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At CooperCon, D.B. Cooper is a mystery, a passion and a community

David Gutman - The Seattle Times (TNS)
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SEATTLE — Have we checked the spare parachute packing card slot? What about the rip cords? Wait, the parachute, was it a 24-foot canopy or a 26-foot canopy? Is there DNA on the tie clip? And, my goodness, how did the money end up at Tena Bar?

The questions linger, they spiral, becoming ever more arcane.

If you're not versed, if you don't know about the copycats and the diatoms and the titanium particles, it all sounds like Greek.

But for those who've been hooked, captivated, enthralled, the legend of D.B. Cooper does not fade. It is a subculture — like Swifties, 12s, the BeyHive — focused around a larger ideal, where people find community.

"We know the middle — we don't know the beginning or the end of the story," said Chris Grandlienard, a county planner from Florida, who flew across the country for CooperCon, a three-day annual event held this year at The Museum of Flight dedicated to solving, or at least propagating, a half-century-old mystery. "It's not like this is Bigfoot. This is an actual person who existed. Who was he? He was so nondescript, he just blended in."

On Nov. 24, 1971, a man giving his name as Dan Cooper walked into Portland International Airport and paid \$20 for a ticket on Northwest Orient Flight 305 to Seattle. He ordered a bourbon and soda, smoked cigarettes and handed the flight attendant a note, saying he had a bomb. He asked for \$200,000 and four parachutes.

The plane landed in Seattle, and he traded the passengers for the money and the chutes. Then he instructed the pilots to fly south. Somewhere over southern Washington, he opened the rear door of the Boeing 727, and jumped.

He's never been found. It is the only unsolved skyjacking in American history. An early news story misreported his name as "D.B. Cooper" and it stuck. Frankly, it sounds a lot cooler than Dan. Nearly a decade later, an 8-year-old boy, digging in the sand on Tena Bar, a Columbia River beach, found \$6,000 of Cooper's money.

The name, the ubiquitous police sketch — close-cropped hair, black suit, black tie, black sunglasses — have become legend.

It is among the great mysteries wafting through the American consciousness, not quite on the level of "Was there a second shooter?" but in the echelon right below.

For the 100 or so people at CooperCon on Friday, who flew from Florida, Texas, Ireland (and paid \$149 for a three-day pass), the motivations vary. Everyone mentions the mystery. Most have a theory of the case. Many want to solve it. Some prefer the unknown.

They came in sloganed T-shirts — "DB Lives," "I am the Man who Found D.B. Cooper," "Northwest Legend."

Few people who ever lived have been more impacted by D.B. Cooper than Martin McNally. McNally was 28 when he lost his job in 1972, a couple months after the Cooper hijacking.

"D.B. Cooper did his in November, OK? Thanksgiving," McNally said Friday. "I said, 'Hey, that sounds like an easy score: Get an extortion note, couple of weapons, disguise, wigs and so forth. And board the plane and demand what you want, money, half a million dollars, parachutes and bail out.' What could be easier?"

"Hey," McNally said, pausing for emphasis, "was I wrong."

In June 1972, carrying a submachine gun, McNally hijacked a flight from St. Louis to Tulsa. He asked for \$500,000, but lost it when he jumped over Indiana. He was caught a few days later with \$13 in his pocket and eventually sentenced to two life sentences. He was released in 2010 after serving 38 years in prison.

McNally, 80, flew to Seattle for CooperCon from his home in Michigan, where he lives with his sister. He was set to be a featured speaker on Sunday.

"It's a big mystery and a lot of people want to know," McNally said of the continued Cooper fascination. "It's the evidence that doesn't even show up. There's no evidence to say that he survived or he perished — nothing."

Grudges are few in the CooperCon world. Maybe it'd be different if someone was hurt or killed, but it's been 50 years, and a defunct airline lost \$200,000. Where's the victim?

A couple years ago, McNally called his sister and told her to come home. He had a visitor.

"He said, 'I haven't seen this lady since 1972,' " McNally's sister, Clare McNally-Bailey, recalled. "I walked in and said, 'Who are you?' She said, 'I'm the stewardess he hijacked.'"

CooperCon is the type of event where Larry Carr, a retired FBI agent who led the investigation for years, addressed McNally, a convicted felon, as "Mr. McNally" and asked permission to ask him a question.

(Carr thinks Cooper died jumping from the plane, "but I hope I'm wrong.")

Eric Ulis, the organizer of CooperCon, attributes the interest to a few things. One, it indisputably happened. This is not a search for the Loch Ness monster. Two, there is a romance to it, to walking into the airport in a black business suit, with cash, drinking a bourbon, smoking a cigarette and jumping out of a plane never to be seen again. It seems like, and is, something from a bygone era. The passengers weren't even aware it was a hijacking until they got off the plane. Plus, new technology, in DNA, in electron microscopes, in fabric analysis, ensures there's always one more nugget of evidence on the horizon.

"It's a lot of things that just sort of come together and just make it a fascinating case," Ulis says.

He's spent a decade and a half, at least, consumed by it, leading expeditions near Tena Bar, petitioning the FBI, looking for more clues.

He has his own suspect, a Pittsburgh-area man who died in 2002 and had worked in titanium research, matching the titanium particles on the clip-on tie Cooper left on the plane.

Almost everyone has a theory. They come in waves; a new one rolls in and an old one drifts away. They compete for oxygen. They metastasize.

Was he a Boeing employee? Or, no, a Boeing contractor? A guy who also got away with killing his stepfather? The college professor with parachute training? Or was it a woman, disguised as a man, angry that the Federal Aviation Administration wouldn't let her be a pilot?

As law enforcement waded through the endless tips, the dead ends, the conflicting evidence, every new theory of the case was trumpeted as a breakthrough.

The FBI closed the case in 2016.

Eric Knackmuhs has a favorite. He likes Richard McCoy, who got caught hijacking a plane a few months after Cooper, then escaped from prison and was killed when the FBI caught up to him. But he doesn't really think McCoy is Cooper. He just gravitates to the story.

Anyway, Knackmuhs isn't at CooperCon to research the mystery. He's there to research the researchers.

A professor of recreation and nonprofit administration at Western Kentucky University, Knackmuhs and two students flew into CooperCon because he's interested in why people are so interested in Cooper. They're surveying attendees and hoping for follow-up interviews.

He has a few hypotheses. The idea of being a citizen sleuth is attractive. He thinks it's possible the crowd, largely male, sees a bit of themselves in Cooper.

"And there's this concept of 'serious leisure,' doing a hobby to the point that it's an amateur career," he said. "It's created a community."

Cory Altheide, of Woodinville, has been fascinated with the case since he saw an "Unsolved Mysteries" episode in the 1980s. His daughter, Winter, 16, caught the bug a couple years ago when they listened to a Cooper audiobook during a summer road trip.

"It didn't make sense, and that's what was interesting," Winter said. She can't get over the money in Tena Bar, found miles from Cooper's estimated drop zone. What's more, the bills were found with diatoms, microscopic algae that only bloom in the spring. But Cooper jumped in November.

As she listened to the parade of Cooper speakers Friday, she knitted and doodled — a plane, a parachute, a cat (unrelated but nice).

Cory and Winter are two of the few who have no theory of the case. And neither particularly wants to see it solved. That would kill the fun.

They are, to borrow a phrase, process oriented.

"It's kind of meta, but I'm really interested in how it captured the public imagination at the time. He became sort of a Robin Hood-type folk hero," Cory said. "Everybody wants to know, I'm having a good time hearing other people's theories."

This is their second year at CooperCon.

"D.B. Cooper," Winter said, "is the friends you make along the way."

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