

Ex-Army Agents Discuss 1968 Monitoring of King

Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Nov. 30—Army intelligence agents monitored the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s public appearances in Memphis in the days before his 1968 murder, said retired agents speaking publicly for the first time. The agents said they had no foreknowledge of the assassination.

They also said conspiracy theorists have misinterpreted and twisted the purpose of their Memphis mission. They watched for outbreaks of violence during the city's volatile garbage workers' strike, the agents said, and the information collected was used to decide whether to send armed troops to Memphis.

"We were never given any mission to keep King under surveillance. Never," said retired Col. Edward McBride, who oversaw the 111th Military Intelligence Group's Memphis operations from Fort McPherson in Atlanta.

Newly declassified reports show that at least four agents were in Memphis on April 4, 1968, when King was shot by a

sniper while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

Overall, the 111th sent as many as 10 undercover agents to Memphis after a March 28, 1968, riot that erupted during a protest march King led in support of striking workers, according to reports obtained by the Commercial Appeal newspaper under the Freedom of Information Act.

Some of the 111th's Memphis visits in March and April 1968 coincided with King's arrivals and departures, the documents show.

"We [took note] when he was in Memphis in his public moves. We knew he was speaking at [Mason Temple the evening of April 3], we knew he was going to march in the parade," said Jimmie Locke, who led the Memphis operation and was in Memphis when King was shot.

"We weren't particularly concerned except that he might be the catalyst for an event of some kind," Locke said in an interview at his home in San Antonio.

James Earl Ray pleaded guilty to King's murder in 1969 but recanted

days later and has spent the past 29 years seeking a new trial. His efforts, and those of his lawyer William Pepper, have given new life to conspiracy theories about the assassination.

King's family this year endorsed claims that the Army had stalked the civil rights leader and played a role in his murder. But the former agents said they did not watch King's hotel, bug his room or follow him. Nor did they see any Special Forces troops, the armed guerrilla warfare soldiers popularly known as Green Berets that had been rumored to have been in Memphis at the time.

"That's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard," McBride said.

Rather, the agents said, they simply monitored public gatherings, using civilians and sources in the Memphis Police Department and FBI to report when King and other activists attended rallies.

Senate hearings in 1971 explored abuses in an Army domestic surveillance program established under President Lyndon B. Johnson after major riots in Los Angeles in 1965 and Newark and Detroit in 1967. The program, designed to provide the Pentagon with "early warning" of civil disturbances that might require federal troops, involved sending Army agents to observe anti-war demonstrations, civil rights rallies and other political gatherings.

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