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KAPLAN (SUB DATELINE)

BY ANTHONY RIPLEY

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DENVER, SEPT. 5--THERE IS A WORLD OF INTERNATIONAL ADVENTURERS, OF WOULD-BE SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE WHO, FOR A PRICE, CAN BE HIRED TO TAKE ON THE MOST OUTLANDISH SCHEMES FROM AERIAL BOMBING OF A LATIN-AMERICAN CAPITAL TO TRAINING AND EQUIPPING A MERCENARY ARMY.

IT IS A WORLD POPULATED BY PART-TIME PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS, RESTLESS EX-MEMBERS OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY SPECIAL FORCES, EX-CONVICTS AND ORDINARY CITIZENS WHO HOLD RESPECTABLE JOBS AND OCCASIONALLY DISAPPEAR FOR A FEW WEEKS, ONLY TO RETURN WITH HARROWING TALES OF ADVENTURE.

IT WAS A MAN KNOWN AMONG THESE RANKS, VICTOR E. STADTER, 50 YEARS OLD, OF GLENDORA, CALIF., WHO WAS AT THE CONTROLS OF A SMALL RENTED AIRPLANE THAT LANDED AT BROWNSVILLE, TEX., SHORTLY BEFORE MIDNIGHT ON AUG. 18 TO ADD THE LAST TOUCH TO AN EXTRAORDINARY RESCUE.

WITH STADTER IN THE AIRPLANE WAS JOEL DAVID KAPLAN, 44, A WEALTHY MAN GIVEN TO INTERNATIONAL INTRIGUE WHO, RELATIVES FEARED, MIGHT BE FORCED TO FINISH HIS 28-YEAR MURDER SENTENCE OR DIE IN A MEXICAN PRISON. KAPLAN MAINTAINS THE MURDER CHARGE IS FALSE.

EARLIER THAT NIGHT WHILE PRISON GUARDS WERE PREOCCUPIED WATCHING A MOVIE IN THE SANTA MARIA ACATITLA PENITENTIARY NEAR MEXICO CITY, A HELICOPTER DROPPED INSIDE THE WALLS, PICKED UP KAPLAN AND ANOTHER PRISONER AND DISAPPEARED.

KAPLAN HAD BEEN IN PRISON NINE YEARS AND IT WAS NECESSARY TO BRING HIM INTO THE UNITED STATES LEGALLY, ACCORDING TO RELATIVES, SO THAT HE COULD CLAIM AN INHERITANCE HELD IN A TRUST FUND IN NEW YORK CITY.

SO STADTER AND KAPLAN NOTIFIED THE UNITED STATES CUSTOMS AT BROWNSVILLE THAT THEY WERE ARRIVING AND WERE MET, SEARCHED AND THEN CLEARED. KAPLAN IS NOW IN THE UNITED STATES AND IN HIDING.

STADTER, WHO APPARENTLY MASTERMINDED THE ENTIRE ESCAPE, WAS CONTACTED BY TELEPHONE AT HIS HOME IN GLENDORA.

"NOT ANOTHER PERSON ALIVE KNOWS THIS STORY BUT ME," HE SAID. "WE WERE VERY CAREFUL SO THAT NO ONE PERSON WOULD KNOW EVERYTHING."

HE ADDED WITH A DASH OF COCKINESS THAT THE RESCUE WAS "JUST A DAY'S WORK. I'VE BEEN DOING THIS FOR 20 YEARS."

HE SAID "JOEL NEEDS HELP" AND THAT HE WOULD BE KEPT IN HIDING UNTIL THINGS QUIET DOWN.

IN SAUSALITO, CALIF., WHERE THE RESCUED MAN'S SISTER, MRS. JUDITH DOWIS LIVES IN A BIG SPANISH MISSION-STYLE HOUSE ACROSS THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE FROM SAN FRANCISCO, THERE WAS AN AIR OF RELIEF LAST WEEK.

"I COULDN'T BE HAPPIER," SAID MRS. DOWIS, 40, A DIVORCEE. SHE SAID HER UNDERSTANDING WAS THAT HER BROTHER COULD NOT CLAIM HIS INHERITANCE HELD AT THE UNITED STATES TRUST

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COMPANY IN NEW YORK CITY UNLESS HE WAS LEGALLY IN THE NATION. THE ADMINISTRATOR OF THE TRUST, BARRY WALDORF, CONTACTED BY TELEPHONE IN NEW YORK CITY, SAID ONLY: "I AM NOT FREE TO GIVE YOU ANY KIND OF A COMMENT ON ANYTHING TO DO WITH HIS AFFAIRS."

A SPOKESMAN FOR THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE SAID KAPLAN IS NOT SOUGHT BY THE FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION.

AND IN MEXICO CITY, HIS ATTORNEY, VICTOR VELAZQUEZ, 74, SAID HE HAD BROKEN NO LAW THERE. HE EXPLAINED THAT THERE IS A GAP IN MEXICAN LAW REGARDING PRISON BREAKS. IT IS ONLY A CRIME TO BREAK OUT OF PRISON IF VIOLENCE IS USED.

"NO VIOLENCE WAS USED," STADTER SAID. "THERE WAS NOTHING EXTRA LEGAL."

VELAZQUEZ SAID HE WAS VERY HAPPY KAPLAN HAD ESCAPED BECAUSE HE WAS CONVINCED THE MAN WAS INNOCENT.

THOSE WHO KNEW KAPLAN BEFORE HIS CONVICTION SAID HE WAS INTRIGUED BY WHAT ONE MAN CALLED "THE SWAMP OF CARIBBEAN POLITICS." WHEN HE BEGAN WORKING IN HIS LATE FATHER'S SUGAR AND MOLASSES BUSINESS AFTER SERVING IN THE NAVY IN WORLD WAR II. KAPLAN GREW UP IN RIDGEFIELD, CONN., AND ATTENDED NEW MEXICO MILITARY INSTITUTE.

"HIS ONLY INTEREST WAS POLITICS," SAID ONE SOURCE WHO HAS KNOWN HIM MANY YEARS.

THE SAME SOURCE SAID HE WAS FOND OF INTRIGUE AND DISGUISES AND THAT IS WHY HE USED FALSE GLASSES AND A BRITISH SEAMAN'S IDENTITY WHEN HE ENTERED MEXICO IN 1961. HE WAS WITH THREE OTHER MEN, ONE OF THEM A BUSINESS ASSOCIATE, LUIS M. VIDAL JR., WHO VELAZQUEZ DESCRIBED AS A GUN-RUNNER.

KAPLAN AT THE TIME WAS PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN SUCROSE COMPANY AND VIDAL WAS COMPANY TREASURER.

IT WAS ONE OF SEVERAL CURIOUS BUSINESS CONNECTIONS KAPLAN HAD, INCLUDING AFRATRONICS INC., WHICH WAS DESIGNED TO ASSIST THE ELECTRONIC AND INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT OF NEWLY-FORMED AFRICAN NATIONS. AFRATRONICS HAD NO ASSETS OR PHYSICAL FACILITIES, JUST A NEW YORK MAILING ADDRESS AND IT LISTED FOUR AMERICAN LEADERS AS "MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS."

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1ST ADD KAPLAN, DENVER XXX CONSULTANTS."

THE BODY OF A MAN SAID TO BE VIDAL WAS FOUND SHOT FOUR TIMES IN THE HEAD AND BURIED IN A SHALLOW GRAVE IN MEXICO IN NOVEMBER, 1961.

VELAZQUEZ SAID THE BODY WAS THAT OF A HEAVY, BALD MAN IN HIS 80'S WITH BAD TEETH AND A STRAIGHT NOSE WHILE VIDAL WAS IN HIS 30'S, ATHLETIC, DARK-HAIRED, FLAT-NOSED AND HAD GOOD TEETH. NO FINGERPRINTS AND NO X-RAYS OF THE TEETH WERE EVER TAKEN, VELAZQUEZ SAID.

MEXICAN AUTHORITIES THOUGHT THE BODY WAS THE REAL ONE, HOWEVER, AND KAPLAN WAS CONVICTED AND SENTENCED TO 28 YEARS IN THE PENITENTIARY.

OVER THE YEARS, A SERIES OF ESCAPE PLANS WERE TRIED. MOST FAILED, AND, ACCORDING TO A SOURCE CLOSE TO THE FAMILY, HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS WERE SPENT IN VAIN ATTEMPTS TO FREE HIM.

ONE SCHEME INVOLVED HIDING KAPLAN IN A LAUNDRY TRUCK. ANOTHER INVOLVED ATTEMPTING TO BRIBE THE PRISON WARDEN TO DRIVE HIM OUT IN THE WARDEN'S PERSONAL CAR TO MEET A WAITING JET AIRPLANE.

ANOTHER MAN CARRIED 150,000 PESOS INTO THE JAIL IN AN ATTEMPT TO BUY HIS RELEASE.

MEANWHILE KAPLAN'S HEALTH WAS FAILING IN JAIL AND MEMBERS OF HIS FAMILY WERE INCREASINGLY CONCERNED. HIS SISTER SAID HE WAS SUFFERING FROM EMPHYSEMA, BAD EYESIGHT, LIVER TROUBLE AND OTHER AILMENTS.

"HE MAY BE A VEGETABLE BY THE END OF HIS TIME THERE," WROTE ONE OF THE ESCAPE ARRANGERS REPORTING ON HIS VISIT TO KAPLAN IN THE PRISON. "HE GOES THROUGH PERIODS OF DEEP DEPRESSION, IS AT TIMES DESPERATE IN MIND, THOUGHT AND ACTIONS -- SORT OF GRASPS FOR STRAWS TO TRY AND GET OUT. AS A RESULT HE IS AN EASY MARK FOR SOME FAST-TALKING INMATES WITH A SURE PLAN."

THE PESO TALKS LOUDLY IN MEXICAN JAILS, ACCORDING TO KNOWLEDGEABLE OBSERVERS THERE, AND ENABLES A PRISONER TO BUY FOOD, DRINK, WOMEN AND EVEN DRUGS WITHOUT TROUBLE.

THE STORY OF THE ESCAPE, AS PIECED TOGETHER FROM REPORTS IN THE AMERICAN AND MEXICAN PRESS, INTERVIEWS WITH THOSE INVOLVED AND WITH AMERICAN GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, IS LARGELY AS FOLLOWS:

A BELL PLASTIC TOP HELICOPTER WAS PURCHASED FROM NATRONA SERVICES, INC., A URANIUM EXPLORATION FIRM IN CASPER, WYO., FOR A REPORTED \$25,000. IT LEFT AN AIRPORT AT MCALLEN, TEX., THE MORNING BEFORE THE ESCAPE AND, MAKING SEVERAL STOPS ON THE WAY, ARRIVED IN MEXICO CITY ON THE EVEING OF AUG. 18.

WHEN IT GOT TO THE JAIL, ALL BUT FIVE PRISON GUARDS WERE WATCHING A MOTION PICTURE CALLED "THE ALTAR OF BLOOD," AND IT LANDED IN THE JAIL'S LARGE REAR PATIO.

KAPLAN AND ANOTHER PRISONER, CARLOS ANTONIO CONTRARAS CASTRO, 36, RAN TO THE HELICOPTER. THE PILOT, IDENTIFIED BY MEXICAN POLICE AS ROGER GUY HERSHNER, 29, OF GLENDORA, CALIF., THEN LIFTED THEM OUT OF THE PRISON YARD WITHOUT A SHOT BEING FIRED OR AN ALARM SOUNDED.

TWO HOURS BEFORE THE HELICOPTER ARRIVED, KAPLAN WAS VISITED BY HIS MEXICAN-BORN WIFE, MRS. IRMA VASQUEZ CALDERON DE KAPLAN AND A MAN ONLY IDENTIFIED AS HARVEY ORVILLE DAYLE.

MRS. KAPLAN, WHO WAS LATER ARRESTED, TOLD POLICE SHE LEFT HER HUSBAND AND DAYLE ALONE WHILE THEY "TALKED BUSINESS."

ONCE OUT OF THE PRISON, THE HELICOPTER FLEW TO ACTOPAN, MEXICO. WHERE IT WAS MET BY A LIGHT PLANE PILOTED BY STADTER,

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ACCORDING TO MEXICAN AUTHORITIES.

THE THREE MEN THEN FLEW TO LA PESCA, MEXICO, WHERE CASTRO, ALSO A PILOT, FLEW OFF ALONE IN A LIGHT PLANE, APPARENTLY FOR GUATEMALA.

STADTER AND KAPLAN, THEN CROSSED THE BORDER AND OUTSIDE OF BROWNSVILLE, TEX., RADIOED THEY WERE LANDING AND IDENTIFIED THEMSELVES FOR UNITED STATES CUSTOMS OFFICIALS. THESE OFFICIALS SAID THE AIRPLANE WAS RENTED FROM MCCREERY AVIATION IN MCALLEN, TEX., BUT THIS WAS SHARPLY DENIED BY ONE OF THE COMPANY'S OFFICIALS.

MEANWHILE, HERSHNER FLEW THE HELICOPTER TO A SPOT NEAR THE VILLAGE OF LAURO VILLAR, ACCORDING TO MEXICAN AUTHORITIES, WHERE IT WAS LATER DISCOVERED DESPITE ATTEMPTS TO HIDE IT. HE CAUGHT A RIDE FROM A PASSING MILK TRUCK DRIVER TO COVER THE 35 KILOMETERS TO MATAMOROS, MEXICO, WHERE HE APPARENTLY CROSSED THE BORDER, MEXICAN OFFICIALS SAID.

AFTER THE ESCAPE, RIOT POLICE SURROUNDED THE PRISON. THE PENITENTIARY DIRECTOR AND A LARGE NUMBER OF THE PRISON STAFF WERE ARRESTED.

MRS. DOWIS, ASKED IF SHE HAD ANYTHING TO DO WITH ARRANGING OR FINANCING THE ESCAPE, REFERRED ALL QUESTIONS TO HER ATTORNEY VASILIOS CHOULOS, OF THE SAN FRANCISCO FIRM OF BELLI, ASHE, ELLISON, CHOULOS AND LIEFF.

KAPLAN'S UNCLE, J. M. KAPLAN OF NEW YORK CITY, SAID IN A TELEPHONE INTERVIEW: "HONESTLY I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT IT." HE ADDED THAT HE ONLY KNEW OF THE ESCAPE FROM NEWSPAPER REPORTS.

HE SAID F.B.I. AGENTS HAD VISITED HIM AT HIS HOME AND THAT HE TOLD THEM HIS NEPHEW WAS "AN INTELLIGENT DECENT HUMAN BEING" WHO "ALWAYS MANIFESTED INNOCENCE." HE ALSO SAID THAT IT APPEARED HIS NEPHEW WAS HELD IN JAIL "JUST SO HE COULD BE BLED AS A RICH MAN'S SON."

HE SAID HIS NEPHEW HAD ONCE CLAIMED TO BE AN AGENT FOR THE CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY. BUT VELAZWUEZ SAID HE DID NOT THINK THE C.I.A. WAS INVOLVED IN THE ESCAPE "BECAUSE THEY WOULD NOT HAVE WAITED ALMOST 10 YEARS TO GET HIM OUT AND THEY COULD PROBABLY HAVE DONE SO THROUGH OFFICIAL CHANNELS."

HE SAID HER PERSONALLY DID NOT BELIEVE JOEL KAPLAN WAS A C.I.A. AGENT, THOUGH HE HAD NO EVIDENCE TO CONFIRM OR DENY IT.

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