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The Last, Agonizing Hughes Years

The Howard Hughes mystery has taken an ugly turn.

The late billionaire, once a daredevil pilot and a dazzling Hollywood producer, became a living skeleton in his last years. He shrank, shriveled, dehydrated and died of the man he had been.

The Mexican authorities told us he died of minimal neglect. Now the U.S. authorities are trying to determine whether his aides enriched themselves while they let him languish.

The key to the mystery is contained in the private papers which the Mexican authorities confiscated, at our investigation, from his last penthouse prison in Acapulco. We also arranged for U.S. tax agents to photograph the papers in Mexico City.

The papers include a fascinating daily log of the billionaire's activities. He spent his last years watching a constant round of movies. He alternated between his bed and a lounging chair. He nibbled his food, sometimes taking hours to complete a sparse meal. The routine was punctuated by painful, often prolonged trips to the bathroom.

It is clear from the papers that Hughes was both the prisoner and the warden. He imprisoned himself in blacked-out penthouses from the Bahamas to Nicaragua, from Vancouver to London.

He issued the orders, and they were obeyed explicitly. Sometimes the orders involved monumental, million-dollar matters. On Nov. 12, 1974, for instance, instructions went out from the penthouse to his top lieutenants.

"He has a staggering plan of great importance regarding Las Vegas,"

they were informed. They were ordered to be "available within three-four hours so that they can all start to work immediately on his plan."

This staggering idea, it turned out, was to construct a huge new Las Vegas hotel-casino complex surpassing all others in magnificence. He had just the right name for it: the Howard Hughes.

But most of the billionaire's orders were much more mundane. Typical were these instructions which he issued on Dec. 23, 1971: "His head pillow is to be inserted with the hard blue-green pillow next to his back and the open end of the pillow case on his right (not the left as before). Also, carry the pillow by the bottom seam."

His doctors provided him with drugs, which they warned were harmful. These nostrums, apparently, gave him his only release from his confinement. His last conscious act, according to witnesses, was a feeble, pathetic attempt to inject a hypodermic needle into his shriveled arm. He finally dropped the syringe helplessly.

Yet the fading Hughes constantly sought medical advice, which he seldom heeded. His doctors urged him to exercise, to regulate his activities, to eat more nourishing food. He never did.

In early 1974, he wanted to confine his intake to prepared cereals. "Please," he scrawled in his own handwriting, "have them research the serial (sic) field—either in Freeport, Miami, or L.A. before I consume any more of that . . . meat. But please exercise all caution toward security."

In July, 1973, aide Levar Myler was

helping Hughes to the bathroom in the London penthouse. Suddenly, the fragile Hughes lost his footing, crashed to the bathroom floor and broke a hip. It was the last time he would walk.

A year later, Hughes described the surgery in his own handwriting. Dr. Walter Robinson, a distinguished London surgeon, "performed a most difficult piece of surgery on my left leg, which was broken at the hip . . ." wrote the bedridden billionaire. "The surgery involved driving a steel spike right thru the bone which constitutes a joint and major structure of my leg at that point.

Both doctors and aides tried to persuade Hughes to exercise and get back on his feet. But he just lay in bed and dreamed of his past deeds. For a final moment, he resolved to fly again. He inquired whether a Dr. Hughes, whom he remembered from the past, would examine him for his pilot's license.

Aide Nadine Henley reported on March 12, 1975: "Dr. Hughes is healthy and is still one of the FAA medical examiners. He will come down here to examine you for your license but he has stated that he will not come down unless you are up and around and walking."

The billionaire wanted to know how much advance notice the doctor would need. Back came the reply: "Dr. Hughes said he would require approximately two weeks notice before coming down to Freeport to interview you."

Of course, the former aviation hero never flew again; he never got out of bed. His doctors simply watched him atrophy, and they seemed helpless to prevent it.