

Beat: Business

U.S. hijacker who flew to Cuba in 1984 returns to face justice

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USPA News - A U.S. man who hijacked a commercial airliner in the 1980s and forced it to fly to Cuba returned to the United States on Wednesday to face justice, although he hopes for leniency after spending 15 years in a Cuban prison for the same offense, officials said. William Potts, 56, was arrested by Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents on Wednesday afternoon after his charter flight from the Cuban capital of Havana landed at Miami International Airport in Florida.

He was taken into custody on charges of air piracy that were filed in the Southern District of Florida in 1985. The charges stem from an incident in March 1984 when Potts - who is also known as William Freeman - boarded a Piedmont Airlines flight from LaGuardia Airport in New York to Charlotte in North Carolina. He there boarded a connecting flight that was destined to fly to Miami International Airport. But on final approach to the airport in Miami, Potts pushed a button to call for a flight attendant and handed her a handwritten note. The flight attendant quickly noticed the word "explosives" when glancing over the piece of paper and immediately gave it to the captain while Potts locked himself in the bathroom. Calling himself Lt. Spartacus, Potts identified himself in the note as a soldier in the African-American militant group the Black Liberation Army (BLA). "I don't want to land in Miami. I want to go to Jose Marti International Airport in Havana," the note said. "There are two explosive devices aboard the plane that I and two comrades have planted aboard the aircraft." The note went on to read about "freeing brothers and sisters" in South Africa, which was at the time still going through the apartheid era that would eventually end in 1994. It also mentioned U.S. government interference with the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua, demanded a \$5 million ransom, and threatened to shoot passengers and blow up the aircraft if it landed in Miami. The captain of the flight diverted the aircraft away from the airport in Miami and eventually landed in Havana, where Cuban authorities boarded the aircraft and took the hijacker off the aircraft. Potts, who had expected the Cuban government to give him guerrilla training, was eventually convicted of the hijacking by a Cuban court and served 15 years in prison, but was granted permanent residency upon his release. "I'm very anxious to return and resolve this conflict that has been going on for too long. We're hoping for a just solution to this problem," Potts said on Wednesday before boarding his flight to Miami, according to WTVJ-TV. He expressed hope for leniency in the United States as he already served time for the offense. U.S. courts have previously given significant sentence reductions to others who served time in other countries and pleaded guilty, but there is no guarantee the same would happen in Pott's case. Prosecutors warned after Wednesday's arrest that Pott, if convicted in the United States, faces a mandatory minimum of 20 years in prison and a maximum term of life in prison.

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