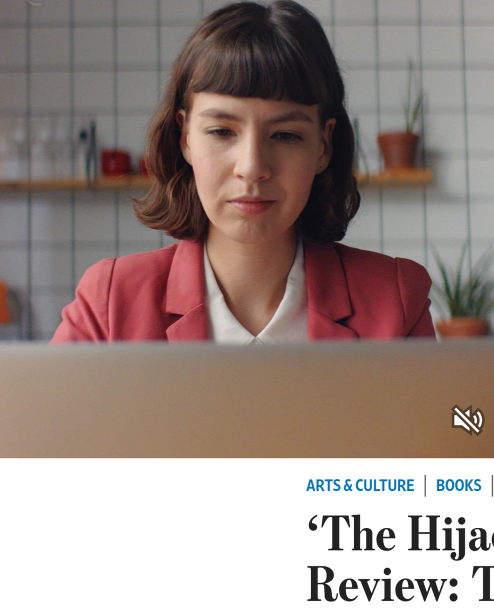
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‘The Hijacking of American Flight 119’ Review: Take the Money and Jump

Air piracy in America peaked in the early ’70s, triggered by D.B. Cooper’s exploits and a design quirk of the Boeing 727.

By *Edward Kosner*
Nov. 9, 2023 at 6:01 pm ET

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PHOTO: ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

D.B. Cooper belongs in the pantheon of American desperados—a Jesse James or Billy the Kid for our times.

On Nov. 24, 1971, Cooper hijacked a Northwest Orient Airlines Boeing 727 as it was en route to Seattle. He threatened to blow up the plane with a homemade bomb, and he demanded $200,000 and four parachutes. Once the loot and gear were delivered on the tarmac in Seattle, Cooper directed the pilots to fly to Mexico. The refueled jet headed south. Over the Cascade mountain range, Cooper jumped from the plane’s rear-exit stairway, the cash in a bag tied to his body. Years later, some of the money turned up half-buried in the wilderness—but no trace of Cooper has ever been found.

An artist’s rendering of Cooper in his shiny wraparound sunglasses quickly became a pop icon. The skyjacker also triggered a run of bizarre copycat crimes. Now John Wigger, a history professor at the University of Missouri, has reconstructed Cooper’s story, among others, in “The Hijacking of American Flight 119: How D.B. Cooper Inspired a Skyjacking Craze and the FBI’s Battle to Stop It.” Meticulously reported, the book belongs on the shelf with other pop histories of the febrile last decades of the 20th century in America.

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The Hijacking of American Flight 119: How D.B. Cooper Inspired a Skyjacking Craze and the FBI’s Battle to Stop It

By John Wigger

Oxford University Press

304 pages

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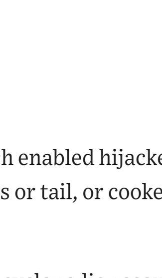

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Over time and as the number of copycat skyjackers increased, the author writes, the FBI and other authorities developed a profile of the kind of desperate man who seized planes: “He was at one end of the mid-twenties-to-mid-forties age range,” Mr. Wigger tells us. “He had recent triggers—divorce and the loss of his job—that pushed him over the edge. He spun elaborate ruses and made a complicated series of demands.”

The skyjacker’s job was made easier by the 1964 introduction of the Boeing 727—with its rear trijet and aft exit stairway—which enabled hijackers to escape by parachute without being swept against the wings or tail, or cooked in the exhaust from wing-borne engines.

Mr. Wigger offers an encyclopedic account of skyjacking. Many air pirates in the 1960s, he tells us, including Black Panthers with criminal records, landed in Havana; the Cubans stashed most of them in what they called Hijack House. Others received a long sentence in Cuban prisons, much of it served in solitary confinement. The experience dashed any fantasies about life in Castro’s Cuba. “Compared to this, San Quentin was a country club,” one wised-up revolutionary recalled.

The author uses the post-Cooper 1972 hijacking of American Airlines Flight 119, from New York to Los Angeles—with stops in St. Louis, Tulsa and Phoenix—as the scaffolding on which he hangs his tale. But he also slathers on so much detail about that episode and others—the search for perpetrators, their capture or demise, the denomination of bills in the ransoms demanded—that the reader can get lost in dense clouds of minutiae.

Unless you skip many passages, you’ll learn the college background and marital status of almost every FBI agent investigating these cases and more than you need to know about many other peripheral figures. Mr. Wigger also delivers a potted social history of American commercial aviation—including the fact that flight-attendant supervisors would pat their charges on the rear before takeoff to make sure they were wearing a girdle. There’s the history of the parachute, too.

Still, the skyjacking narratives are inherently compelling. The case of American Airlines Flight 119 came soon after Cooper’s caper. The air pirate fit the profile: Marty McNally, a 28-year-old from Michigan—divorced, jobless and in debt. He was familiar with aircraft after serving as a flight electrician aboard Navy patrol planes tracking Russian submarines off Alaska. He’d hatched his skyjacking scheme in a desperate effort to change his luck and chose to catch the plane at St. Louis because security at that airport was lax.

On June 23, 1972, under the name Robert Wilson, McNally boarded the 727 with a round-trip ticket for Tulsa. In his briefcase were a cheap wig, rubber gloves, a smoke grenade, a sawed-off machine gun and a pistol. Once airborne, he ducked into the lavatory and emerged wearing the wig and gloves, clutching the machine gun.

Mr. Wigger delivers a taut account of the episode—the return to St. Louis to collect the $500,000 and parachutes that McNally demanded; the delay when an angry civilian trying to thwart the skyjacking drove onto the tarmac and crashed his Cadillac into the 727’s landing gear; McNally’s daredevil jump from the plane after he ordered it to be diverted over tiny Peru, Ind.; and his loss of the loot in midair. After landing and hiding his parachute under a rock, McNally made his way to Peru and roosted in the same motel as several of the FBI agents hunting him. He was finally captured after the FBI matched his fingerprints on fragments of his ransom note, which had been retrieved from the plane’s aft staircase.

The jury took less than an hour to convict McNally after the government called 52 witnesses against him. He was sentenced to two life terms but was eligible for parole after 15 years. A number of the other early Cooper copycats also received long sentences but served only a fraction of the time behind bars.

McNally was the last skyjacker to parachute from a plane, Mr. Wigger writes. Air piracy peaked between 1968 and 1972, then petered out thanks to stiffer penalties imposed for the crime, the introduction of stringent airport security and the installation of an ingenious mechanism ensuring that the aft stairways on 727s could never be opened in flight.

It would be ironic if it turned out that D.B. Cooper survived long enough to savor the postmodern crime wave his madcap exploit inspired.

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Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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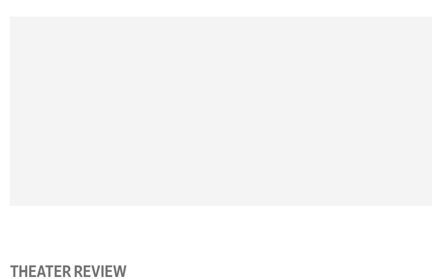

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