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Plane's Abortive Arms Mission Touches Off International Furor

By Laurence Stern

Washington Post Staff Writer

A mysterious American aircraft carrying a quarter-of-a-million dollar arms cargo on an abortive mission to Africa has touched off an international furor and triggered investigations by authorities on three continents.

The plane, a Constellation bearing cryptic and painted-over registration markings, picked up the bulk of its weapons cargo—2000 rifles, some machine guns and several hundred thousand rounds of ammunition—in Prague, Czechoslovakia, according to Government sources.

The mission to Africa was interrupted when the plane made an unscheduled landing in Malta on Feb. 6. On board were four Americans, a Swiss national, a Briton and a Canadian.

There the plane and ammunition were impounded by Maltese authorities. And in a swiftly formed international dragnet, two more Americans were arrested by Dutch authorities and another aircraft was seized in Amsterdam.

Claims Stir Alarm

The incident has caused a sensation on the continent and deep concern in Washington because of allegations by the crew members that their mission was sponsored by the United States and Western governments.

It has also cast its reflection on East-West relations because of the reported loading of the arms cargo in Prague. Still another sensitive international aspect of the case is the fact that the weapons-bear-

ing plane reportedly bore registration markings of the United States, Canada, and—finally—Ghana at various points in its wayward flight around the European continent.

The Federal Aviation Agency on Feb. 11 issued an emergency suspension of the aircraft's certificate to operate. The grounds: There is question whether the plane is not registered "under the law of a foreign country—to wit Ghana" and also whether ownership of the plane has not been transferred to a Ghanaian corporation. U.S. registration can only be given to planes owned by American citizens.

Destination Disputed

Members of the plane's crew have intimated to officials and newsmen that they were flying the cargo to Algerians rebelling against the regime of President Ben Bella. But another line of investigation being pursued both here and in Europe is whether the arms were destined for the Congolese rebels. Ghana is openly supporting the Congolese rebel cause.

State Department press officer Robert J. McCloskey said in a lengthy briefing on the incident Monday that no U.S. Government agency had any connection with the flight. Yesterday, when asked specifically if the CIA had any role in the incident, State Department spokesmen gave their most solemn assurances that there was no CIA or other governmental involvement.

Backgrounds of the six

Americans in the case have already been explored intensively by authorities here. But no information was volunteered.

The Americans were identified as Vincent Francis Burger, 38, the pilot, whose last-known address was 3062 S.W. 20th st., Miami; John Consolini, 27, of Brussels, copilot; Paul W. Schanke, 34, of Luxembourg, flight engineer, and Horace Pickett Jr., of Lima, Ohio, president of the United States Airways of New York, to which the plane was registered. All four were on the plane when it landed in Malta.

Customs Charge

In addition Dutch authorities in Amsterdam arrested Urban Leonard Drew, 40, who was identified as a co-owner of "the Amosco establishment in Saigon" and Robert Leete Farquhar. Drew was charged with customs violations, according to official reports from Amsterdam.

The ill-fated mission began on Feb. 2 when the plane flew from England to Holland, where, according to official sources, 100 parachutes suitable for weapons drops were loaded on the plane.

On Feb. 3, according to the State Department account, the plane arrived in Prague and took aboard the arms.

From Prague it filed a flight plan to Libya. But for some reason—possibly weather, fuel shortage or a mechanical failure—the plane was detoured to Malta, its final stop.