

1-10-63
JIM GARRISON

Then there was the ill-starred Lee Harvey Oswald, a thin young man still ramrod straight from his Marine years, periodically marching out of Banister's with a handful of leaflets sufficiently inflammatory to make the average federal agent's hair stand straight up.

Anti-Castro Cubans, many unshaven and wearing green combat garb and boots, regularly tramped up the stairs to Banister's office. More often than not they were talking to each other in Spanish. On their way to and from the guerrilla training camp north of the lake, some of them no doubt dragged Army duffel bags with them.

And, as if all of this was not enough, the Secret Service and Naval Intelligence agents across the street must have grown bored witnessing the movement of ammunition boxes to and from Banister's office: rifles, hand grenades, land mines, whatever had been collected for the secret war against Cuba. During that long busy summer of 1963, it must have been all that the Secret Service and O.N.I. agents could do to concentrate on their business at hand—whatever that might have been.

My small team and I wondered aloud at how it was known in advance that Banister's operation—in such systematic and open violation of the Neutrality Act—was to be protected by the various elements of the intelligence community. For indeed, the F.B.I.'s grossly incomplete announcement of its raid north of Lake Ponchartrain had amounted to an enormous concealment of Banister's continual and considerably more substantial violations of the Neutrality Act within the very heart of the New Orleans intelligence community. It seemed clear to me that the F.B.I.—in its well-publicized "raid" on the ammunition pile supposedly owned by one "Jose Juarez," who never materialized—was going through the motions of giving President Kennedy what he had ordered while its heart continued to belong to the missions being carried out by Guy Banister.

I obtained a copy of the Secret Service's report of its investigation of 544 Camp Street—the entrance to Banister's office—and made it available to my staff. The synopsis of the report, dated December 9, 1963, indicated that "extensive investigation" had revealed that no one at that address ever recalled seeing Lee Harvey Oswald. It went on to

ON THE TRAIL OF THE ASSASSINS

indicate that nothing of any consequence had been found at that address.*

Even a layman, across from whose house Barnum & Bailey was operating a circus, would not have to see too many elephants before he realized that this was not an ordinary neighbor. It was the consensus of my informal team that the circus at 544 Camp Street could not have been as invisible as the Secret Service report sought to make it seem.

We did not yet realize it, but we were encountering the first signs that there was a force in this country that—no matter what the cost—wanted the Cold War, and the hot war in Vietnam, to continue.

* The Secret Service synopsis stated: "Extensive investigation conducted thus far has failed to establish that the FAIR PLAY FOR CUBA COMMITTEE had offices at 544 Camp Street, New Orleans. It has likewise been impossible to find anyone who recalls ever seeing Lee Harvey Oswald at this address."

The front entrance of the Secret Service's office was located approximately 50 feet from 544 Camp Street. If, after walking those 50 feet, the two Secret Service agents had gone up the stairs, they would have found themselves on the landing outside the door of Guy Banister's office. If they had not known this beforehand, Banister's name was printed there for them to read.

If they had made any effort to investigate him, they would have found that one of Banister's employees had taken off on a bizarre trip to Texas an hour or so after the President's assassination and that later the same afternoon, in a remarkably uncharacteristic action, Banister had pistol-whipped another of his employees. If they had obtained a search warrant, they would have found a stack of left-over "Fair Play for Cuba" leaflets in the office.

Had they questioned Delphine Roberts, Banister's secretary, she might have told them what she later admitted to others: that Banister had been engaged in closed-door meetings with Lee Oswald and that he had arranged for a third-floor room for Oswald's use.

However, the Secret Service investigators did not take these steps. Rather, as their seven-page report reveals, they located a number of individuals whose marginal connection with 544 Camp Street had ended back in 1961 or 1962. The agents engaged these individuals in discursive conversation on matters bearing no discernible connection with President Kennedy's assassination. That was the sum and substance of the Secret Service's "extensive investigation."

Because of several inconsistencies, this facile explanation had never sat quite right with me. To start with, I knew that Oswald had stamped the 544 Camp address only on his public handouts of August 9th. It no longer appeared on the subsequent pamphlets he gave out. So now I wanted to look at the place firsthand.

Catty-corner from Lafayette Square, I found 544 Camp to be located in a small mousy gray structure built from a conspicuously unsuccessful imitation of blocks of granite. This modest edifice was called, I was later to learn, the "Newman Building," after its current owner. The entrance at 544 Camp opened onto stairs leading to the second floor. There was something familiar about the building, and it took me a moment or two to refresh my memory. Then I went around the corner, past where Mancuso's small restaurant used to be, and walked a few steps down Lafayette Street to the other entrance of the building. There I found myself looking at the door of what I knew had been—back in 1963—the entrance to the upstairs private detective office of Guy Banister. Located at 531 Lafayette Street, the door had borne the designation, "Guy Banister Associates, Inc. Investigators." So both entrances—544 Camp and 531 Lafayette—led to the same place. And curiously, the name of Guy Banister, which had come up three years before, had surfaced again.

Banister had died in 1964—about nine months after the assassination—but now it occurred to me why "544 Camp Street" appeared on Oswald's material for only one day. Somebody—presumably Banister or an associate of his—had stopped Oswald from using the address on later circulars. And small wonder. Guy Banister hardly could have been enthusiastic about the young ex-Marine stamping his address on pro-Castro literature.

Even though no longer in the F.B.I., Banister had shared the sentiments of J. Edgar Hoover. I knew that he was heavily involved in anti-communist endeavors of all kinds. A young attorney I frequently played chess with at the New Orleans Chess Club had told me how Banister had hired him when he was a college student to find radical, or even liberal, organizations on the campus, and to join and penetrate them. I knew further that Banister was a leader of the Anti-Communist League of the Caribbean. I had heard about this far-right group from a partner of his in the organization, an attorney named Maurice

24 This is hand by Maurice Thut
GUY BANISTER'S OFFICE, TUP NEX-1
PARK, + I'm sure he did not

Gatlin, who lived at the Claiborne Towers apartment building at the same time I did.

Knowing now that Guy Banister's office was the headquarters out of which Oswald had operated, I began to understand some of the things I had learned about the "Marxist-oriented" pamphleteer. Whenever Oswald was going to hand out pro-Castro leaflets, for example, he regularly had gone to a local employment office and hired men to help him in his leafleting work. I found this out when I noticed that one of the young men shown in local news photos handing out flyers with Oswald looked very much like the son of one of my fellow artillery officers in the National Guard. I called Charles Steele and learned that indeed it was his son, Charles, Jr. We interviewed young Steele and discovered that Oswald had paid him and the others two dollars an hour to hand out pamphlets with him. Oswald had told them that they had to do this until the news photographers departed, after which they were free to go. This recruitment method was highly improbable for a true Marxist group. Most such groups had members to do their leafleting but almost no money. Oswald's Fair Play for Cuba Committee, by contrast, had no apparent members other than himself but enough money that it could hire unemployed people. \$2.00 per hour!

This was the first evidence I encountered that Lee Oswald had not been a "communist" or a "Marxist" of any kind. What appeared to be considerably more probable, now that I had seen the setup at 544 Camp, was that Guy Banister—or someone associated with him—had been using Oswald as an *agent provocateur*. For what purpose, and under whose auspices, remained a mystery.

If Oswald had been working that summer under Banister, I reflected, that would help explain some other oddities I had discovered in my reading. According to the Warren Commission report, when Oswald was arrested on August 9 on Canal Street and brought to the police station, he immediately asked to see an F.B.I. agent. Oswald was separated from the other arrested men and brought into a private room where he talked with Special Agent John Quigley of the local Bureau office. Later Agent Quigley burned the notes he had taken during this interview. This is contrary to standard Bureau procedure. Customarily, such notes are placed in the office file, along with the report of the occasion. Such special treatment for a vociferous commu-

THIS IS
IN THE
W.C. BUREAU
MEMES
I WAS
THREE
DO NOT
ALREADY
THIS

not alone in their unorthodox handling of the investigation. The Dallas Police Department, which closed its books on the case almost immediately, also conducted a highly irregular inquiry. For example, after his arrest Lee Harvey Oswald was questioned while in the custody of Captain Will Fritz, head of the Dallas Police Homicide Division. As a prosecutor, I knew that recording of such questioning is routine even in minor felony cases. Yet, according to what I read in the Warren Commission hearings, the alleged murderer of the President of the United States had been questioned for a total of 12 hours without any taping or shorthand notes by a stenographer. Nor was any attorney present. The absence of any record of the interrogation of Oswald revealed a disregard for basic constitutional rights that was foreign to me. This could not be mere sloppiness, I realized. A police officer of 30 years' experience like Captain Fritz had to be aware that anything Oswald said under such circumstances would be inadmissible in any subsequent trial.

In my reading, I was also surprised to find how quickly the F.B.I. had wrapped up its investigation, reaching its conclusion that Lee Oswald was the lone assassin within weeks. Judging from the plethora of loose ends I was finding in the Warren Commission's testimony and exhibits, such a rapid conclusion seemed incomprehensible.

The more I read, the clearer it became that all the official government investigations of the assassination had systematically ignored any evidence that might lead to a conclusion other than that Lee Oswald was the lone assassin. At first I did not know what to make of this, so I just kept reading. Then one Friday night I found myself reviewing the testimony of Lieutenant Colonel Allison G. Folsom, Jr., who was reading aloud from Oswald's training record. He described a grade that Oswald had received in a Russian examination at El Toro Marine Base in California shortly before his highly publicized defection to the Soviet Union.

Russian examination! My ears went up.

In all my years of military service during World War II—and since—I had never taken a test in Russian. Never mind Colonel Folsom's additional testimony that Oswald had done poorly on the exam, getting only two more Russian words right than wrong.* I

* I am reminded of the man who said his dog was not very intelligent because he could beat him three games out of five when they played chess.

would not have had any Russian words right. In 1959, when Oswald was taking that exam, I was a staff officer in the National Guard in a battalion made up of hundreds of soldiers. None of them had been required to show how much Russian they knew. Even on that night in 1966 when I read Colonel Folsom's testimony I was still in the military service—by now a major—and I could not recall a single soldier *ever* having been required to demonstrate how much Russian he had learned.

Soldiers ordinarily are not taught Russian any more than they are taught philosophy or art or music—not if they are really members of the combat branch to which they are assigned. The government's witnesses and exhibits had described Oswald as a Marine assigned to anti-aircraft duty. A soldier genuinely involved in anti-aircraft duty would have about as much use for Russian as a cat would have for pajamas.

I read no farther that night. I had to digest this first indication that Lee Oswald—in 1959, at least—had been receiving intelligence training. I knew, as did anyone with military background, that Marine intelligence activity was guided by the Office of Naval Intelligence (O.N.I.). Wondering what possible connection there might have been between the O.N.I. and Lee Harvey Oswald, I went to bed. I did not sleep much that night.

The next morning I headed downtown to the seedy, faded sector of town where 544 Camp Street was located. I had jotted down this address some weeks earlier while reading the exhibits section of the Warren Commission volumes. It had been imprinted with a small hand stamp* on some of the material which Oswald had been handling out on the streets of New Orleans in the summer of 1963. Oswald had been spotted participating in several pamphletting incidents. In one on August 9 he was involved in a scuffle on Canal Street with several anti-Castro Cubans and was arrested. The Warren Commission had concluded from this and other evidence that Oswald was a dedicated and ostentatiously visible, if lonely, communist who had joined the Fair Play for Cuba Committee to support Fidel Castro.

* The stamp, later found among Oswald's possessions after his death, was the type available at any dime store.

*action
operator,
actually*