

Profile

Up in the sky ... hijackers and beer cans

DAVID HOLMBERG
Miami News Reporter

James Cothron once refused to fly hijackers to Cuba and got shot for his trouble. And once he fleetingly thought he was trapped in the Devil's Triangle and almost made a possibly fatal turn.

Five days a week Cothron, captain and senior pilot for Chalk International Airlines, flies what he calls "one of the toughest planes ever built" to Bimini and Nassau and, sometimes, to other islands in the Bahamas.

He used to fly the late wheeler-dealer Adam Clayton Powell to his Bimini retreat. Motor magnate Ralph Evinrude and his actress wife, Frances Langford, also used to fly to the islands with Cothron. Leicester Hemingway, brother of the novelist who used to do his macho thing in Bimini, occasionally is a passenger now.

Tuesday on Flight 202 from Nassau — which Cothron brought in on time — the most illustrious passenger was the lead dancer from a revue at the Britannia Beach hotel in Nassau, one of the hangouts for Chalk pilots on layover.

The Grumman Mallard seaplane crunched into the calm waters of Biscayne Bay at 12:15 p.m. and taxied to the landing ramp on Watson Island, and the dancer flounced out along with about 15 other passengers.

Cothron, a tanned, graying man of 54 with an easy, down-home manner, arrived at the Customs area a few minutes later. He had some time to kill: he was flying the 5 p.m. flight back to Nassau, with a layover there in a Chalk-owned houseboat reserved for flight crews.

The veteran pilot, a St. Augustine native, has been with Chalk for nine years and has 21,000 hours in the air in about 35 years of flying. He works a three-days-on, two-days-off shift, with an overnight in Nassau about once a week.

He flies only during the day. He used to fly at night, for another airline, but those flights were stopped when gambling and drinking passengers frequently turned up late for the flights.

A fun loving passenger also gave Cothron a momentary receptivity to the Devil's Triangle theory.

Flying a charter from Nassau to Freeport under hazy conditions, Cothron glanced at his compass and noticed it had suddenly turned 60 degrees. "I didn't have any idea what was wrong at first," he said. "But I'd heard so much about the Devil's Triangle and I was in that area, so it naturally came to mind."

Then he looked again. There was a beer can on top of the compass, placed there by a passenger who'd visited the cockpit before the flight took off. The steel was throwing off the compass.

"That's the kind of thing," Cothron said, "where you could make a turn in accordance with the new



The Miami News - BOB MACK

Cothron at Watson Island in front of 'one of the toughest planes ever built'

compass reading and find yourself on the way to England with very little fuel."

Five years ago Cothron almost found himself on his way to Cuba — with a good chance of not making it back.

Two hijackers burst into his cockpit on March 7, 1972 and ordered him to fly to Cuba. It was during a period when hijacking was the rage among militants of various stripes, and Cothron was determined not to take the line of least resistance.

"I told them I wasn't going anywhere," he said. "One of them said they'd shoot me and I said go ahead. I guess I went that route because we were still on the ground. These guys were wild-eyed and looked like they were popping pills and I couldn't see taking my crew up."

So the hijackers shot Cothron twice, in the arm and leg, and took off with another pilot. An airline mechanic was also shot, but the plane went to Cuba and returned without further incident. Cothron recently learned that one of the hijackers left Cuba not long

ago and was killed in a fight in Jamaica.

It was four and a half months before Cothron could fly again.

Other than hijackers and revelers, the main hazards for an island-hopping seaplane pilot are boats — particularly tugboats — and heavy seas.

"Tugboat waves are the worst," he said. "You don't follow one when you land or take off behind one unless you're tired of it all. And on weekends the pleasure boat traffic is sometimes so heavy you can't land on the island and have to fly around and come back. But people are generally pretty good about getting out of our way; they move awful fast sometimes."

There is a danger, Cothron said, of a seaplane going out of control if it hits a strong breaker on landing. But, he said, the airline's 15-20-year-old planes "can handle just about anything" and the 57-year-old airline has never had a fatality. "And that mechanic and I who were shot are the only ones ever injured," he said.