

**8th Air Force Historical Society, Oregon Chapter
Lt. Col. Frank Heyl
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Lt. Col. Frank Heyl
[Photos by Joan E. Hamilton]

BASED ON THE D.B. COOPER SPEECH OF LT. COL. FRANK HEYL

Edited by Joan E. Hamilton

[Checked, corrected, modified, and approved by Lt. Col. Heyl]

Our 8th Air Force Historical Society (AFHS), Oregon Chapter's May speaker was, once again, Lt. Col. Frank Heyl whose 40-year military career was served as a B-25 Mitchell pilot on submarine patrols during WWII in the U.S. Army Air Force; flying C-46s in the Air Force during the Korean War; and as a helicopter pilot in the Oregon Army National Guard. For 23 years, he was principal instructor and director for training with military and contract survival schools. He served as the Air and Ground Safety Consultant on the Alyeska Pipeline and collaborated on the pamphlet, *Staying Alive in the Arctic* for the American Petroleum Institute. Lt. Col. Heyl wrote the book, *Why Some Survive: Common Threads of Survival*, with Richard O. Woodfin, Jr. Lt. Col. Heyl co-piloted a search-and-rescue helicopter involved in the search for D.B. "Dan" Cooper, the infamous hijacker of Northwest Orient Airlines Flight 305 on November 24, 1971. After 50+ years, the true identify of D.B. Cooper has not been officially uncovered nor overall proof of the success or failure of his skyjacking plight. The following is based on the presentation by Lt. Col. Heyl with his modifications and additions.

Lt. Col. Frank Heyl: The skyjacking happened about 50 years ago. D.B. Cooper hijacked the Northwest Orient Airline [Flight 305] out of Portland to Seattle. Ralph Himmelsbach was the lead FBI agent on the case. Ralph was on his way home for Thanksgiving dinner. It was Thanksgiving eve [November 24, 1971] and he got the call to return to the airport immediately, that there'd been a skyjacking going on. And so, he spent the next twenty-five years on the case.

Ralph was an interesting and dedicated person. He lived about six blocks from me. His wife and my wife were members of the same garden club. I've gone to his house with my family to barbeques.

I was a great admirer of the FBI and Ralph at that time. Ralph was a dedicated soldier of the FBI. That was for sure. He would've arrested his own grandmother if she had committed a crime against the government. I really believe that.

I was told Ralph gave up a promotion otherwise he could not have stayed on the Cooper case. He'd been with the FBI over twenty years and, one of the rare FBI agents who had accomplished the great place of being the only FBI agent at that time who'd never failed to solve a case and Cooper was his. So, he was going to solve the case.

Ralph moved to the airport. By that, I mean they had quarters for security there. Now, this is hearsay from my wife who knew his wife. Ralph came home once a week Saturday night to change his underwear and then would go back to the airport. He and his wife were eventually divorced. I would've divorced him too.

At the time, I had left the Air Force and moved to the Army National Guard. I became a helicopter co-pilot for Col. Bill Gottlieb. We were one of the aircraft that searched for D.B. Cooper.

D.B. Cooper bailed out of a Northwest Airline 727 jetliner probably north of Portland on Thanksgiving eve. He'd checked in at the airport, regular customer service Northwest Airlines and boarded the aircraft and took a seat in the rear of the aircraft. After the aircraft had taken off, he called one of the flight attendants and handed her a note. In the note, he had written, "I have a bomb and you will do as I tell you."

Now, I'm kind of going by memory. There's a copy of the note, I think, in the book, *Norjak*, written by Ralph Himmelsbach and Thomas Worcester.

Cooper was hijacking the aircraft and the note said, "Take this note to the pilot and bring it back to me."

There were thirty-six people aboard the aircraft and a hijacking—or skyjacking this was—you don't want to see thirty-some people lose their lives. So, the flight attendant took the note to the pilot. The note explained to the crew exactly what he wanted them to do. They took off from Portland to fly to Seattle, about a thirty-minute flight. He told the pilot what to tell the people on the ground at Sea-Tac, [Seattle Tacoma Airport]. They would not go into a regular parking area. They would park on the far side of the field and there would be a fuel truck there. Now, they had fueled in Portland, but they'd be loaded with fuel at Sea-Tac and if anyone approached the aircraft other than a tanker with fuel, he would blow up the aircraft. He showed the flight attendant what looked like six bombs. They were later thought to be railroad flares, but no one knew that at the time.

He ordered all passengers to leave the aircraft when they got on the ground in Seattle. They sent a bus out to pick up the passengers. The only people on the aircraft when they left Seattle were the pilots and flight attendants.

After they landed at Sea-Tac, Cooper informed the pilots that they should order \$200,000 in twenty-dollar bills. Kind of funny. I look at \$20 bills now. I had those serial numbers, after fifty years. Cooper ordered four parachutes with the \$200,000. He wanted two military-type chutes and two civilian chutes. He inspected each parachute thoroughly. One of the chutes was damaged.

He took one parachute, a backpack, and a chest pack. The chest pack fits on the chest and a backpack on his back. He knew quite a bit about parachutes because he was observed by the flight attendant to check the release pins, and adjust each strap evenly. This you must do. And the leg straps must come up in your crouch and be snug.

He did know a lot about the 727 because he chose the only aircraft that he could've parachuted safely from at that time. The 727 jetliner had stairs and a ramp in the back that could be lowered. They lowered it from the cockpit by the pilot or by the stairs in the back.

They gave Cooper the money he wanted and then the jetliner took off to fly to Mexico. However, he changed that inflight to Reno, Nevada. Somewhere around Ariel, Washington, the pilot was told to slow down to jump speed. The aircrew heard and could feel the decompression of the stairs being lowered in flight. The aircrew felt the decompression and the aircraft continued to Reno. They didn't pull the stairs up until they got ready to land. So, Cooper had jumped out someplace between Ariel, Washington and Reno, Nevada.

The skyjacking occurred on Wednesday afternoon, Thanksgiving eve which was good planning by Cooper. The long holiday weekend would slow organized volunteer search operations.

The search to begin with was by helicopter. Then, they had the volunteer on the ground search-and-rescue people. We've got to give the volunteers a lot of credit.

Think about D.B. Cooper, if you will. He had to pick a target. There had been skyjackings previously, but none of them had been successful. The skyjackers were all caught before they even got started.

So, the 727 target was new. No prescribed search method or procedures. The man knew what he was doing: target, aircraft, and money of \$200,000 which today would be about \$1.4 million in purchasing power.

Cooper figured out a short flight to let the law know what he was going to do. He knew a lot about parachutes because he was observed by the flight attendants who saw him checking and adjusting each. He knew a lot about the 727, the only aircraft that had the stairs and a ramp suitable for parachuting. You cannot just bail out of any airliner. If you look at the size of the windows, they're much too small. You couldn't get out with a parachute on. Cooper also wanted a safe rear end exit.

Audience member: Weather? Stormy?

Lt. Col. Heyl: He picked a good night, too. Thanksgiving eve and the weather helped him. Someone said, "Wow, he didn't pick a very good night or a very good time to do it."

"Well, he wouldn't bail out over downtown Portland on a sunshiny afternoon."

He picked the wilderness area, again, good planning.

No injuries. No deaths. No problem. After the search had gone on for several days and I got to talking to Ralph and he said, "We'll have this wound up in a matter of days."

I agreed with him.

And it went on for months. Finally, Ralph retired. He'd lost his wife. He'd turned down a possible promotion which would've meant an increase in retirement pay and he retired as an agent instead of a supervisor.

After a number of years, several books came out on the hijacking. The only one that I really have any faith in is *Norjak* [*Norjak: The Investigation of D.B. Cooper* by Ralph Himmelsbach and Thomas Worcester]. Sally, you looked it up. How much?

Sally: \$1599 (fifteen hundred and ninety-nine dollars).

Lt. Col. Heyl: Yeah, you can get one for \$1599. No, you can get them for less, maybe \$4.99, can't you? Four dollars and ninety-nine cents. But, the last chapter, they quoted me on how could've been Cooper successful in his attempt.

Now, whether he's alive today, I don't know, but I at that time had just returned from a combat-aviation survival course: how to land and live in the Arctic; how to land and live in the desert; how to land and live in the jungle; and how to be an escapee; escape and evasion. So, I thought I knew it all. It's in the back of the book, last chapter, pages 125-129.

I got to go to several critiques, several lunches with the air crews. After each flight in the searches, we would have an after-mission report. But I wanted to know what kind of clothes did he have on? They said he had a business suit on, but what did he have on underneath the business suit? "What kind of clothes did the man have on and what did he have in that briefcase?"

Also, I wanted to know the only thing that they didn't really pick up on which was the kind of shoes he had on. I wish they would've noticed that. If he was wearing low-quarter shoes, he would've lost them in the parachute jump. The shoes paratroopers wear lace above the ankle. So, I think the man got on the ground with his shoes on.

One of the flight attendants said when he took off his tie—that's the only evidence he left aboard that aircraft when he bailed out and I think the tie was a G.I. issue. I feel the man knew parachuting. I think he knew a lot about the aircraft. He knew a lot about aircraft performance, how fast. He knew about the stairs and their operation.

It was the perfect crime. Now, I don't say he wasn't killed, but they have never found one item. The parachute harness hardware would still be there today. It's made of stainless steel. They've never found the parachutes after he bailed out. They never found a belt buckle off his clothes. They never found a pocket knife, nothing, nothing. So, where is he? I assume, maybe he was a success. I don't know, but I hope not.

One person said to me, "Maybe he attended one of your military survival courses."

I said, "I hope not."

In 1986, Ralph wrote the book, *Norjak [Norjak: The Investigation of D.B. Cooper]* by Ralph Himmelsbach and Thomas Worcester]. It's a great book. I went so far as to tell both (along with many others) how Cooper could've done it.

Bert Campbell: You said he had four parachutes.

Lt. Col. Heyl: Yes.

Bert Campbell: Two backpacks, two chest packs.

Lt. Col. Heyl: Correct

Bert Campbell: Two of them were civilian and two of them were military.

Lt. Col. Heyl: Correct

Bert Campbell: The military was a T-10. Does a military T-10 parachute look like a civilian T-10 parachute? The canopies are the same. Are the parachute packs the same? Do you know?

Lt. Col. Heyl: No, I don't know. I went through jump school, but all I ever worked with was the military and he did take the military chutes. So, that gives me reason and thought that he was military.

Bert Campbell: I understand the T-10 quite well. You said the civilians' chutes had been tampered with.

Lt. Col. Heyl: Yes, the pins had been bent, so I've been told. He got the parachutes from two different sources: a civilian jump school at Sea-Tac and also military locally. I don't know where they came from, but they were military chutes. He selected two parachutes and the hardware and the buckles would still be there if he survived it or hid them.

By the way, a number of years ago, a youngster did find some of the ransom money in \$20 bills at the confluence of the Columbia and a small river. The young boy was awarded 1/3 of that money in current US currency. As I mentioned, I never get a \$20 bill that I don't look at the number. Most anybody that wanted a copy of the numbers--they were in the newspaper—had a copy of those numbers at that time. Any questions?

Audience member: Is the money burned? Looks like it's burned around the edges.

Lt. Col. Heyl: That's just from being in the water and aging over the years.

Audience member: Have you ever spoken to Dan Griner by any chance?

Lt. Col. Heyl: I have not.

Audience member: Do you know who he is?

Lt. Col. Heyl: I know of the name, yes. I've not met the man.

Audience member: [Inaudible] There was another hijacking/skyjacking two years later.

Lt. Col. Heyl: There was one in Canada. That was a Canadian, I believe.

Audience member: Utah

Lt. Col. Heyl: Utah, okay.

Lt. Col. Heyl: These were first-time crimes. I mean the D.B. Cooper case was, look at it. He picked the ideal target. He picked the best time of the year and the day. "I'm going to have four or five days before they get an all-out search."

And, you know, a bank robbery, they've got it all laid out. Check 1, 2, 3. They know what to do, when to do, and how to do, and they do it. With a hijacking or skyjacking as they called it, it hadn't been successfully done. They didn't have experienced procedures to go. Ralph Himmelsbach wrote investigative procedures from then on. Ralph had been a P-51 pilot during WWII and he was knowledgeable about aeronautics. And, as I recall, he held a commercial pilots license. That was his thing. I think the Cooper investigation ruined part of his life.

Now, that's me just [inaudible] saying that and I associated with him quite a bit. We were both members of the Quiet Birdmen. I rode back and forth to the base with him and he did not have very good words to say about Cooper. Any other questions? Yes.

Audience member: Was his name really D.B. Cooper or did they find out it was something else?

Lt. Col. Heyl: We don't know.

Audience member: We don't know, because checking ID back then [inaudible].

Lt. Col. Heyl: There just was not a D.B. Cooper to match up with the man. There are some D.B. Coopers in the United States. I think there were four or five of them, but all of them had jobs and all were home on Thanksgiving night. Yes, sir?

Audience member: Did they estimate how old he was at the time?

Lt. Col. Heyl: Yes, forty to fifty years old. He was somewhere in there. He was the same age I—he'd be about 100 years old now if he were alive. Any other questions? Good, alright. God Bless you. Good luck. [Applause]