

A Millionaire's 10-Second Jailbreak

By Warren Hinckle

Warren Hinckle is co-author (with William Turner and Elfol Asinof) of "The Ten-Second Jailbreak: The Helicopter Escape of Joel David Kaplan" (Holt; \$6.95), which he discusses here.

DURING the downslide of the 1960's, when I was editing Ramparts, I found the CIA susceptible to the journalistic metaphor of Drains run amok — it seemed most everywhere outside the kitchen sink of intelligence where it belonged.

Those were the years before muckraking became trendy, and for a heady time Ramparts had the field almost to itself in exposing the CIA's domestic dirty tricks. That made for a journalistic game plan which gained Ramparts many scoops of the day but exposed us to occasional overuses of paranoia. Of no ease was this more true than the enigmatic matter of one Joel David Kaplan, a story which proved so bizarre and elusive that even Ramparts did not dare to go to press with it.

The story came to the attention of Bill Turner, then a Ramparts senior editor, in 1966. Turner was the head of the magazine's "spook desk," an assignment which had been a Special Agent of the FBI for ten years before turning investigative reporter; the "spook desk" tried to sort the genuine articles from those which might be phonies or plants in the flood of crankish manuscripts — the subject matter of which stood their authors little chance of publication in the more conventional press — which each week overflowed Ramparts editorial offices on Broadway's topless strip.

A waiter in Brooklyn had written claiming to know about startling ties of the CIA to the puzzling disappearance of Joel Kaplan, an American millionaire with a history of amateur gunrun-



HINCKLE

'Five years on the story... out in the cold'

ing, who was serving a 25 year sentence for murder in a Mexico City jail.

We had learned to check out even the craziest stories involving the CIA, so the waiter was sought out by Turner and Sol Stern, another Ramparts editor who had written our expose of the CIA's infiltration of American student groups. The waiter was at first effusive but then became hostile and finally abusive, accusing the two journalists of being CIA agents trying to sap his vital juices.

But some of the leads the screaming waiter had suggested checked out, and dove-

See Page 41

tailed with an independent investigation Ramparts was then mounding into the complicated affairs of Joel Kaplan's uncle, the renowned financier J. M. Kaplan, a capitalistic buccaneer of the old school, a Caribbean molasses baron and Democratic Party sugar daddy whose \$30 million nonprofit Kaplan Fund was an admitted CIA "conduit" for the covert transmission of funds to domestic organizations.

Deeply suspicious

We had reason to suspect even deeper ties: the Kaplan family in the CIA, a former employee of Joel Kaplan who had no love for his old boss had secretly approached us, in the course

of his investigation. He was sentenced to 25 years. The 1962 extradition to Mexico of the spook was itself explosive since the two countries had no diplomatic relations and extradition treaties. Kaplan kept saying that the CIA was framing him.

We were to spend the better part of the next ten years trying to make that connection. The most cursory examination of the "murder" of which Joel Kaplan stood convicted indicated a frame-up of Mark Brothers proposition.

He was said to have killed Luis Vidal Jr. his partner

'We could tell the story but we had no publisher'

in the gunrunning business. Vidal was a known figure from the anti-castro plot. He was the godson of Cuban can dictator Trujillo and a distant relative of both Ismaelillo Bouvier and Carlos Prío. He was living in low class circles as a CIA handyman and successful dabbler in prostitution, narcotics, arms smuggling and other businesses listed on the central exchange of the Caribbean black market.

The body identified as Vidal was found in 1962 some 100 miles from the scene of the alleged murder. The victim's clothes were found in the small far the center, murderer Vidal. The body was found in the same eyes. Vidal's identity was established by the police. It was explained: "Someone must have changed the eyeballs."

Nevertheless, Joel Kaplan

was sentenced to 25 years. The 1962 extradition to Mexico of the spook was itself explosive since the two countries had no diplomatic relations and extradition treaties. Kaplan kept saying that the CIA was framing him.

Ramparts always had a reputation as the most serious of magazines. It was the only magazine in New York publisher of the former Evening Post and the Ramparts was cited again as a less than ideal magazine. Senator's which, in Ramparts before it, stubbornly took up the unprofitable pursuit of riddles such as that of Joel Kaplan. Turner, having lost his patience, sought to get the harbour authorities to produce the files on Vidal. He was told to follow his

in the gunrunning business. Vidal was a known figure from the anti-castro plot. He was the godson of Cuban can dictator Trujillo and a distant relative of both Ismaelillo Bouvier and Carlos Prío. He was living in low class circles as a CIA handyman and successful dabbler in prostitution, narcotics, arms smuggling and other businesses listed on the central exchange of the Caribbean black market.

The body identified as Vidal was found in 1962 some 100 miles from the scene of the alleged murder. The victim's clothes were found in the small far the center, murderer Vidal. The body was found in the same eyes. Vidal's identity was established by the police. It was explained: "Someone must have changed the eyeballs."

folk hero, the world's first "Hellfugitive." Most press accounts called the airborne escape "CIA engineered."

I telephoned Turner. He'll has no fury like two writers who have put in five years on a story and suddenly find themselves out in the cold. We prevailed on Kaplan's sister Judy, and on his attorney, Vasilios Choulos, to let us visit him — wherever he was. Two weeks after Kaplan's dramatic escape, while scores of other reporters thundered by fruitlessly in journalistic possees, Turner and I met with Kaplan in his Southern California hideout.

A Shy Man

I found him a shy, thin man of Napoleon height, given to downcast glances and furtive half smiles. He was still dressed in the Mexican-issue gaberdine trousers and v-necked white t-shirt which had been his wardrobe during almost ten years in Mexican prisons. A ring of hippie love beads hung around his neck. He was not the type to give out the time of day without close cross examination, but after ten hours of conversation and several bottles of Jack Daniels he agreed to tell us his story.

That made for another complication. Just a few months before Kaplan flew out of jail, ~~Turner and I~~ also, run aground on the publishing shoals. Turner and I found ourselves in the checkmated position of being the two journalists in the country who could tell the story of the man who had made the most sensational jailbreak of the century — and we had no magazine to tell it in. We ultimately piggy backed on Playboy and wrote a book

for which we added a third writer Eliot Asinof, to our team. It took the three of us another year of investigation to separate the wheat of fact from the chaff of lies and illusions.

The publisher titled the book "The Ten Second Jailbreak," which reflects the exciting escape story that is told therein. But for all the inherent analogies to the modern novels of espionage, it was Melvin Belli, one of Kaplan's attorneys, who I think best capsulized the Kaplan saga with a different reference to contemporary literature: "That book 'Bel' and ~~the~~ the called 'Two Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.'"