

The Angola Mercenary Caper

Instead of Adventure, Soldiers of Fortune Meet the Press

By Laurence Stern

Washington Post Staff Writer

MIAMI, Jan. 9—The scene was a scruffy motel on the fringe of the "little Havana" district, and the cast of characters who showed up there last weekend might have emerged from the mercenary underground of the "Dogs of War."

They were veterans of such capers as the bombing of the president's palace in Port-au-Prince, the attempted kidnaping of Cuban fishing boats, mercenary operations in the Congo and Biafra. Now they were trying to sign up as soldiers of fortune for Angola, the newest of the world's mercenary adventure lands.

The only trouble was that when the prospective recruits turned up to volunteer their services they were met only by a battery of reporters. According to one account, the only traces of the alleged recruiters were a few beer cans and handful of olives in the sink.

The two recruiters, Pedro Martinez Castro and Jose Antonio Prat, did show up fleetingly to give rapid-fire press interviews, pose for television cameras and disappear again. Word of the Miami mercenary recruiting operation for Angola began to spread on national television and wire services.

Calls came pouring in to the Miami bureaus of the news magazines and networks from their New York headquarters, whose interest was fueled by the growing confrontation over Angola between the United States and the Soviet Union.

"A researcher in our New York picture department told me the story had to be true because CBS ran film on Cubans volunteering," sighed one veteran news magazine correspondent.

"I told them I thought the story was phony as hell and that if they wanted me to line some Cubans up and say they were

volunteers, I could do it any hour of the day," he said.

Ralph Edens, the Miami correspondent for Soldier of Fortune magazine ("the Journal of Professional Adventure"), began receiving calls from would-be volunteers whom he could not help.

"A lot of our people want to know if there is a genuine connection here or whether it's a hustle," said Edens, a burly and bearded construction worker who lives in Miami when he is not adventuring in the bush.

And despite the inevitable attention given the alleged Angolan recruiting operations in the place that served as the urban staging ground for the Bay of Pigs invasion, there is no evidence that a single American mercenary or Cuban exile soldier has been signed up here.

"This whole episode has been a media

See MERCENARIES, A6, Col. 3

The Angola Mercenary Caper

MERCENARIES, From A1

phenomenon," insisted one Miami newspaper executive, who followed the recruiting story with an early sense of skepticism.

"We have asked Washington for authority to investigate the allegations" of mercenary recruiting, said a spokesman for the Miami branch of the FBI in a voice which betrayed no sense of urgency.

"If there's anything to the allegations, which so far have been mostly newspaper stories, then we might be looking into violations of the Foreign Registration Act or the Neutrality Act," he said.

The Miami recruitment story began circulating on New Year's Eve with a story filed by the Associated Press bureau quoting Cuban refugee spokesmen Prat and Martinez as saying that they were recruiting for the U.S.-backed UNITA—the National Union for Total Independence of Angola.

"We want to get as many Cubans and other Latins as possible. We have hundreds of applications," Prat was quoted as saying.

Prat went on to say that after the Angola venture the Cuban exile recruits would fight to overthrow Fidel Castro in Cuba, according to the AP dispatch.

The two principal Miami newspapers, The Herald and The News, treated the Angola mercenary matter with cool circumspection.

"Because of what was going out on the wires, the heat was on us to produce," said

Ray Herndon, city editor of The Miami Herald. "It's pretty hard to knock down a story. You have to say what's not happening."

Last Sunday The New York Times ran an Associated Press dispatch from Miami, keyed from its front page, reporting that Martinez and Prat had 365 men ready to be airlifted to Africa. "We plan to begin moving them out in about a week," Martinez was quoted as saying.

The Times' stringer in Miami, a Cuban exile with excellent connections in the exile community, had warned the newspaper off the story, it was learned. But an editor had not gotten the word.

The previous Friday, Jan. 2, the Christian Science Monitor ran a story, which The Washington Post quoted, saying that 300 American mercenaries were already operating in Angola and an equal number were waiting to go as soon as funding became available.

The Monitor story quoted unidentified "senior mercenary officers familiar with the situation both in Angola and the United States." Its publication was followed by denials from the CIA, the State Department and the White House of the Monitor's allegation that the United States was financing the training of American mercenaries for Angola.

The Monitor story did not mention the alleged Miami recruitment operation. It did, however, say that guerrilla training operations were being conducted at Fort Benning, Ga., a claim also denied by U.S. government spokesmen. Special forces and paramilitary training has traditionally been conducted at Fort Bragg, N.C.

Despite the barrage of official denials, Monitor senior editors were standing by the story by the newspaper's U.N. correspondent, David Anable.

The author of the original AP story, Ike Flores, said in a telephone interview that he thought Prat and Martinez were "fairly serious" in their recruitment objectives, although he acknowledged that there is widespread skepticism of the report. "All I've reported," he said, "is what they've told me."

According to one Cuban exile editor with widespread contacts in the community, the Miami Angola recruiting caper started in a bar during a conversation between Prat, Martinez and a friend who worked for the Cuban-exile radio station, WFAB, one of five highly competitive Spanish language stations in Miami.

"They decided to put on the air the fact that Cubans were ready to go to Angola. As soon as it was on the air, AP and UPI picked it up as news and the whole story blew up around our heads.

"To tell the truth," the editor continued, "Prat and Martinez never expected that sort of publicity. It wasn't intended to go outside of Dade County."

However thin may be the claims of Prat and Martinez, the furor over Angola has served to awaken the old dreams of both the Yankee mercenaries and the CIA-trained Cuban operatives that trace back to the Bay of Pigs era.

But whether they will add Angola to their catalogue of past exploits in such places as the Congo, Cuba, Biafra, Vietnam seems, at the moment, questionable.