



FLIGHT 401

On the clear moonless night of December 29, 1972, a young rookie game warden sat behind the steering wheel of a light-green 1969 Plymouth four-door sedan with a blue “gumball” emergency light mounted on the rooftop. His foot pressed lightly against the accelerator pedal as he inched down the L28 levee with the headlights out. Loose chunks of lime rock cracked and popped under the tires as he crawled ahead.

From his vantage point atop the levee, Gray Leonhard had a commanding view across thousands of square miles of darkened marsh. An elevation of only eight feet felt like being on a hilltop in the Everglades. The night was a balmy 72 degrees, the mosquitoes surprisingly sparse. The lack of biting insects allowed him to roll the driver’s window down to better hear a shot fired from a poacher’s gun.

Gray moved the shifter into park, cut the motor, and stepped out. Standing by the open door, he carefully scanned the unbroken horizon with a pair of wide-lensed binoculars.

The young warden felt a sense of mission as he looked out into the black swamp, the mystique of a job where cunning and stealth often determine the winner. The high-stakes game of cat and mouse played with real-life backwoods characters is a seductive one.



Warden Gray Leonhard sits atop his patrol airboat in the Everglades, 1972.

That notion was first instilled in him by a chance encounter with two game wardens five years before. He happened upon them one day, quite by accident, while they were hidden in the woods on stake-out next to a highway in northeast Florida. Gray was curious and asked who they were after. The wardens took the measure of the quizzical nineteen-year-old, saw a potential convert, and decided to confide in him. “We’re waiting for a refrigerated box truck to come by with a load of bootlegged speckled perch,” one of them explained. Gray thought that was “pretty neat.” The memory had stuck, and now here he was. On stakeout, alone, without backup, in a wild-ass place where a lawman stood just as good a chance of stumbling into a South American dope drop or finding a bullet-riddled body as he did of catching a wildlife crook.

Gray noted nothing of interest. No flicker from an air boater’s headlamp. No roar of unmuffled high-horsepower engines. No gunshots. Only silence—broken by the intermittent croaking of bullfrogs and the occasional rustle of tall reeds as an unseen creature passed through them. The hint of a pale glow lightened the sky above Miami more than forty miles away. Everything else was a blank slate.

The rookie warden climbed back in the Plymouth and idled on south, nosing the low-slung sedan into the inky black—unaware that his night had only just begun.

Meanwhile, 1,100 miles to the north, an Eastern Airlines jumbo jet lifted off in bitter cold from New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport. The time was 9:20 p.m. Flight 401, as it was operationally known, was on a short-haul flight to Miami.

Stewardess Beverly Raposa, twenty-five, recalled nothing unusual about the flight as it passed high over the Atlantic Ocean en route to Miami International Airport (MIA). The petite brunette stood just five-feet-one-and-a-half inches tall. She had been turned down by TWA Airlines for a job because she was a half inch under the five-two minimum height required for all stewardesses. But Eastern had overlooked the half inch, whether by design or error she didn't know. But to play it safe, she always wore an add-on hairpiece, teased up into a bouffant, to make her look taller.

Beverly smiled cheerfully while she collected empty drink cups and dishes from the passengers. The only thing she looked forward to on arrival in Miami was going to bed. She was whipped.

Somewhere in midflight, passenger Ron Infantino switched seats with his wife, Lilly, after she returned from the bathroom. They were seated on the right side of the middle section—designed for four-abreast seating—near the trailing edge of the right wing. They'd been married only twenty days and were returning from their honeymoon. They were both twenty-six years old. At the time, the innocent decision to change seats carried no meaning.

The captain, and his first and second officer, had every reason to feel good and confident about flying this particular ship. The plane was virtually brand-spanking-new, having been put into service only three months before.

The Lockheed L-1011 Tristar was the “next generation” design in the wide-body class of commercial airliner. The outer fuselage was attractively trimmed with Eastern Airlines' signature blue and purple band against a background of white that ran around the nose and down both sides of the fuselage. On the tarmac it stood five stories high. If the massive jet could have been parked sideways on a football



A rare photograph of the Eastern Airlines Lockheed L-1011 Tristar 1 jumbo jet a few months before it crashed in the Florida Everglades on December 29, 1972. At the time, it was the worst disaster in U.S. civil aviation history.

field, the wingtips would overlap the distance between the goal line and the stripe at midfield. Customers quickly fell in love with the state-of-the-art features offered in this new class of twin-aisle jetliner that was designed for luxurious seat comfort, extra legroom, and a superquiet “whisper” ride.

After three hours aloft, Flight 401 had so far been uneventful. A trio of newly minted Rolls-Royce turbofan jet engines barely made a rumble to the 163 passengers and thirteen crew members seated inside the spacious cabin and reconfigured cockpit.

Ten minutes out from MIA, the plane began to descend from cruising altitude and entered into its final landing approach. Beverly sat in seat R4, located in the tail section, at the very back and right side of the plane. The seatbelt sign flashed on, she buckled into a four-point seatbelt harness, with a strap crossing over each shoulder. Almost directly across from her sat stewardess Stephanie Stanich. They were best friends. A cheerful voice boomed over the cabin’s loudspeaker address system: “Welcome to sunny Miami,” the captain announced.

“The temperature’s in the low seventies, and it’s beautiful out there tonight.”

Ron and Lilly were exhausted from having celebrated Christmas with his parents in New York. They both looked forward to some rest and then a big New Year’s celebration with her Cuban parents in Miami and the traditional whole roast pig cooked over an open fire pit.

Ron closed his eyes, arms crossed comfortably across his chest, and let the gentle engine thrum lull him into a light sleep. Lilly leaned back in her seat, resting quietly.

At 11:32 p.m., Capt. Robert A. Loft, fifty-five years old, with thirty years’ experience and 29,500 flight hours under his belt, gave the order for the nose landing gear to be lowered. Following deployment, the nose wheel-well light failed to illuminate green—confirmation that the nose landing gear was fully extended and locked in the down position.

Two minutes later Flight 401 called the MIA tower: “Ah, tower; this is Eastern, ah, four zero one, it looks like we’re gonna have to circle. We don’t have a light on our nose gear yet.”

“Eastern four oh one,” the tower advised, “. . . roger, pull up, climb straight ahead to two thousand . . .”

The captain climbed to two thousand feet and locked the autopilot to “on.” The plane traveled on a rectangular go-around loop that would take it west of MIA and then south over the pitch-black savannah of water and grass that was the Everglades. Left behind was the mosaic of colored lights flickering from high-rise condominiums, beach hotels, convention centers, and the lamp-lit streets of a tropical resort city populated by a half-million people.

Flight 401 streaked above a primordial swampland filled with poisonous snakes and alligators crawling through razor-sharp saw grass and open-water sloughs, sparsely dotted with small tree islands. At twice the landmass of Rhode Island, the largest subtropical wilderness in the United States is one of the most formidable terrains on earth. It cannot be traversed by foot, car, or truck. The ubiquitous south Florida airboat—a gigantic, cage-like desk-fan mounted on a small aluminum boat hull, powered by an aircraft engine—has been

the standard form of backcountry transportation in these parts since the 1930s.

Had the cockpit crew craned their necks to look below, they would have seen nothing but a black void. The lack of even a single light on the ground made it difficult to visually detect a subtle decrease in altitude. The captain hoped the circling delay would give them time to fix what seemed to be a minor problem.



By now Gray's eyes had become night-sensitive to the low-light conditions of ambient starlight. He peered through the front windshield at a limitless horizon, where the black silhouette of an indistinct line of saw grass melded into a gray-black, star-speckled sky. He was looking for a "working light," the glow from an airboater's headlamp beam sweeping above the marsh. If he saw a light, he'd shut the patrol car off to listen.

The manner in which an airboat operator drove his boat was a vital clue in determining whether or not a game law was being violated. Outlaws often cut their engine at regular intervals to listen for a game warden slipping up behind them in a "blacked-out" airboat. Rather than take the risk of carrying a gun to unlawfully shoot a deer at night, many of them would flush a deer up and then run over it with their airboat, again and again and again, in tight, skidding circles, until it couldn't move anymore. The deer was left flailing in the water and nearly pounded to death from blunt-force trauma, with the coup de grace delivered by stopping the airboat on top of the deer and mashing the animal down into the muck until it drowned. Thus, a game warden's success or failure in this shallow-water no-man's land was often determined by how well, from a distance, he could judge the operator's intent by engine sound patterns that indicated abrupt course changes. If Gray saw or heard a suspicious airboat, he'd find where the operator had launched and wait nearby, hidden in the bushes, until the bad guy returned for his truck and trailer.

Gray had the credentials that the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (GFC) valued in a game warden. During a preemployment interview before a board of veteran GFC brass, he was grilled about his