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GUNG HO

The CIA's Man For All Nations

By William Seymour



Streicher (originally German National Archives ... collection now in Soviet hands)

One of Streicher's favorite pictures, showing him with an intelligence team inspecting Rommel's defenses in France, late 1943. Rommel is second from left; Streicher is in the rear, middle.

The officer hurried his half dozen anonymously-uniformed men aboard the twin engine seaplane sitting along the swampy coast of Cienga de Zapata in an unknown Cuban coastal area called Bahía de Cochinos (The Bay of Pigs). It was 15 April 1961.

"Get your asses in that ship ... no way we're going to spend the next decade in some stinking prison as Castro's propaganda display," he blustered, slapping a stumbling soldier lightly on the back.

The slender officer, the last man aboard, relaxed only after the unmarked aircraft landed quietly at a small U.S. Navy airfield in the southern Florida Keys. When it touched down, he turned to the man next to him. "Well, Sergeant, it's the CIA's dud all the way now."

I was that sergeant, and the officer was Captain William Rhine ... at least, I thought that's who he was at the time. Our outfit was a special mission intelligence unit hurriedly returned from a "commuter" assignment in Cuba, trying to coordinate the Army's last bailout share of that half-assed invasion idea.

Since my discharge I'd been work-

ing as a journalist and was taking a busman's holiday one afternoon in 1979, reading NEWSWEEK. There was something naggingly familiar about the man in one of the pictures, illustrating an account of counter-terrorist fighting in South Africa. He was identified as Rolf Mayer, a European mercenary officer.

"Sweet geezus," I bellowed, making my girlfriend jump about a foot. "That's Capt. Rhine!"

That won't shake you. But, since the man in that picture was the same U.S. officer I had spent life-risking togetherness with in Cuba, my adrenalin paid attention and pumped away.

From that moment, my sparetime crusade was unraveling the "who, what and why" of William Rhine-Rolf Mayer, involving more than two months of letters, telephone calls, threats from the Army, a visit from the feds, some nasty letters from two foreign governments and, finally, an interview with my former officer. But that's only a very small part of the story ... here's the rest.

After those months of digging, fighting, threats, and nasty exchange,

es, my telephone rang and the quiet voice on the line told me it belonged to the man I wished to see.

The following week we were seated in a Baltimore hotel room, face to face for the first time in over a decade. At 62 he looked young, trim, and fit ... especially for a man who began his career as a German officer in Spain in 1938 and had just retired from the CIA payroll.

William Rhine told me his real name is Helmut Streicher, although he holds passports and other ID cards covering nine other identifications and nationalities. He was a professional spy who has worked for the American government since 1945. He has been in and out of Russia several times, all over Europe, the Middle East, Cuba, and most recently, was in the field on a special contract basis in Africa. Of medium height, trim and handsome in a nondescript way, Streicher had been covering and uncovering as an intelligence op for 42 years, until his retirement in 1980.

But, I'm ahead of my story. Let's go back to 1960 when the CIA assigned Streicher to duty as William Rhine.

U.S. Army officer. The fortyish officer spoke "American" with a slight accent, but passed his "tests" with room to spare. At the end of 10 months orientation and training he took over my Army intelligence unit; this is where I met the man I knew as Captain William Rhine. I had no idea the CIA had inserted him into our Cuban operations. He was our CO, and I was the unit's intelligence NCO and translator.

Our assignment was to gather field intelligence and act as the barometer for the supposed anti-Castro underground and their freedom groups. As such, we were in and out of Cuba about twice a month.

It got hairy at times. Once, a Cuban MIG buzzed our plane while we were still over Cuban territorial waters. For some reason, the pilot did not shoot at our unarmed, unmarked white amphibian. Only God and the base laundry will ever know how scared our six men and two fliers were that day!

Then there was the time Rhine, a CIA man, two Cuban nationals (hired CIA hoods acting as bodyguards) and I were in a small village to meet a defecting Cuban militia officer. Suddenly, we leaped to the surprise of shouts and gunfire in the distance. It turned out the defecting officer had thought twice about the rewards of showing Fidel the heads of American aggressors and decided to double-cross us.

"Let's stay and hit 'em," I had said dramatically, opening the dust cover on my greasegun, wanting to pull a John Wayne.

Rhine stared at me for one second, then motioned me into a clump of vegetation which was knee deep in swamp. Mr. James Bond and his bodyguards chose a shooting retreat instead and came this close to being caught. While the militia chased the CIA entourage, Rhine quietly led me in a big circle, getting us back to our pickup area within three hours. Although I hadn't known just how much of a pro I was with, I was quite thankful not to have fired any shots in anger that day!

The finale came on April 14, just three days before the now infamous Bay of Pigs invasion, when our Cuban intelligence network told Rhine the Cuban militia simply would not support a revolution unless its leaders were clearly in control and Castro was either dead or on the run. Put simply, the little people liked Fidel. Not trusting CIA plans to deal with Castro, "Rhine" ordered in an immediate airlift to withdraw our small force the next morning.

According to Rhine, the invasion used 1400 "safe" Cubans who were known to be right-wingers against the Castro force of 4000 militia supported by tanks and aircraft.

How could our small force fight its way to the Escambray Mountains



Streicher fled the Russians to surrender to the British in May of 1945. In flawless English, he asked a British photographer to snap a picture of the event and he bought the film on the spot.

when it had to face those odds, not to mention Castro's air force that had been reported out of action by 'established' CIA sources? We had reported to both the CIA and our brass that the Cuban military would NOT support an uprising," Rhine told me.

He had been correct in that too, as armed Cuban T-33's, originally U.S. training jets, had appeared over the Bay of Pigs beaches and shot down the CIA-furnished B-26's. "We told them about the planes, too," he added.

President John Kennedy took all the heat for the Bay of Pigs fiasco with a curt, "There's enough blame to go around." As a man involved in the coordinating details of the mission, Helmut Streicher, as Captain William Rhine, knew of what the late President spoke. But, CIA involvement didn't end at the Bay of Pigs, nor did Streicher's career.

In the flap after the invasion fiasco, John McCone, CIA head at that time, vigorously denied the Agency's role in any of the activities, because he had been lied to by Richard Helms and former Vice President Richard Nixon, the operations architects.

I asked Streicher if the assassination of John Kennedy had been a revenge hit by Fidel Castro, as at least one CIA man, David A. Phillips, main-

tains. My old boss looked at me with a wry twist of his eyebrows.

"One of the worst kept secrets in the Company is the truth about the President's murder. It wasn't Castro, Russians or Castro Cubans. The men who killed Mr. Kennedy were ex-CIA contract agents working on their own with some anti-Castro Cuban exiles, and the whole thing was set up and financed by Mob money and some very Big Money interests. You'd have to go back to his father's background, old Joe Kennedy, to get into all that.

"John Kennedy's murder was a two-part conspiracy. One was the action end of it with the killers, but the deeper part is the acceptance and protection of that murderous operation by the intelligence apparatus that controls the way the world operates. It has to happen. The man was too independent for his own good."

"But, what do you know about it?" I asked.

"Hah. I am retired now and enjoy my peace and my pension," was the only answer I got.

I couldn't believe that my old boss, this lifetime professional spook, was really retired. It seemed as if he had spent all his life out in the cold.

Born in Danzig in 1918, Helmut Streicher says he is a 1937 graduate

any
thing in?
Cuba

Duller at time of
Bay of Pigs



Admiral Canaris, Streicher's spy boss during WWII, was the chief German spymaster until he fell from Hitler's favor and internal political intrigue.

of the University of Bonn. He went immediately into military school at *Blutordensburg*, the educational HQ of the German regime, located at Vogelsang Castle. He also studied war at Sonthofen.

Following his advanced training, Fahnrich (Ensign) Helmut Streicher was assigned to Spain, entering the German web of quasi-military espionage on behalf of the rebel forces of General Francisco Franco. The year was 1938, and the Spanish Civil War was about to end. Streicher spied, fought, was promoted and slightly wounded in Spain, all while "advising" a unit of rebel guerrillas. The German officer was brought home in 1939 for a non-combatant espionage assignment.

Helmut Streicher became Karl Schmidt, journalist, and spent the next two years in America working under cover as a writer for a German news agency and learning the American language, customs and idioms. In 1940, he was recalled to Germany for "post-graduate" intelligence study as the Third Reich moved its war machine into overdrive.

Although few German officers dared to break Hitler's establishment goose step of Nazi militarism, Streicher was one of those who did. He broke with the Nazi Party's Super-

man theory and racism, becoming a professional in espionage. This ideological break probably saved his career, if not his life, after the war.

Operating all over Europe, Streicher made the Allies' "top ten" list of axis intelligence agents when captured German operatives tied his name in with an Otto Skorzeny-planned attempt to either kidnap or assassinate General Eisenhower just prior to the Battle of the Bulge.

"I have no doubts we could have handled this assignment. It would have been easy to kill your General Eisenhower, but it would have been a real challenge to kidnap him. I would have enjoyed doing the latter," he remarked candidly and with dry wit.

But by spring of 1945, Streicher, recently promoted to Colonel, was moving westward across ravaged Germany. Finally, the weary officer surrendered to the British just outside Kitzingen on 7 May 1945. Having a strong professional reputation among G-2 people, Streicher was cleared by Allied intelligence that fall and accepted an assignment with U.S. Army Intelligence.

The major danger for a Cold War agent, aside from spectacular assassination attempts, is losing his cover or being detained in an unfriendly country. According to Streicher, if the

agent's a courier, he might simply disappear, while the more important agents are traded back and forth between East and West.

"There is pretty much of a gentleman's agreement on not shooting important spies. It costs a great deal of money and time to train a good one, you know. So we don't bother their people much, and they leave us alone," Streicher told me. "Of course, when someone does rock the boat — that's when headlines are made."

The closest Streicher ever came to being arrested was late in the summer of 1954, when Dr. Otto John, a Western intelligence chief, defected to the East. Within two weeks, 200 Western agents were picked up or liquidated by the communists. Streicher was in Prague at the time.

"I had a tip from an informer that the Soviet raid was coming. I was on the escape route within ten minutes. I was so close that I even pocketed a Walther PPK 7.65mm pistol in case I needed it to get out," the retired master spy told me, adding it was one of the very few times he had carried a gun when not actually in the combat field.

Another close call for Streicher and his team, working this time on a massive communications' network tap in Berlin, came when a double-agent named Geyer fled to the East. Berlin authorities with microfilm records of about 300 Western agents in 1957. Most of the agents had time to escape because Streicher's counter-intelligence work sounded the alarm almost the moment the Red agent crossed the border.

"We paid Geyer for that one, too. Two of our people went into East Berlin and staked him out at his building. When Geyer came out at noon, one agent created a noisy car wreck down the street by driving through a shop window. While pedestrians were looking at this, our other man leaned a silencer-equipped rifle out of a rented room across the way and put Geyer out of business permanently."

Of course, I knew nothing of Rhine-Streicher prior to my contact with him in Cuba and Miami, twenty years ago. I asked Streicher what he had done after the Cuban fiasco in 1961. He said the CIA had removed him from his Army cover "quickly and quietly to keep me away from Congressional committees."

In June of 1961, Streicher returned to Africa, now 43 years old, and working for the CIA. The last time he had been in Africa he had been 25 and working for Adolf Hitler. Backed with this experience, his simple cover was as a mercenary officer in the fight against U.N. forces. His cover name was Rolf Mayer, a "character" he used throughout several African assignments.

Streicher's initial assignment in Africa was to determine if the killing



... collection now in Soviet hands)

Under cover in Madrid ... Canaris (extreme left) and Streicher (next to Canaris) meeting with other Nazi agents. He believes this was a covert photo taken by the SS following Hitler's paranoia about traitors. He was shown a copy in 1944.



Streicher

Streicher (in beret) spent his last fulltime CIA field operations assignment using cover as a mercenary officer in Africa during the early '70s.



Streicher (Cliffordix Photo)

In the field for the last time, the veteran operative was working on a "freelance" basis as a CIA contract agent. "He tended to victims of the terrorism in South Africa ... this is the picture that became the genesis of this article, as the author searched for his old CO.

of Patrice Lumumba, the Congo's first premier, had been the work of mercenaries, a Communist plot to create a martyr, or simply a fortune of war.

"Our official conclusion was that it was the work of mercenaries, although it did create propaganda for the other side," he said. "My own conclusion was that we (the CIA) had him killed. So what? It happens."

One of Streicher's few humorous adventures in Africa came when an errant United Nations mortar round hit the Elizabethville brewery of the Simba Beer Company. Like civilized gentlemen, the mercenaries and the U.N. soldiers arranged a temporary cease fire until workmen could get the beer back into production.

"That sour beer was one of the true fringe benefits of fighting in that smothering climate all day," he added.

I asked him about other diversions, specifically about his female counterparts in the business. The reply was a

sharp snort followed by, "Hell, James Bond gives us normal chaps an impossible life to live. Actually, most of us can't shack around too much on assignment. Off the job, well, mostly that's each man's business ... real spying isn't all sex, like movies and television have it."

In 1964, Streicher was reassigned to Algeria as Karl Rolf, German tradesman. His cover was to sell a load of scrap metal, while his assignment was to stop Algeria's President Ahmen ben Bella from slipping enormous amounts of modern automatic weapons and ammunition to Congolese insurgents. The situation was ripe for some good old-fashioned sabotage, and you may remember the headlines about trains wrecked and ships sunk.

"We tried to be as quiet as possible and make the attacks look like normal accidents or regular war losses. The biggest problem was ships, but the Agency always had an answer or a tricky explosive device," he told me,

hinting that the CIA helped tip the scales to the Congolese National Army.

By the fall of 1964, optimism prevailed among the much-aligned Congolese National Army (ANC). After 10 months of less than glorious fighting, victory against the Congolese rebels seemed just a mop-up away.

"The only problem was taking Stanleyville without letting the rebels murder the 800 hostages, including 63 Americans, being held prisoner there," Streicher recalled.

Streicher was with the first wave of Belgian-led mercenaries air-dropped just outside the city by U.S. transports. He was an "observer" ordered to the scene at the 11th hour and 59th minute by the CIA. A Belgian transportation officer on the Agency payroll got Streicher the correct travel orders and vouchers. His "official dossier" was misplaced in Washington for the duration.

Washington's fear in the whole matter, as explained by Streicher, was that the Congo might become an open battlefield between Chinese Communists and the U.S., with Russia on the sidelines to smother the victor of that conflict. Other African countries feared this battle between the powers in their nations, too, so that official eyes were shut to the secret wars of espionage and insurgency in which China, Russia and the U.S. tried to outdo each other behind the scenes.

The U.S.'s top man in that area was Colonel William Dodds, a retired Army officer and counter-insurgency expert who "volunteered" to stay in that cruel and bloody fighting after his official tour ended.

"I'm not sure if Dodds knew I was on the same payroll as he was," Streicher said. "To him, I was probably just another European mercenary officer who spoke excellent English."

Streicher described this second mercenary tour as tougher than the first, at least as far as spying was concerned.

"Finding an information drop was tough, as most of the mercenaries practically lived in a small bar called L'Equipe, located on Elizabethville's Avenue L'Etroupe. Before, when the mercenaries were fighting the U.N., it was easy to slip messages out. During cease-fires it was not unusual for mercenary and U.N. officers to drink, gamble and whore together. So the Agency planted a man with the U.N.: he was my courier. But there was no courier this time."

I asked Streicher why the CIA would send such a senior operative into a relatively minor skirmish area.

"The United States had more than 10 billion invested in South Africa alone then, not to mention the fact that the gold mines there are the underpinning of the free world's monetary system," he replied. "Besides, we couldn't let the Reds take advantage of a race war, could we?" he asked, grinning.

After that assignment, Streicher came home. He spent some time at Langley, worked standard tour assignments in rather tame locales and did liaison assignments with other governments. His service years piled up, and because of his experience and contacts in South Africa, he was offered a special "contract" to return there in 1978, although totally in an "unofficial" position. He had filed "retirement" papers that July.

"The CIA rules say you can't go on assignment at my age." Then he laughed, adding, "But we're like the Mafia: no one really retires. You're always on the job."

His view of the Soviet takeover in Afghanistan?

"They'll never conquer those people. It's like a small scale Vietnam, except they're too smart to get as

involved as the U.S. did. I am hopeful we will step up our unofficial support of the rebels."

I asked if he knew that we were supplying the rebels.

"Well, no, we're not shipping them weapons, supplies and equipment. But we're sending them the product that buys all those things — money," he smiled.

Did you miss not being in Vietnam?

"I chuckle that I may be the only CIA agent who didn't get his ticket punched there. I lived enough combat in Spain, Europe and Africa, though. Vietnam? If I had had a son then, knowing what I know from talking to people who really knew, yes, I would have advised him to stay away."

"The U.S. was not running a real war. It was a political action. The military had to work within odd rules. It would make no sense to die under those circumstances. I would not want my children to do so."

For the record, Streicher is married for the third time, and he and his present wife have no children by choice. He has a 26-year-old son by an earlier marriage, and an 18-year-old daughter.

Streicher has seen much killing and has been wounded in combat as a spy. He has been nearly killed and nearly captured. He has faced danger so many times in 42 years as a soldier and espionage agent that I asked him how he could even stomach being in the spy business these last few years, watching the same things unfold by the same types of blood-thirsty people as he had been doing for more than four decades.

"It's easy — when you remember that a life in most places on Earth comes cheaper than an American cigarette."

I saluted my former CO for the last time, then shook the hand of Mr. —, now a middle-aged, middle-American citizen who wants to stay lost.

BIOGRAPHY OF

Helmut Streicher (real name)

Cover names: Rolf Mayer, Hans Molloff, Karl Rolf, William Rhine, Kark Schmidt, and others

Born: Danzig, 1918.

Graduated: University of Bonn, 1937.

MILITARY SCHOOLS

1937 *Blutordensburg* (Citadel of the Order of Blood), which was the educational HQ of the Nazi Regime at Vogelsang Castle. *Sonthofen*, for intermediate studies and basic training. *SS Junkerschule*, an SS officer candidate school south of Munich in the Bavarian Alps.

ACTIVE DUTY

- 1938 In Spain as an advisor and observer. Set up spy networks and contact drops used later in the war. Was wounded slightly in combat.
- 1939-1940 In the U.S., with cover as a German journalist. Learned English and American customs well. Also learned spy system and worked as a courier.
- 1940-1941 In Germany for additional intelligence schooling and internal work. On duty in Eastern Europe as well.
- 1942 On the Russian front as a combat line unit officer.
- 1943-1945 In Europe, Africa, in and out of many nations — both neutral and involved in the war. Some contacts with allied agents. Worked with Schellenberg, Skorzeny, Canaris, and others.
- 1945 Surrendered to British near Kitzingen on 7 May 1945, escaping Russians. Cleared by Allied Intelligence, he was formally accepted into work for U.S. Army Intelligence in October 1945.
- 1946-1947 In Europe, working for Central Intelligence Group, the forerunner to the CIA.
- 1948-1950 In Europe, Africa, and Middle East for CIA. Had assignments in Greece and Israel.
- 1951-1957 Assigned as Co-op agent to General Reinhard Gehlen, chief of West Germany's Federal Intelligence Service, Bundesnachrichtendienst. Various assignments in Europe, including behind the Iron Curtain.
- 1958 In U.S. assigned to training with U.S. Army to serve as an intelligence officer. Working with CIA solely at the time.
- 1959-1961 In U.S. as intelligence officer with U.S. Army. Various duties, including Cuban invasion. Still with CIA at this time.
- 1961-1965 In Africa and Middle East on CIA field assignments.
- 1966-1967 In Europe, realigning CIA and allied Co-op intelligence networks.
- 1968-1970 In Africa and Middle East. Senior Field Agent, with intelligence gathering and observation for CIA. Posed as mercenary, writer, and tourist.
- 1971-1973 Working in HQ area, Langley, with training and plans assignments.
- 1974-1977 In Africa and Middle East. Intelligence gathering and inspection tours as supervisor.
- 1978 "Retired" as of 1 July 1978.
- 1979-1980 Contract agent on special assignment for CIA.
- 1980 Voluntary total retirement as of 15 June 1980.