

LONDON, July 18—U.S. authorities took custody of James Earl Ray here tonight and put the accused assassin of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. aboard a plane bound for the United States but kept details of the flight a secret.

A U.S. Embassy spokesman announced Ray had started his journey back to the United States but refused to enlarge upon the schedule of the trip.

[The Associated Press quoted reliable sources as saying that Ray took off from a military airfield near London after being removed this evening from London's Wandsworth Prison and convoyed out of the capital under heavy guard.]

The extradition flight followed by only a few hours the signing by Home Secretary James Callaghan of the surrender warrant which formally made possible his delivery to U.S. authorities. Before signing the warrant, Callaghan spent several hours inspecting a thick pile of legal documents

See RAY, A1, Col. 1

RAY, From A1

to insure that every possible procedural safeguard had been respected in the extradition proceedings that began with Ray's arrest here June 8.

The plans for Ray's return went forward despite the passionate but apparently ineffective protest of his American lawyer, Arthur J. Hanes of Birmingham, Ala. Who repeated his demand that he be allowed to accompany his client back to America.

Hanes told reporters that last night he called Jack A. Herfurt, U.S. Consul General, asking for information about Ray's return. According to Hanes, he was told that Herfurt had a message for him from Assistant U.S. Attorney General Fred M. Vinson Jr. to this effect:

"I hope you'll understand

why you can't accompany your client and why you can't see him prior to his departure."

The Alabama attorney said he replied, "I don't understand it at all."

Hanes, who visited with Ray again this morning, said:

"I don't want this man grilled, cross-examined and interrogated in the plane when I'm not there."

Hanes said he offered Ray one bit of legal advice: "I told him to keep his mouth shut—it's that simple."

The evident reason for the secrecy about Ray's return was the fear that a mob of reporters might create a security problem if details of the flight were known. Reporters were reminded that Lee Harvey Oswald was killed in Dallas in 1963 at the moment he was being transferred from one prison to another.

Hanes said he would leave London as soon as he knew his client had been returned to America. "At the moment," he said, "I don't know whether they will carry my client back by Wells Fargo Stagecoach, yacht or a yellow submarine."

The Alabaman said that the extradition arrangements were "without justification, melodramatic and overplayed. I am convinced he will be taken out secretly and spirited away."

A remaining legal obstacle to Ray's return was removed in Bow Street Police Court this morning when two lesser British Charges against him were dropped. No prosecution evidence was offered against him on charges of possessing an unlawful pistol, and a charge of possessing a forged passport was withdrawn. Ray

DATE 7/19/68

PAGE A1

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himself did not appear at the brief hearing.