JACK ANDERSON and MICHAEL BINSTEIN

Frank Sturgis: A Real-Life Don Quixote

The death of Watergate burglar Frank Sturgis passed last weekend with barely a whimper in the press. He was one of the four Cubans who were recruited to do the dirty work and were all but forgotten in the wreckage of Watergate.

But we can't let this event pass without telling you Frankie's story. Long before he joined the world's most celebrated burglary crew, he was a close friend of this column.

Sturgis was a soldier of fortune, forever chasing adventure but usually finding misadventure. He was also a Don Quixote, square jaw set against the enemy, drawn irresistibly to such calamities as the Bay of Pigs and Watergate.

In his youth, he confounded the odds and became part of a legend, one of the ragged few who persevered in the mountains of Cuba with revolutionary leader Fidel Castro. After their incredible victory, he could be seen on Havana's streets in the regalia of an air marshal. He became Castro's man in charge of "liberated" gambling casinos and luxury hotels.

But on matters of principle having to do with Castro's repression and his turn toward the Soviet Union, Sturgis defected from the revolution and became a long-shot gambler against the house. Thereafter, he risked his neck against Castro in the doomed ventures of Cuban "freedom fighters."

He progressed from the Bay of Pigs to the Watergate burglary, in which he believed he was seeking evidence that Castro was contributing to the 1972 Democratic presidential campaign.

By chance, we encountered Sturgis and his fellow Cuban burglars at Washington National Airport a few hours before the Watergate break-in. Sturgis was asked what he was up to. He fidgeted and mumbled.

"Secret business," he finally blurted out nervously. He left quickly, and it wasn't until the next morning's newspapers that we learned what his "secret business" really was.

Those four Cubans fully deserved their sentences for their role in the break-in, but their plight has always been overshadowed by the political dimensions of the scandal. They thought they were serving their adoptive country, and they were motivated by a misguided sense of patriotism. Three of the four, including Sturgis, had been trained by the Central Intelligence Agency and had risked their lives on its missions.

They wound up behind bars while those who plotted the Watergate crimes remained free. President Richard M. Nixon's aides, H.R. Haldeman (who died last month) and John Ehrlichman, even after their dismissal from the White House, were chauffeured to the grand jury in White House limousines. Sturgis and his accomplices were brought in manacles by federal marshals.

The White House left the Cubans out in the cold. In contrast, John Wilson, the attorney for Haldeman and Ehrlichman, conferred personally with the president. Haldeman was even permitted to use secret White House tapes to help prepare his defense—the same tapes that had been refused to the Watergate prosecutors and Senate investigators.

A reported $460,000 was slipped to several Watergate defendants and their lawyers to buy their silence. Yet only a paltry few dollars filtered down to the Cubans—less than $14,000 to help maintain their families and $13,000 for their attorney. Sturgis's share was just $2,500 in expenses.

Sturgis attributed his mother's death to the Watergate reaction, and he owed $3,000 in hospital and funeral bills. His wife, Janet, worked furiously to pay the bills while he was in jail.

"We now know we did wrong," Sturgis said in 1973. "But as God is our judge, we thought at the time we were serving the country." He always felt that the more Americans learned about Watergate, the more they would believe he was one of the innocents.

He expressed this sentiment in a letter he wrote his wife from prison in the fall of 1973. In the letter, he noted that E. Howard Hunt, the White House aide and ex-CIA official, had been taken away to testify on the scandal.

"Howard has not returned as yet," Sturgis reported. "Everybody thinks he is talking his butt off. If he is, he can only help us and not hurt us.

"We still may win this yet," Sturgis wound up the letter.

"Keep the faith, honey! I love you always."

Sturgis died last weekend with his Don Quixote boots on. He ignored wracking pain from lung cancer and flew to Washington last month to tell us about his latest escapade. He said he was training guerrillas in the Florida Everglades to overthrow Castro.