

This rediscovered article was the first investigative story in 1971 to focus on the rumored fly-away escape – a theory officially discouraged by the FBI. The research was gathered in Washington State by visiting *Los Angeles Times* writer Daryl E. “Bud” Lembke – later a renowned Northern California Bureau Chief and now in 2017, a semi-retired playwright. The details offered by his six eyewitnesses, marked with **red** arrows, match the facts in both the FBI “302” summary accounts and the 1997 oral history from Source Russ Cooper.

DID ACCOMPLICE ARRIVE?

Indications of a Rendezvous Heighten Hijack Mystery

BY DARYL LEMBKE

Times Staff Writer

WOODLAND, Wash. — A light plane swept out of the stormy night and circled over a crude airstrip in the hills 10 miles east of here.

The weather was bad, rainy and windy, and no fit night for a joy-riding pilot to be landing on the bumpy, unlighted hilltop airstrip near a wooded ravine.

Yet some nearby residents say that a small plane did land at a little after 8 p.m. on Nov. 24, at the same time and in the same area where a hijacker is believed to have parachuted from an airliner with \$200,000 in \$20 bills.

The eyewitness accounts of the strange presence of the light plane could explain how the hijacker, who gave the name D. B. Cooper on boarding the airliner, escaped a three-day manhunt for him, or at

least how he had planned to escape if he survived the parachute jump.

He could have had an accomplice who flew in by prearrangement and waited for him or there could also have been a third party in a car who looked for him and took him to the plane. The hijacker could have been

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in touch with his accomplice by walkie-talkie.

Adding credence to this theory is the fact that someone in a car apparently rendezvoused with a pilot at another, nearby airstrip the night before the hijacking and went for what could have been a pre-hijack scouting flight in equally bad weather.

Those who say they saw the light plane on the night of the hijacking have been questioned several times by FBI agents, who also combed the wooded ravine near the airstrip during the man-hunt last weekend. The FBI refused comment Thursday on the significance of the reports about the small plane.

The airstrip is on property owned by the McClellan family. Mr. and Mrs. Robert M. McClellan Jr., who live in a new house at the south end of the airstrip, formerly owned a plane but sold it. McClellan's parents live in an older house a little farther from the landing field.

Deer hunters and others flying light planes frequently set down on the strip, which is surrounded by foot-high weeds. But they seldom arrive at night in a rainstorm.

Indignant at Claims

Robert M. McClellan Sr., 66, whose family has owned the ranch land for 100 years, was indignant at neighbors' claims of seeing or hearing a plane coming into the airstrip on the night of the hijacking. He said he had been in Vancouver, Wash., 18 miles to the south, that night, but added that "none of my family who were home heard a plane."

"I'd bet the \$200,000 if I had it that they didn't pick him up here," McClellan said. "Twelve FBI agents hunted that woods below my house there last weekend and didn't find anything. 'Course that doesn't mean much. I've lost calves in there for days."

A flight recorder in the commandeered Northwest Orient 727 indicated that the hijacker opened the rear door of the plane at 8:13 p.m. Because of a slight lurch of the plane, searchers deduced that he made the jump from the lowered rear steps two or three minutes later.

Mr. and Mrs. Emil Neiger, who live just down the road from the McClellan airstrip, said a plane had been circling the landing area most of that afternoon.

A little after 8 p.m., they saw what seemed to them a puzzling sight, considering the severity of the storm.

"We were gone for a while and came home about 8 o'clock," said Mrs. Neiger. "I was washing the dishes when both of us saw this plane swoop down low. We thought it was going to land and it put its landing lights on.

Then we thought it took off again."

Two miles down the road to the west, Mrs.

Frank Distefano saw something that made an impression on her at about 8:30 p.m. Mr. and Mrs. Distefano moved to a rural area here from Redondo Beach, Calif., 12 years ago "to escape the drug problem."


Their grocery store and gas station, with residents in the rear, constitutes the entire wide spot in the road that is the town of View. The town used to have a church but that is now abandoned.

Craft 'Flew Very Low'

"I was home alone when I saw a plane out the back window about 8:30," said Mrs. Distefano. "It flew over the store twice, very low, and it had a big red light on the tail. It seemed bigger than a light plane. It was raining and the wind was blowing.

"I thought, 'What's he doing out here this time of night?' It was weird to me because we don't see many planes at night here. He was so low that he could have hit a mountain."

There are no mountains in the immediate vicinity, but several, including majestic, snow-covered Mt. St. Helens, (elevation

9,677 feet), are within 30 miles. 


Mrs. Melvin Andersen, who resides just across the road from the north end of the McClellan landing strip, said she heard a plane land there and saw lights indicating that it was turning around.

"He was parked an hour or so and then it left," she said.

Connection Doubted

"I doubt if it was connected to the hijacker. The McClellans probably had a visitor. They have friends who fly."

But the McClellans insist that they had no visitor drop in that night.

The imagination is further stirred about the possibility of a dangerous swoop down to pick up the hijacker because of the experience the previous evening of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Haun,  couple who own and maintain a public airstrip on the same county road as the McClellans' makeshift field but four miles to the west.

The Haun airstrip, cutting across an alfalfa field next to a berry patch, is well known to Portland, Ore., area skydivers because they frequently used it for jump flights until two years ago.

The unlighted field is across the road from the Hauns' farm residence.

"We were sitting and watching TV Tuesday night when a plane landed in the rain," explained

Mrs. Haun. "A car also drove up. The car's parking lights were left on and the driver got in the plane and took off with the pilot. They were gone 45 minutes to an hour and then came back and landed. The car drove off and the plane took off again.

"I thought it was a little strange."

The FBI has questioned Mr. and Mrs. Haun several times about the mysterious airfield meeting, which could have been a dress rehearsal and reconnaissance mission for making a getaway on Thanksgiving eve.

The Hauns were not at home on the night of the hijacking, so they have no way of knowing if their airstrip was used that night.

Like many others in the countryside on Thanksgiving eve, the Hauns were attending the wedding in the town of La Center (pop. 300) of a neighbor girl, Celeste Rau, and the popular La Center high school music teacher, Terry Vander Stoep.

"Nearly everybody in town and for miles around was at the wedding," said

La Center grocery and general store owner Elmer Soehl. "There were 300 at the wedding and reception, so that kept a lot of people in the area occupied for a couple hours, just when the hijacker was supposed to be making his escape."

Because of the bad weather and uncertainty as to where to look until flight information was fed into computers, the search was not begun on a full scale until Friday morning, 36 hours after the hijacking.

The search employed some 25 to 30 Clarke County and Cowlitz County sheriff's deputies, Woodland's police chief and FBI agents, plus several pilots flying planes and helicopters, and even two boats on Lake Merwin.

The lake is a manmade body of water stretching behind a dam on the Lewis River, which marks the division between very rugged country to the north and more gently rolling, partly cleared land to the south.

The search area encompassed about 150 square miles to the north and

south of the Lewis, but computer data pinpointed the hijackers descent at two miles south of the Lewis. That would have put him some two miles north of the McClellan air strip.

Clarke County Sheriff Eugene Cotton, who displays on his office wall a diploma from the FBI Academy for law enforcement officers, said the north half of the search area was scanned only from the air.

"If he landed in there, he's in trouble," said Cotton.

Only last Nov. 13, a 18-year-old boy became separated from his father when hunting in that area and has not been found.

Joe May, Woodland po-

lice chief and an ex-Navy divebomber pilot, flew a light plane over the rugged terrain and pointed out to a reporter some of the hazards: Steep cliffs, thick fir trees, a mountain stream gurgling down a valley and 5,000-foot Davis peak.

The area south of the Lewis is not so forbidding. It has many small farms, on which the farmer raises a few chickens, cattle or sheep to supplement a job in town.

Good roads criss-crossed the countryside. There are some forests but many cleared hilltops and mead-

ows.

A man could pop out of the clouds here and land without breaking his neck, although James Allen of the U.S. Forest Service's Redmond Air Center in Oregon and a parachute jumper for 25 years, said it would help a lot to have special equipment.

He said the center's fire fighters each carried 150 feet of rope to let themselves down from trees when they jumped to combat forest fires. They also wear boots and special suits with padding in the elbows and knees to soften the landing in rough terrain.