door.

With the door securely closed, I went over the details of the extradition treaty with Jackson, who by this time was getting visibly more tired and submissive. To make a long story short, after about 40 minutes of discussion he said that he agreed, in principle, to surrender to the highest-ranking officer at the airport, Major General Caceres Monie, but that he needed a little more time to think over his situation. He said the general would also feel better after some

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

Assignment: Skyjacker

breakfast and he, Jackson, wanted to drink his last can of beer in peace. He said to tell the general that he wanted to keep his pistol as a souvenir, without the bullets, of course.

I returned to the terminal in the car of the chief mechanic, who had waited for me at plane-side after fixing the door. I told Caceres Monie that the affair was about to end and to give Mr. Jackson maybe another hour, beyond which I did not think he could last. I said that for the first time he was really alone in the plane and while this would seem an ideal opportunity to commit suicide, I was certain that Jackson had no such intentions as he was very concerned with the fate of his children. Caceres Monie agreed with this reasoning, which I then repeated for the benefit of a police psychiatrist.

In the meanwhile Mr. Wachter kept the Embassy informed of developments and followed proceedings from the Braniff communications room, where Mr. Pfizer, the Braniff Security Officer, was getting increasingly restless, aggressive and generally objectionable, insisting that the plane now should be taken by force. He was finally told by Colonel Alberto Vallejos, Chief of Federal Police, to desist from interfering with the proceedings or he would be ejected from the premises.

At a few minutes before 0900 hours I again contacted Jackson on the plane via Braniff radio and advised him that General Caceres Monie had an important family engagement, that he could not wait much longer, and that unless Jackson wished to surrender immediately he would have to surrender later to a lower-ranking officer. We got no immediate answer to this message, giving rise to thought that Jackson might have fallen asleep or, according to the pessimists, even committed suicide. However, a few minutes later Jackson came on the air, acknowledged the message, and said that he wished to change his clothes for the surrender ceremony. I then went to General Caceres Monie to advise him that the time was ripe. The general asked that I accompany him to interpret during the act of surrender. We set off in the general's car at about 0905 and were met at the foot of the stairs of the plane by Jackson, already in the custody of Inspector General Alberto Villar and Commissioner Jorge Colotto. General Caceres Monie and I got out of the car into the pouring rain and faced the hijacker, now subdued. I introduced the general to Jackson; the general bowed stiffly from the waist, we shook hands all around, and the show was over.

With Jackson being driven off in one car, the general and I proceeded to the Airport Detachment of the Federal Police, from where General Caceres Monie telephoned the President (with me at

Assignment: Skyjacker

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

his side) to report that the mission was completed with full success. Mr. Wachter then took over the U.S. representation at the police station, and I left Ezeiza Airport at 1000 hours, just about 20 hours after arriving on the scene.

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~