

Was CBS 'Ripped Off' in Search for Hoffa?

By Martin Waldron
New York Times News Service

KEY WEST, Fla. — About 4 o'clock last Friday morning, a tough-talking man — identified by the Justice Department as Chuck Medlin, an ex-convict — left the downtown Holiday Inn at Tampa, Fla., to try to find his cousin. He has not returned.

In his pocket, Medlin apparently carried almost \$10,000 that CBS had advanced in return for his promise to lead a television news team to the body of James R. Hoffa, the former Teamsters union president who disappeared July 30.

Medlin's disappearance was part of a bizarre series of events that began about a week ago when Medlin persuaded a free-lance writer that he could produce Hoffa's body. It also involved an editor of Harpers magazine, the Tampa police and the FBI. And it led last weekend to a fruitless boat search for Hoffa's body by a CBS film crew.

The free-lance writer, Patrick O'Keefe, informed The New York Times of the story Thursday, saying he felt widespread publication of it might protect those involved from any efforts at revenge for finding the body. A Times reporter was sent to Tampa early Friday, but when he arrived he found O'Keefe upset and Medlin gone.

O'KEEFE HAD tape-recorded interviews with Medlin and his own negotiations with CBS; from those tapes and from other interviews the story was unraveled.

It began Dec. 1 at Greensboro, N.C., when Medlin called the University of North Carolina campus there and said he wanted to talk about writing a book. A secretary referred him to Robert Watson, who teaches creative writing.

Watson said there was such an aura of violence about Medlin that he became terrified. He said he referred Medlin to several



MORLEY SAFER
Interviewed 'informant'

newsmen who might help him, including O'Keefe, a 33-year-old journalism teacher who had worked for the Associated Press and later for The Greensboro Record.

The feeling of terror Watson described was reported by others in contact with Medlin last week. Until he walked off in Tampa on Friday, people around him leaped to do his bidding, while he coldly issued orders. They said he frequently threatened to kill everybody in sight.

Medlin persuaded O'Keefe, the writer said, that he knew Hoffa was dead and where the body was. He also persuaded O'Keefe that he was as tough as he said he was. Demonstrating how quickly he could move his hands, O'Keefe said, Medlin accidentally hit him in the left eye, giving him a shiner.

O'KEEFE SAID Medlin told his journalism class that he had been a "hit man" for the Teamsters union. (A Justice Department source said there were no indications that this was true.)

According to O'Keefe, Medlin said:

He had decided to tell what he knew about the Hoffa disappearance because he had had a strong friendship with the onetime union leader.



DON HEWITT
CBS producer

He had learned from a professional murderer in Miami — having stuck "a gun barrel down his throat" — that Hoffa had been shot to death while on a fishing trip to Key West.

Hoffa's body was said to be encased in concrete, lying on the ocean floor in 12 feet of water 2½ miles off Key West.

O'Keefe called Harpers magazine about the story, and Harpers advanced \$100 toward an article about it. When O'Keefe and Medlin flew to New York last Wednesday, Lewis Lapham, a Harpers editor, suggested that O'Keefe take Medlin to CBS, which might also be interested.

DON S. HEWITT, a CBS news producer, said Lapham had reported that O'Keefe had handled two assignments for Harpers and seemed competent.

Lapham, who said he did not believe Medlin's story, said he felt uneasy in Medlin's presence because of an air of barely controlled violence. He said that when he called Hewitt he suggested that CBS make as many checks as it could on Medlin.

Hewitt said that the only check CBS made was with Lapham about O'Keefe's competence as a newsman. He also said he had thought Medlin very persuasive and

that there might be some truth to his story.

On Wednesday, Medlin was interviewed by Morley Safer of the "Sixty Minutes" program. He said he was leading CBS to the body of Hoffa because he wanted to have the satisfaction of calling Hoffa's murderers to tell them that the body had been found. Then, he said, he wanted to have an hour in which to flee before CBS called the authorities.

CBS paid \$1,000 for the interview, O'Keefe said.

THE NEXT DAY, the network hired O'Keefe as a consultant, agreeing to pay him a total of \$10,000 to lead a CBS news team to the body. There was no direct contract with Medlin.

Medlin maintained that he had killed numerous persons over the years, according to tapes made by O'Keefe.

The contract with O'Keefe had provided that \$9,000 would be paid, but only if Hoffa's body was found where Medlin said it was and if CBS had an exclusive beat on it. But CBS pressed the money on Medlin in advance, giving it to O'Keefe, according to the tapes, to avoid direct payment to a participant in a news event.

The network had been criticized some months ago for having paid H.R. Haldeeman, former chief of staff to President Richard M. Nixon, for an interview.

O'Keefe and Medlin were unable to get reservations from New York to Florida on the same plane as the producer and crew assigned to the project. They agreed to meet the news team in Key West last Friday.

O'KEEFE AND Medlin went to Florida on a flight that stopped at Tampa.

Medlin decided he wanted to spend the night there, and he and O'Keefe checked into the Holiday Inn. Before leaving New York, according to O'Keefe, Medlin said he would hold the \$9,000, explaining that it would be safe with him because people were just naturally afraid of him. O'Keefe said he had given it to him.

At the Tampa motel, Medlin began drinking and during the evening a young woman who Medlin said was his cousin came to the motel, according to O'Keefe.

O'Keefe said that the young woman became upset and left. About 4 a.m., O'Keefe said, Medlin said he was going to bring her back and departed. He never returned.

Friday afternoon, O'Keefe called CBS in New York to report that Medlin had disappeared. Remembering Medlin's threats to kill everybody, Hewitt said he directed O'Keefe to take refuge at the Tampa Police Department.

O'Keefe did, although he said later he was not afraid of Medlin. He also said he believed Medlin's story.

ON SATURDAY, O'Keefe flew to Key West to join the CBS news team.

Using directions provided by Medlin before he disappeared, the news team searched the ocean off Key West that afternoon. It did not find Hoffa's body.

Hewitt said then that the FBI had identified Medlin as an ex-convict named Clarence Newton Medlin, in his 40s, and had said he had connections to the Teamsters' union and had been at the federal prison at Lewisburg, Pa., when Hoffa was.

CBS urged the FBI to dredge off Key West; the FBI did not dredge.

On Sunday, the CBS news team was back in its boat on the ocean looking for the body once again; it did not find it. Nor did it have more luck on Monday.

A Justice Department source said in Washington that the department believed CBS had been "ripped off."