

Failed hijacker pleads guilty to lesser charge

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A man who tried to hijack a plane from Palm Beach International Airport to Cuba last summer pleaded guilty Thursday after striking a plea bargain with a federal prosecutor.

Arthur Carl Blonkenfeld changed his plea shortly before he was to be tried on charges of pirating a Dolphin Airways plane.

If convicted, Blonkenfeld, 49, would have faced a possible 20-year prison sentence. He pleaded guilty instead to a reduced charge of obstructing an airline flight crew.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Kenneth Lipman said he will recommend a prison term of no more than 10 years for Blonkenfeld, who threatened

to blow up the small airliner on Aug. 17.

While holding off Palm Beach County sheriff's deputies during 2½ hours of negotiations, Blonkenfeld said he wanted to take the jet to Havana so he could kill Fidel Castro. Deputies seized Blonkenfeld after luring him near the door of the plane. They found that the "bomb" he said he was clutching under his shirt was a shaving kit.

"It was an emotional problem, rather than anything political," Lipman said of the hijacking attempt. "He had no association with Cuba whatsoever."

Blonkenfeld had recently finished serving four years at the Lantana Correctional Institute for armed robbery.

The Largo man had gone to Clearwater to visit a woman with whom he had corresponded while in jail, Lipman said.

"He apparently had misunderstood her feelings for him," the prosecutor said.

His hopes for a romance ended, Blonkenfeld drank heavily and boarded the Dolphin flight from Tampa to West Palm Beach, Lipman said.

After eight other passengers had left the plane, he told the jet's two crew members that he had a bomb.

Nobody was hurt in the hijacking attempt. U.S. District Judge Norman C. Roettger set Blonkenfeld's sentencing for March 7.