

CUBAN ESCAPE ATTEMPT FAILS

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Three Seize Ship, But
Can't Raise Anchor

By JAY R. SHARBUTT
VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. (AP)
— Three Cubans seeking political asylum seized a 292-foot ship Tuesday but were thwarted in an attempt to bring it into Norfolk because they couldn't get the anchor up, U.S. Coast Guard crewmen related.

With a Coast Guard cutter standing by helplessly, they
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put off in a lifeboat, but the lifeboat soon was rammed twice by the Cuban vessel, dragging its anchor.

The Cuban ship, identified as the 26 de Julio, later reported it had the men aboard alive and was heading back to Cuba.

These and other details of the drama were supplied at a news conference by three members of the Coast Guard who were directly involved.

They were Master Chief Boatswain's Mate P. W. Cavanas, 43, skipper of the cutter Point Brown; Lt. Cmdr. R. H. Elkins, 43, who was aboard the Coast Guard tug Chock; and Boatswain's Mate I.C. Ishmael Torres, also aboard the Chock, who served as an interpreter in conversations with the captain of the Cuban vessel.

Cavanas related that he took the Point Brown out to meet the 26 de Julio after the Coast Guard had been advised by radio it was proceeding toward Norfolk with Cubans aboard who sought political asylum.

He said he rendezvoused with the Cuban vessel about 10 miles

east-northeast of Cape Henry and "we were trying to get them into inland waters but they were having trouble getting their anchor up."

With his cutter standing by about 300 yards away, Cavanas said he saw three men lower a lifeboat, climb into it and start rowing away. Shortly thereafter, he said, a number of men appeared on the deck of the 26 de Julio, the ship got under way, dragging its anchor, and rammed the lifeboat.

On a second pass, still dragging anchor, the Cuban vessel "caught her right on the bow and pushed her along," Caviness said.

On a third pass, the ship stopped between the cutter and the lifeboat, and Caviness said, "I didn't see them (the three men) any more."

Asked why he did not intervene, Caviness replied he was awaiting orders because "I wasn't prepared to go out there and take action that might involve the whole nation and might be over my head."

By the time of the third pass, Caviness said, he had received orders to "take all necessary steps to see that this Cuban vessel did not run over this boat a third time."

He added: "My guns were uncovered."

Asked about reports the 26 de Julio fired on the lifeboat, Caviness said "I heard one shot and saw smoke," but that was all.

Elkins said the tug Chock pulled alongside the 26 de Julio and he talked to the captain of the Cuban vessel, Ricardo Puri, through Torres.

Elkin said Puri, "very cooperative," related that four persons aboard the ship got hold of a pistol or other weapon and forced the rest of the crew into the brig. Puri said the four rifled the ship for food and equipment and took about \$3,500 in Canadian dollars. He said the four planned to seek political asylum in the United States and possibly go on to Canada.

Somehow, Elkin said, the four dwindled to three, but the Cuban captain did not account for what happened to the fourth.

Elkins said Puri reported to him the three who were run down in the lifeboat had been taken back aboard the 26 de Julio, cold and wet. "But I didn't see them," Elkins added.