

Key Garrison Witness Lied, Officer Testifies

Police Lieutenant Says Russo Admitted He Did Not See Shaw Among Alleged Plotters

BY JERRY COHEN
Times Staff Writer

NEW ORLEANS — A police lieutenant testified Wednesday that Perry Raymond Russo admitted he lied under oath two years ago about an essential element in Dist. Atty. Jim Garrison's conspiracy case against Clay L. Shaw.

Russo acknowledged he did not see Shaw in the late David W. Ferrie's apartment on the night he claims he overheard a plot to kill President John F. Kennedy discussed there, Lt. Edward O'Donnell said.

Russo is Garrison's principal witness against Shaw.

He testified at a preliminary hearing after Shaw's arrest in March, 1967, that he had listened as Shaw, Ferrie and Lee Harvey Oswald considered ways of accomplishing the assassination. Russo placed the time of the conversation as mid-September, 1963.

O'Donnell, a New Or-

leans policeman for 17 years, said he talked with Russo on June 17, 1967. The purpose of the conversation was to lay the groundwork for a lie test Garrison wanted to give Russo four months after Russo told his original story.

The polygraph test, said O'Donnell, never came off. He implied it didn't because of the damaging admissions he said Russo made to him.

"Russo stated that when he entered the courtroom (for the preliminary hearing) all of his intentions were to tell the truth," O'Donnell testified.

Addressing F. Irvin Dymond, Shaw's chief defense counsel, the officer added:

"But he said your questions 'turned him on' when you kept asking if he believed in God—which is a very sensitive point with him—and he decided he was going to bury you."

"Bury me?" Russo asked.

"Bury you," replied O'Donnell, tall, handsome and poised.

O'Donnell said Russo, a 27-year-old book salesman, asked if the officer could show him Garrison's entire case against Shaw so he could make a "decision" about future identification of the 55-year-old defendant.

"The only way is to rely on your own conscience," O'Donnell said he replied.

The next day, O'Donnell added, he reported to Garrison and the district attorney's chief assistant, James Alcock, that Russo had completely revised his story about Shaw's being in Ferrie's apartment. "I made it known to the DA," he testified.

In Garrison's office, he said, he was confronted by the district attorney, Alcock, Russo and Andrew Sciambra, another Garrison assistant. There, he said, he discovered Russo had "done a double take and denied what he had told me the day before" about Shaw's not being at the apartment.

O'Donnell conceded under cross-examination by Alcock that he had told Russo he had recorded their conversation and would play the tape of it to refresh Russo's memory—even though he actually had not taped Russo's admissions.

"You were lying then about having a tape," Alcock said.

O'Donnell said he had spoken of having a tape to "reinforce Russo's memory of what he told me."

Asked by Alcock if Russo disclosed during their conversation of June 17 that he was under "extreme pressure" from television representatives to change his story, O'Donnell replied:

"Under extreme pressure from news media—and Jim Garrison . . . he said he was under pressure from newspapers, magazines—and Garrison's office."

Russo also told him,

O'Donnell testified, that he recanted what he had told a three-judge panel at Shaw's preliminary hearing Garrison would charge him with perjury.

Detailed testimony offered earlier by magazine writer James Phelan of Long Beach supported this, and underscored defense contentions that Russo was afraid of altering his story, lest Garrison retaliate.

Before Phelan took the stand, an internationally famed handwriting expert's testimony appeared to explode a prosecution witness' story that Shaw had signed the name "Clay Bertrand" in 1966 in a guest book in a VIP room at New Orleans International Airport.

Room Hostess

The witness, a hostess in the room, identified Shaw last week as the man she had seen sign the book. Garrison claims Shaw used the aliases "Clay Bertrand" and "Clem Bertrand" while plotting with Ferrie and Oswald, and even has used them since.

But Charles A. Appel Jr. examined examples of Shaw's handwriting and enlargements of the signature in the book and said

that the two were totally unlike.

Phelan refuted previous testimony by Sciambra about what has come to be known as the "Sciambra Memo."

The controversial memo makes no mention of Shaw's attending a party at Ferrie's apartment or of an assassination plot. The memo purportedly describes what Russo told Sciambra in Baton Rouge in late February, 1967, when Russo first volunteered information to the New Orleans district attorney's office.

Memo Copied

Sciambra explained the omissions by claiming the memo actually was the second he completed. The first, he contended, was written after Russo described the plot and the

plotters while under Sodium Pentathol. However, the "Sciambra memo" bears the earlier date of the two.

Phelan testified that Garrison let him copy the memo when they held a "prearranged" meeting in Las Vegas after the preliminary hearing.

A short time later, Phelan said, he visited Garrison's home in New Orleans and pointed out to the district attorney "wide discrepancies" he had found in it.

What happened? Dymond asked.

"Well, his jaw dropped a little," replied Phelan.

Shaw himself is expected to be a witness today. For the first time, he publicly will be allowed to

contradict Garrison's charge against him. He will be the last witness in his own behalf.

Final arguments could follow immediately, and the case could go to the jury by the weekend. But there are reports the state claims a series of rebuttal witnesses, which could stall the trial's climax until sometime next week.