

**Phone Interview with Larry Finegold Transcription:
"Cooper" August 17, 2012**

Would you mind if we used an audio recorder for this to get your oral history, perspective on it? If you don't, we can turn it off, if you like.

No, that's fine.

Okay.

Um, one of the things, you know just to kind of start out with, you know we're really interested in hearing your story and perspective, um, you're the first actual witness we've spoken to thus far.

Mm hmm. So... where would you like me to begin? I can begin with... why I was on the airplane. Which would take about a minute or two to explain or I can begin with when I was on the airplane. And, you know, go from there.

You're actually, your reasoning for being on the plane would be good background information and then you... from Portland to Seattle, in that order...

Okay. So, first let me give you just the caveat. This happened a, uh, long time ago. Um, perhaps when you were both very young. I was pretty young, frankly, myself. You were even younger probably. And, so, uh, so some of this may be, uh, by and colored by time and recollection. So forgive me if some of it doesn't comport with some of your understanding. I was at the time of the skyjacking, assisting the United States attorney in the US attorney's office in Seattle and had been in, um, actually Vancouver, WA, um, I was then attorney general to the state of Washington, and a man named John O Connell from Tacoma, and a former mayor of San Francisco named Joe Alioto who were being tried on a corruption case that was a civil case brought against them. And I was preparing on behalf of the department of Justice for a criminal prosecution. And so I was watching the civil trial and on Thanksgiving eve got on, went out to the airport, and it was a stormy, lousy night as thanksgiving can sometimes be in the Northwest or often is. And, uh, was just coming home, uh, where I was going to meet my wife, where we were going to go off to a ecumenical Jewish, Christian, religious service that night, and, um, lo and behold it turned out I was skyjacked. What I recall of the flight, is, uh, I had gotten out to the airport, and, uh, the plane was a bit delayed because it was lousy weather and frankly I don't remember much about, except sitting in the waiting room, I didn't notice any of the passengers, I didn't notice anything peculiar. And finally they called our flight. And if recollection serves me, and please interrupt and any point if you wish to, I was sitting in, uh, what would probably be called row 6 – the first row behind business class these days – and so, everything that would've happened, happened behind me, and there was no one I think sitting in first class cause this was just a flight from Portland to Seattle and the planes weren't as crowded in those days especially going on Thanksgiving eve as they are these days. And, uh, it was I think at that time about a 35 minute flight on a 727. And, uh, I remember we, um, it was stormy, they asked us to just keep our seatbelts on. And at some point it seemed like we had been circling the city, the pilot came on, who, uh, I think I described to Time Magazine shortly after the incident had a voice that would make you feel calm on the way to a guillotine. And the pilot came on and said that they were having some, that the combination of the weather, that they were having some difficulties with the landing and that we would be circling the city for a while, while they were in communication with

the ground and that everything would be okay, and we should just all stay seated and relaxed, and of course that immediately, um, certainly was unnerving to me, I can't speak to other people because I'm not sure there was anybody, uh, there certainly was nobody sitting either in the row of seats I was in or even the aisle across from me, because as I said I think I was in row 6. And, uh, we just continued to circle, it was lousy weather, and bumpy, and the plane was just quiet, I didn't recall seeing any cabin attendants around. But had no suspicion that it was anything other than maybe we were going to crash or something comical like that. What seemed like a couple hours later, the pilot came on and said that we were now going to be landing, that he wanted people to remain in their seats, and, uh, if I'm not mistaken, suggested that we get into sort of a 'tuck' position in case it was rough landing. But in any event, we should stay in our seats upon landing, and we then descended for a few minutes, finally landed. Still I had no knowledge of inkling that there was anything like a skyjacking going on and I don't think anyone else on the plane was aware of that except the crew, which I'll get to in a second. And when we landed, we went to what seemed like a far runway. And the plane stopped and I remember seeing a gas truck pull up and part of what I had assumed was going on was that the plane was trying to burn fuel off before landing in case it became an emergency landing they didn't want to have as much fuel on it and I didn't think through or don't, still to this day, don't know enough to know about whether you can just dump fuel and how you would do that. But I remember seeing a gas truck come up to the plane just after we landed, and we were just sitting on this far runway, and thinking to myself, "why in the world do they care more about the, uh, getting the fuel out of the plane than getting the passengers off," and I might've even blurted something out half loud to that effect, but that's now lost in a fog of history. Finally, after a few minutes of what seemed like loading fuel on the plane, the front door opened, and they told people they could start exiting the plane – there was an announcement made – and the first person that I saw down as I, cause we were just de-planing out on the runway and going down just a set of stairs that they had rolled up, first person I saw that I recognized was an FBI agent who I knew because I was assisting the United States Attorney at the time, and I said to him, "John, what in the world's going on?" and he said, "Larry, just keep going, there's a skyjacker on the plane." And that's the first thing I knew about the skyjacking. And, um, the rest is pretty much history because we just came in and I was sort of the, because I had tried some big cases a lot of the press people there knew me and so I became the focus of the, in the absence of the Mr. Cooper, I became sort of the focus of some attention in this case. What I later learned, of course, was that they had talked with one of the stewardesses and told her, I think named Tina Mucklow or something like that, they had a, um, that this fellow who identified himself as, or at least on the plane, as Cooper and told him that he had a bomb. And wanted \$200,000, and to parachute, and we the passengers were out of it once we, uh, got off the plane and were bussed into the terminal and the only other thing I would finish off with a footnote and you can follow if you wish is that sometime there after I was actually involved in the prosecution as a, uh, when two guys, from uh, over in...near Port Angeles, one of them posed as DB Cooper and the other as his agent and actually sold the story of the DB Cooper skyjacking to a then well known, former... I think Time Magazine... editor. This editor quit Time went to work for a magazine just starting called L.A. owned by a wealthy guy named Max Pulaski and their first publication of L.A. was going to be the inside interview of DB Cooper and they decided on a prudence to come to the department of Justice first to see when their uh, they should run this story and how they should run it and it turned out that the alleged twenty dollar bills that they had showed him to prove that it was, uh, that these were some of the real twenties taken, the FBI was able to prove that they were bogus bills. So that's the second chapter in my history of the DB Cooper story that we ended up prosecuting and convicting these two gentlemen who went off to prison. So there in a nutshell is my version of the DB Cooper story. However you pronounce that little town and of course then the money being found then on the riverbank by the kids. But, um, at least for my part, from time to time I've got dragged back into this, I-I- I've been – excuse me that wasn't very good English – I've been pulled back into this because over the years, from

time to time I've gotten calls from people who've gotten my name for example one was a woman who claimed that her husband said that his name Dan – on his deathbed – that his name was Dan Cooper which led her to start looking around and somehow she found me and was convinced that her husband might've been DB Cooper and there have been all kinds of incidents like that over the years and I usually have just directed people to contact the FBI or I've been in touch with the lead agent who looked for DB Cooper for years – someone I used to talk to from time to time about the case. He's now a retired FBI agent, if he's still alive. So, uh, I could keep talking for hours but I'm sure you have more important things to do.

Well I think it was really useful to get the summary and firsthand perspective, certainly, I guess we have a couple questions to follow it up.

Sure.

Could you maybe tell us a little bit more about the case with LA? And how you were involved – how you got involved with that? Is that the only case of that nature that you've been involved with since?

The case with... you mean this newspaper?

Yeah.

Well, what happened was, I was with the US attorney's office for about four years so I guess in, let's see Cooper was in 71 and I was there in 73 or spring of 74... So, this gentleman, as I said named Max Pulaski ... two people from I think the... you know, some place on the Olympic peninsula, not sure exactly where. One guy named Murphy and one guy name Bill.... It'll come to me in a minute. But these two gentlemen, one of them contacted a guy named Karl with a K Fleming. Fleming had been with as I said either Newsweek or Time magazine as the West Coast reporter. And contacted him and said, "I'm the agent for DB Cooper. And if we could set it up, we would do an interview and we would charge \$30,000," or that's what basically was negotiated for him. Well, um, ...??... cause he knew he wasn't going to pay so Karl went to this fella named Max Pulaski who had started the magazine called LA which I think only lasted for two or three issues. And after Karl dealt with them after some period of time to prove that they were the real DB Cooper he wanted to see a sample of some of the twenty dollar bills because the back story is that one of the reasons that the plane was in the air so long was that the... when Cooper, or whoever it is, let's call him Cooper, demanded the two parachutes and the money, the FBI went to the federal reserve bank in Seattle and got \$20 bills with pre-recorded serial numbers and that's how he ended up with twenty dollar bills and I remember there was something like a list of 36 pages of twenty dollar bills that were being circulated around the country looking for any of those twenties and that's how years later they knew that when some of the money was found by some kids along the Columbia that those were the real twenties because they had a list of all the serial numbers. So in any event, these two gentlemen showed the – gave them photo – gave Karl Fleming I think photo copies of the twenties and when the FBI lab finally looked at it before they published their story, the FBI was able to determine that the numbers didn't line up perfectly. And that someone had fiddled around when – so as to sort of change numbers to make it look like these were actual bills when in fact they were photo copies of bills that had... the numbers had been fiddled with.

Larry, on that point, did that play into the prosecution at all? In terms of any kind of counterfeiting charge?

No, what they did was, they charged, uh, boy...

That's a minor detail.

Yeah, yeah, no, uh, we ended up charging Murphy and Bill? I just can't remember his name. We ended up charging them with I think either mail fraud or wire fraud. And they were each convicted- I think got 3 years in prison. Did some portion of that. So it was not – there was no currency violation charge. It was purely a fraud charge.

I see. Okay.

Just charges of wire fraud scheme and conspiracy. And it just so happened that I had been walled off basically from the investigation of DB Cooper because I was the victim... that my boss was.... Cause I was the number two person in the office by that time... determined that since I was doing some of the bigger trials that that was not – that this had nothing to do directly with the DB Cooper case and therefore it was not a problem for me to handle the Murphy – whatever his name was – case.

I see.

But I stayed away from anything that had to do with the actual DB Cooper investigation. Cause I was a potential witness. And as I've always told people over the years, by the way, I could've – for all I know – I could've sat next to the person who ended up being DB Cooper when we were in the waiting room, I know he was sitting in the back of the plane where the galley is – in the back of the 727 – so I didn't see him during the flight so I may or may not have ever laid eyes on him, but when I was shown the composite photo I had no memory or recognition of that person, but I was busy thinking about a case and looking at some documents and really wasn't paying much attention to the other passengers that night.

Did any other passengers, um, comment or feel – have any idea what was going on, or was it generally – was the explanation of the storm generally accepted?

I think – I don't know, I believe – well I'm certain that no other passengers – the crew did such a good job of keeping what was going on from the passengers that we all thought it was an engine problem. I remember interviews... reading – cause I don't think I talked to many of the passengers afterwards everybody went their own way – but I know that there was... well someone now claims that somehow they knew – but I never heard of anybody saying they were aware that there was a skyjacker on the plane except for the cabin attendants. Because the pilot – because it was rough weather the pilot said that he was going to ask the cabin attendants to just remain seated during the flight. The only communications we ever heard were from the pilot, and it was my understanding that Cooper had shown her this note and told her to contact the skipper of the plane and that was pretty much who knew about it.

Larry this – this might...

...and of course the ground.

This might seem a pretty obscure detail, but when you were in Portland, and getting ready to make your flight to Seattle, do you recall, was Northwest really the only option at that time? Do you remember if there were any other commercial airlines or carriers you either took before or were considering then?

Um, you know I don't. I used to often take the train down there. I don't think – in those days – Northwest was flying... I don't know that Alaska was even around... I don't remember when Alaska started. The other carrier would've been Western. Which then was purchased by Delta. And I don't know whether there was also a Western flight to Seattle and I don't know whether Alaska Air was yet big enough that it was flying Portland-Seattle.

Okay, great. Thank you.

But I do know if you've ever flown to Portland that it was at the same sort of little terminal area where they go in and out of now. As I said, I don't know if you've taken a flight down there but that same area where Alaska now has all its flights come up to Seattle is just where it's been reconfigured... it's the same place. It's funny, never even thought about that on all the numerous flights I've taken that it's still back in the same place.... I can tell you a rather humorous story – about a month later I got on a plane with my boss to travel over to Idaho in connection with this criminal case I was working on, and I saw some fellow walk into the bathroom with what looked like boots and like he was going to change his clothes and I turned to boss – US attorney – and said, "I think we're going to get skyjacked again!" And this fellow was in for about ten minutes, came out, *had* changed his clothes, but he was just a person changing clothes in the bathroom. We were not skyjacked, so, I didn't make it two-in-a-row.

Oh, good.

Yeah, I think so too, because each time I get off an airplane I say I beat the odds again anyway, so. Who needs two of those?

On that thought, it's safe to say that the experience colored your perception of airline travel?

Nope, I've flown all over the world a millions of times and, as I've said, other than this being an interesting story I never think...it never occurs...I never think twice about flying and being skyjacked because remember this was one of the only – this was the first skyjacking for money and one of the few and there's a lot more things to worry about like getting through security these days than thinking about a skyjacking.

Speaking... kind of going into the topic of security, did you notice any – you've flown a lot – did you notice any significant changes after that experience, in terms of security?

Well, the first thing was that in those days the rear of the 727 – you could exit from the rear of the 727. And they didn't have it made such that, uh, it couldn't be opened in flight. And so, when Cooper jumped out of the airplane, he actually went down the rear stairwell. And I think Boeing very quickly retrofitted all the planes so that you could not jump out of the tail of the plane – you couldn't get the tail to go down, in flight.

Yes, that's been our research as well. That other aircraft like the DC9 with the rear stairs were also retrofitted.

Yeah, so that you couldn't – so that you couldn't open them mid-flight which of course is the way that he got out of the plane. Uhhhh, I was going to say ---- I never think about it day to day. To just answer your question, I do get calls once in a while. And then I just happen to see something or someone mentioned to me something about what you folks were doing and I thought it sounded interesting so I would simply volunteer and call and see if I could be of any assistance.

This has been really helpful. Do you have any questions for us?

Nope, when are you planning to do something so that I know to come down and take a look at it?

We're planning on having the exhibit open about a year from now – August 2013. At our museum here in Tacoma. And we'll be sure to include you on our invitation list.

Oh, well thank you. And if there's anything I can do – I'm happy to talk with you about it, I haven't – you know – I'm not someone who collects a lot of memorabilia so I don't think I can contribute anything significant but, if, *if* the FBI agent who was out of Portland who was in charge of the investigation is still alive, he would be someone to check with.

That would be Ralph Hammersbau?

Yes, exactly. If he is, please give him my regards, as I said I've talked to him from time to time over the years because I sometimes get these screwy calls about the real DB Cooper. And there have been a whole variety of incidents, that I won't bore you with all the details, but have come up over the years with people making these outlandish claims, etc including the one last year where – and I don't know that that was outlandish – but the woman claiming that her uncle or cousin or father or somebody was DB Cooper. So, but I do extend the offer, I'm in and out of town but usually reachable by email if you have any other questions or need....

END!