

The Letelier Prosecutor: An

By Timothy S. Robinson

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In Chile, he is greeted by hordes of Spanish-speaking reporters shouting "Prosecutor Propper, Prosecutor Propper" and hidden photographers wait to snap his picture as he walks down streets or comes out of buildings.

His comings and goings are documented with bold red headlines, and newspapers speculate on matters ranging from his briefcase, which they think is "James Bond-equipped," to the specially built car they say is flown to Chile from the United States for his use there, and even his alleged love life when he is in Santiago.

The object of the attention is 31-year-old Eugene M. Propper, whose life is not nearly as exotic as the Chilean press proclaims.

One of 161 assistant U.S. attorneys in the District of Columbia, he was assigned by chance two years ago to investigate what many people thought would be the unsolvable assassination of former Chilean ambassador Orlando Letelier.

Tuesday, he stood before a federal judge here and calmly asked that three Chilean secret police (DINA) officials—including the feared ex-director of the agency—be arrested in the Sept. 21, 1976, bombing murder of Letelier and an aide Ronni K. Moffitt on Sheridan Circle.

Along the way, in a manner unrivaled in many major investigations, the flamboyantly bearded Propper and drawling FBI agent L. Carter Cornick have become the international symbols of the dogged persistence of U.S. authorities to solve the Letelier murder case.

Propper and Cornick say they cannot directly discuss the Letelier case because of the pending trials. But a clear picture has emerged of two well-matched, plodding and innovative investigators who have come out, so far, smelling like roses in a case that easily could have generated a very different aroma.

On Sept. 21, 1976, Propper was sitting in the U.S. Courthouse cafeteria when his supervisor, Donald E. Campbell, asked him if he would take the case. He knew nothing about Chile other than what he had read in newspapers, and spoke no Spanish.

Cornick, a 38-year-old University of Virginia graduate and ex-marine, had a reputation of sorts of minor boat-rocking in the normally staid world of look-alike FBI agents, some of his acquaintances say. He had just arrived

Unlikely Celebrity

in Santiago

in the Washington field office after a stint in bomb-rocked Puerto Rico, and he came to mind when Washington FBI agent-in-charge Nick F. Stames was looking for a Spanish-speaking agent to assign to the Letelier case.

Cornick and Propper seemed to work together well quickly according to people who watched them at the time. Propper's ego was such that he would make seemingly outrageous demands; Cornick would soft-soap those demands so that they seemed perfectly normal when they were relayed.

Propper, who is from New Hyde Park, Long Island, earned an undergraduate degree in economics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and a law degree from the University of Minnesota. He worked briefly for the Justice Department be-

fore joining the U.S. attorney's office in 1972 to get trial experience.

He had worked in various sections of the prosecutor's office trying crimes including murders and rapes, and had joined the fairly elite major crimes division—where he dealt with such matters as contract murders and the widely publicized second Sting project involving undercover agents who operated a fake stolen-goods shop. At the time of the Letelier blast,

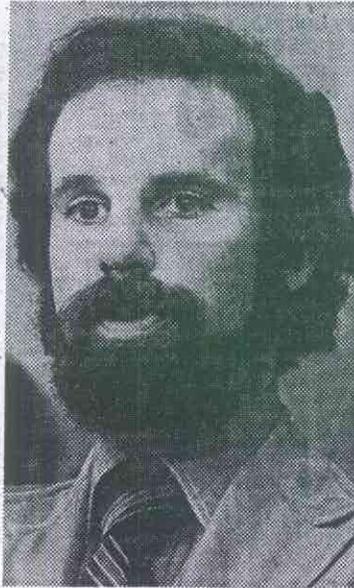
he was contemplating leaving the office to enter the more lucrative field of private practice.

Propper was known as a cocky young man, outspoken in his views about some aspects of office policy but not any sort of "star" in the courtroom or in his handling of investigations.

In one of the more touchy aspects of the early part of the investigation, the Justice Department and the FBI

an attractive female journalist. Newspapers proclaimed in English, "FBI GO HOME." And, as in a Peter Sellers movie, photographers hanging out of Fiat windows chased an embassy station wagon at high speeds through a market district, scattering chickens as they went, trying to take pictures of Barcella and Propper.

Propper, his fame changing to notoriety so quickly after his whirlwind romance with the Chilean press, said he has no plans to return there soon.



EUGENE M. PROPPER
... at first, royal treatment



'... a cocky young man, outspoken in his views about ... office policy, but not any sort of star ...'