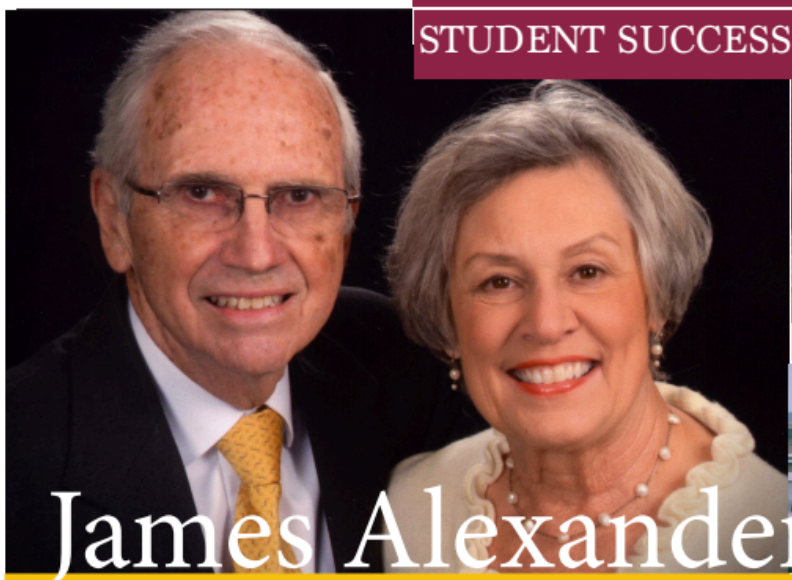


STUDENT SUCCESS



In three decades as press officer at ORNL, Alexander saw most everything—including a hijacked jet.

Early one Saturday morning in 1972, James Alexander was still in bed when his phone rang. Harvey, his Oak Ridge National Laboratory co-worker, was on the line. “Good morning, J.,” said Harvey. “Guess what? There’s a plane flying over Oak Ridge and it’s been hijacked. The hijackers are threatening to crash the plane into a nuclear reactor.”

“Very funny,” Alexander replied.

“But it’s not a joke,” said Harvey. “You need to get down there immediately.”

Alexander sprang into action, speeding to meet Harvey, where they saw Southern Airlines Flight 49 lazily circling over ORNL’s nuclear reactors. For the next eight hours, Alexander sat in a tiny room frantically answering national media calls, most of them the same question: what would happen if the airplane crashed into a nuclear reactor?

This was a far cry from what Alexander expected when he decided to pursue a career in journalism. “It was a pivotal point in my life,” Alexander recalled. “I went to UT from West High School not sure what I wanted to do.” At first, Alexander followed his father’s footsteps and declared business as his major. But first he had to find a job to pay his way through school. “I had a friend whose father was the editor of the *Knoxville Journal*. My friend’s father called me one day and asked, ‘would you like to work as a mat boy?’ I said, ‘I’ll take anything!’” A mat boy, Alexander

explained, worked in the ad department, walking around the city showing advertisers their proofs. “I went from mat boy to copy boy to putting papers on the machine, doing anything the editor needed,” Alexander said. The state editor took a shine to Alexander and asked him if he wanted to learn the fundamentals of journalistic writing. “As a matter of fact, I would!” he replied. Alexander was hooked. He changed his major to journalism, graduated in 1962, and got a job in the PR office at ORNL. For the next 30 years Alexander served as the Lab’s principal public information contact, answering questions about scientific breakthroughs, the environment, accidents, spills, and unusual incidents, including a hijacking.

As Alexander discovered later, the hijacking traced back to a dispute between the city of Detroit and a Knoxville native named Louis Moore. With Melvin Cale, a burglar who had escaped from a Tennessee halfway house, and their friend Henry Jackson, Moore had smuggled guns and hand grenades aboard Flight 49 in a raincoat, and forced the captain to change course. Their demand: \$10 million. After receiving no ransom money in stops at Cleveland, Ohio, and Toronto, Moore ordered the plane to fly to his hometown. “This is going to be your last chance,” he radioed Southern Airlines officials. “If we don’t get what we want, we’re going to bomb [ORNL].”

As the DC-9 circled over Oak Ridge, Alexander came up with the answer to the media’s queries about the effects of a plane crashing into a nuclear reactor. “The technical people with the Atomic Energy Commission and a contractor organization that ran the lab told us that a plane crashing into that nuclear reactor would likely cause severe damage, but not a nuclear explosion. It could result in the dispersal of radioactive material, which would most likely be contained in the government property in western Oak Ridge.”

As the plane descended in a slow spiral, Moore demanded that the pilot crash into the reactor, but the pilot asked him if killing himself was really worth it. Deciding it wasn’t, Moore instead demanded to be flown to Orlando, where the military shot the landing gear, and then to Cuba, where the 31 passengers emerged traumatized but alive. “Fidel Castro himself was there to meet the passengers and the pilot,” said Alexander. The hijackers spent five years in prison in Cuba, followed by 25 more in the United States.

Today, Alexander spends his retired life volunteering around Knoxville with his wife, Barbara. As for the future of journalism, Alexander remains optimistic. “I don’t believe print journalism will die; everyone enjoys a hard copy,” he said. “Future journalists should be excited and never be discouraged from reporting facts and asking the hard-hitting questions.” — Kaila Curry