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U.S. Heads Off the Hijackers: How the Operation Unfolded

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 11 — Shortly after noon Thursday, Eastern daylight time, President Reagan conferred in a private office at a cake factory near Chicago and, after weighing the risks, decided to try to intercept an Egyptian civilian jet with United States fighter aircraft.

Mr. Reagan was told that intelligence experts expected that the plane would soon be flying from Cairo with the four hijackers of the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro, and the President decided to try and force them away from a safe haven and into a court of justice. His order was racing through Pentagon channels by 1:30 P.M.

The bold plan for an airborne operation to seize some initiative from international terrorists was conceived and presented to the President early Thursday morning, according to White House officials.

No Hint of the Operation

After he gave initial approval by midday in Illinois, F-14 fighter planes were scrambled from the American aircraft carrier Saratoga and were flying in place over the Mediterranean at 2:15 P.M. Eastern time — it was already evening in Europe — to await his final order.

At 4:37 P.M., as he returned to Washington on Air Force One after his visit to the Chicago area, the President received confirmation that the Egyptian plane had taken off 22 minutes earlier, and he issued his final instruction to have the armed fighters carry out the interception plan.

Mr. Reagan gave no hint of the risky operation as he traveled from Washington to Chicago on Thursday morning for a speech on tax reform. He told jokes to Representatives Henry J. Hyde and Lynn Martin, Republicans of Illinois, as they flew west aboard Air Force One.

But the attractiveness of the plan already was clear to him, according to aides, and he summarized that today in explaining his decision to proceed despite the attendant risks.

"Here was a clear-cut case where we could lay our hands on the terrorists," he said, after five years of frustration over a series of bombings and kidnap-

pings directed at United States citizens in the Middle East.

"We did this all by our little selves," Mr. Reagan said rather proudly. His advisers concurred, exultantly describing the seizure of the terrorists as a singular success for American intelligence and military planners, and as a tribute to the President's quiet decisiveness.

At the President's side in Illinois monitoring the word from Cairo was his national security adviser, Robert C. McFarlane, a soft-spoken combat veteran who said today that Mr. Reagan had expressed "very prudent regard" for the risks and had several times asked "what if" questions as he went over final details of the plan during a break on his tour of the Sara Lee Kitchens cake factory in Deerfield, Ill.

"It never reached the point where the risks exceeded the potential gains," Mr. McFarlane said.

Memory of Failed Mission

But as the time approached for the President's final order, various officials knew of the operation and could appreciate the risks, recalling the failed attempt by President Jimmy Carter to use military force to rescue the hostages in Iran in 1980.

"Those four people will be brought to justice," a cryptic but unusually confident Senator Dave Durenberger, Republican of Minnesota, told reporters Thursday at 4 P.M., shortly after he was briefed about the plan.

"Or whoever is still living at the time they can be brought to justice," Mr. Durenberger, chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, quickly added, since the plan was still far from certain success.

When the cruise ship hijacking began on Monday, the Administration put into effect standing plans to have a military assault force prepare for a possible boarding action. But Wednesday was the earliest opportunity for the nighttime raid — too late to capture the terrorists, who had by then surrendered to Egyptian authorities and been promised safe passage from Cairo.

While the boarding raid was a known option of the Administration's anti-terrorist contingency plans, the idea of intercepting the Egyptian airliner was not. Even as he was ordering the interception plan, the President was telling a Chicago crowd of his "gorge" of frustration at the incident, in which an invalid passenger from New York reportedly was shot in the head by the terrorists and thrown overboard.

As the President ordered the interceptors to proceed, he was operating with what Mr. McFarlane said was an unusually high quality of intelligence

information from various sources, including the Central Intelligence Agency. He would not elaborate, but other Administration officials hinted there might have been sources who had the Egyptian plane, a Boeing 737, under visual surveillance as the takeoff was awaited.

In contrast to the joke-telling session on the trip to Chicago, Mr. Reagan did not visit his guests on the return trip aboard Air Force One, after he had issued his initial order and details were being received about the scrambling of the F-14's. "He was quieter, less ebullient," a Presidential aide recalled of the flight back to Washington.

The aircraft that took off from the Saratoga included four F-14 fighters that had rehearsed their close-winged approach to the civilian jetliner, as well as three additional F-14's, an E-2C radar intelligence plane, and tanker planes to refuel the force during its five hours of action. It was being closely tracked by a team of Administration officials working in the Situation Room in the White House basement under the direction of Mr. McFarlane's deputy, Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter.

The Saratoga had been cruising at night near the Peloponnesus when the President's initial order arrived and had to come about into the wind for the aircraft launch. In formation above the Mediterranean, the planes were ordered to operate "in total darkness, in total silence," according to Navy Secretary John F. Lehman Jr.

After waiting more than three hours, the planes, aided by extensive radar information, spotted the Egyptian 737 visually at 5:30 P.M. Eastern time at 34.25 degrees north latitude and 25 degrees east longitude. This was 80 miles south of Crete.

They trailed it without announcing themselves, and the jetliner gave no indication that it was aware of the surveillance, according to Pentagon officials.

Order to Intercept Is Given

The F-14 force monitored radio transmissions as the jetliner sought and was denied permission to land at Tunis, then Athens. Finally, the order was passed to the fighters to turn on their running lights and confront the jetliner by radio and shepherd it to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization base at Sigonella in Sicily.

One crucial question that Administration officials would not answer definitively today was whether the planes had been prepared to fire on the jetliner if the order were resisted.

"That's for them to go to bed every night wondering," Mr. Reagan said today, speaking of the incident as a lesson for any potential future terrorists.

The jetliner and its escort landed at the Sicily base at 6:45 P.M. Eastern time. It was instantly surrounded by troops from the base, which is near the city of Catania.

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A period of confusion followed involving American and Italian officials, according to Administration officials. Heavy air cover could be seen, with planes circling the field, according to one officer on duty at the time, and from time to time the jetliner was towed from one point to another, as if to protect against potentially unfriendly interlopers.

Shortly after 11 P.M. Thursday in Washington, the White House confirmed the mission and said it had achieved the President's goal: to see the terrorists brought to custody in order to face charges for the hijacking of the cruise ship.

Larry Speakes, the President's spokesman, summarized the mission and Mr. Reagan's role in it. "He approved the escalation of it as events warranted," Mr. Speakes said. "It was just the right application of U.S. force."
