

Cubans Chase U.S. Customs Ship Away

By Jack Anderson

In a dramatic sea chase, an armed Cuban fishing boat last year ran an undercover U.S. Customs ship out of Cuban waters.

The skipper of the Cuban craft, brandishing a pistol in the swashbuckling style of the Blackbeards who used to sail the Caribbean, tried to board the Customs vessel and take it into custody.

But the Customs crew ducked for cover and made a run for freedom. With a crackling of gunfire, the Cuban boat followed in "hot pursuit" for two hours. It broke off the chase just before U.S. Coast Guard planes arrived overhead in response to emergency "Mayday" calls.

The bizarre episode may have set back the Cuban-American thaw. It certainly upset the Coast Guard, whose planes nearly became involved in an international incident. And on Capitol Hill, Rep. John Murphy (D-N.Y.), chairman of the House Coast Guard Subcommittee, is conducting a secret investigation.

The details have been swept under a secrecy stamp, but we have had access to the classified Coast Guard account of the misadventure.

Customs rented a shrimp boat for undercover work, which we have agreed to keep confidential. We also agreed to omit the name of the vessel and the date of the incident. Off the Cayo Bahia de Cadiz, states the Coast Guard report, the shrimp boat

"violated Cuban waters (and) a Cuban vessel was dispatched to arrest the U.S. craft . . .

"The crew aboard the (Cuban) vessel was motioning to the Americans to turn their fishing vessel and head toward the Cuban coast," continues the Coast Guard account. "The Customs boat did not alter its course . . .

"U.S. Customs officer Manny Marin went to the stern of the (shrimp boat), (and) the Cuban fishing vessel skipper informed Marin in Spanish, 'We represent the armed forces of Cuba. You are under arrest. Follow us to land.'" For emphasis, the skipper waved a 9-mm. revolver.

After a whispered conference, the Americans decided to try to escape. They agreed tersely that if they should be caught, they "would throw their radio and U.S. Customs investigative credentials overboard to prevent the Cubans from discovering the fact they were United States officials."

The American helmsman wheeled the shrimp boat due north toward the U.S. coast. In response, "the Cuban skipper fired two warning shots with his pistol." Everyone on board the Customs ship ducked below decks as the chase began.

"Sharp noises were heard," declares the Coast Guard report, "but they could not be definitely determined as gunfire or boat engine noises." Afterward, bullet holes were found in the boat's hull.

By dumb luck, the Americans had their shrimp outriggers jutting out from the side. In the six-

foot-high waves, every time the Cuban crew tried to board, the outriggers kept the Cuban boat from getting close enough.

The Cuban captain shouted that he had air assistance on the way, and the Americans saw the Cuban crew "constantly scanning the sky for possible aircraft."

After the two-hour "hot pursuit," the Cubans gave up. A few minutes later, Coast Guard aircraft, alerted by the "Mayday" calls, came to the rescue.

The Coast Guard report charges that the emergency calls only served to "reveal the nature of (the U.S. ship's) employment, thus rendering its cover useless for future operations."

The Coast Guard's acting commandant, Vice Adm. T. R. Sargent, complained in a confidential letter to Murphy that Customs not only blew the cover on the shrimp boat but brought "acute danger to the men embarked in that vessel."

The Customs ship's "mode of operation might (mistakenly) have been interpreted to be that of an anti-Castro infiltration operation," added the admiral. This "could have very likely resulted in embarrassment to the United States."

Intelligence Digest—Sources close to the Geneva peace talks say the Arabs and Israelis won't likely reach a disengagement agreement until February at the earliest . . . The Egyptians, meanwhile, have sworn to make

the Israelis pay for every day they delay their withdrawal from the Suez pocket. Egyptian snipers have been picking off Israeli soldiers, and Egyptian commandos have attacked Israeli outposts. Most of the incidents have been kept out of the newspapers, but have been reported in the secret intelligence dispatches . . . Diplomatic reports from the Arab side claim Egypt's President Sadat, Saudi Arabia's King Feisal and Jordan's King Hussein are willing to negotiate a permanent Arab-Israeli border close to the June, 1967, line but allowing minor corrections . . . In private, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger refers to his old North Vietnamese adversary, Le Duc Tho, affectionately as "Ducky" . . . The Nobel Peace Prize pair exchanged friendly reminiscences but made no diplomatic headway in their latest Paris get-together. Kissinger is relying upon Hanoi's uncertainty about President Nixon to keep the North Vietnamese from unleashing an offensive. Intelligence reports say the Hanoi hierarchy consider the President unpredictable and are uncertain how he would react . . . The American ambassador to Australia, Marshall Green, has been called home for an extended stay. The reason is State Department irritation of Trade Minister Jim Cairns' anti-American remarks. Our State Department sources believe the U.S. has become over-sensitive and, therefore, over-reacted.

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