

Ray tells his plan: 'I'm gonna kill King'

By GEORGE McMILLAN

Second of a series

The first things James Earl Ray did after escaping from the Missouri State Penitentiary in 1967 were to have a reunion with his brothers, get drunk after his first visit to a bar in six years and take a woman to bed.

Then came a family council on what Ray should do. Ray decided the outcome of the discussion with his younger brothers, Jerry and Jack, when he said: "I'm gonna kill that nigger (Dr. Martin Luther) King. That's something that's been on my mind. That's something I've been working on."

Although he was out of jail for the first time in six years, Ray had not given up the obsession that had taken root in his mind during his term in the penitentiary in Jefferson City.

Ray was haunted by depression stemming from his cruel childhood, humiliations at school, failures in the Army and as a petty crook in civilian life.

His obsession against King was deepened by a flirtation with Nazism that ended during his Army service in postwar Germany and an interest in the conservative political movement in the United States. King's activities in breaking down the segregationist barriers between races may have been what triggered that obsession into a rage.

Psychiatric Opinion

Ray had developed his hatred for King because, psychiatric experts have said, King was a figure who had won the love and warmth of thousands of people, in contrast to Ray's perpetual state of loneliness.

The experts said King reminded Ray of the tenderness Ray's mother had denied him and the weakness of his father. They termed Ray's desire to kill King a symbolic form of parent-icide, a way for Ray to obtain revenge against his own parents.

When Ray made the announcement to his brothers at their reunion in Chicago's Atlantic Hotel two days after his escape, it was the first time that all three had been outside jail at the same time in 20 years.

When the family meeting began the morning after the celebration, the younger brothers started out by suggesting that Ray pursue careers other than that of an assassin.

Porno Discussed

The first suggestion was a kidnapping, with the Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner or Chicago sportscaster Jack Brickhouse as targets, but they never got down to details.

Then "porno" was the main topic discussed, brother Jerry said. There was less chance of getting caught if you did it right. Also, Jimmy thought there would be more money in it than anything else.

Ray seemed to lose interest, then announced his intent to kill King.

According to Jerry, Jack, who had helped his brother escape from Jefferson City, exploded: "That's crazy! You can count me out of that deal. There isn't no money in killin' a nigger. I'm going back to St. Louis," he said and left the meeting.

But Ray had made his fateful decision. Now, he needed money to finish his plans.

A Drug Dealer

During his six years in the Missouri State Penitentiary, Ray had become a dealer in goods, including rugs, that had been smuggled in to him. Each month, he smuggled out the profits to his brothers.

When the accounting was made, Ray received \$4,000 and Jerry still owed him \$1,500. That gave Ray 8,400, plus what he could earn on the outside, to carry out his plan.

Two days after the meeting, Ray rented a room in Chicago and spent the next two months as a dishwasher. In July 1967, he headed for Canada to carry out another part of his plan: earning to forge passports and finding out whether he could leave Canada by ship after the killing of King.



Bad news: In this 1975 photo, Ray has just learned that a federal judge has turned down his bid for a new trial.

During his stay in Canada, Ray was supposed to have met the mysterious "Raoul," an agent for a foreign government according to the story Ray later told to author Bradford Huie that was published in Look magazine in November, 1968.

Brother Jerry says that story was a hoax. One of Ray's lawyers, Percy Foreman, has sworn under oath that "Ray bragged about the fool he was making out of Huie. Ray told me he intended Raoul for Huie. He said there wasn't any Raoul."

But Raoul may have been Ray's alter-ego, a man who was many of the things Ray had never succeeded in being, a successful big-time criminal with international connections and influence with powerful figures in the straight world, a man who could pay others to do the dirty work for him.

Even the word "Raoul" has significance, a glamorous and foreign-sounding variation on the name Ray. It was a perfect choice for an idealized mask to cover the inadequate identity of Ray's real self.

During a stay in Montreal, Ray rented an apartment and began courses in self-improvement that included dancing lessons and the start of a correspondence course in locksmithing.

A New Wardrobe

He also purchased a new wardrobe, clothes more expensive than he ever had owned before, then went to the Queen Elizabeth Hotel for a haircut and a manicure.

Ray also became familiar with Montreal, which he saw as a possible escape route overseas after he fulfilled his plan. And he learned by numerous inquiries how to obtain a fake Canadian passport. Later Ray would write to the American South African Council which represents Rhodesia in Washington to ask about emigrating to Rhodesia, which at the time was off-limits for travel by U.S. citizens. It also was a country of white supremacy rule, and one where extradition of an American criminal would be difficult.

Ray would later tell his attorneys: "I thought I could get to Africa and serve two or three years in one of those mercenary armies, and those people wouldn't send me back."

His chores in Montreal completed, Ray returned to Chicago and met his brother Jerry. Ray told him he was ready for the next step.

Jerry said:

"Jimmy was going to Birmingham to take out citizenship papers in Alabama. He believed that if he killed King in Alabama or if he killed him anywhere in the south it would help him if he showed he was a resident of Alabama."

"He was determined to kill King in the South. Of course, if he killed King in Alabama, he believed Gov. George C. Wallace would eventually pardon him, not at first, but after a few years when things cooled down."

In Birmingham, Ray got a room with two meals a day for \$22.50 a week under the name Eric S. Galt. Within a month, he had acquired an automobile, a registration, a driver's license and a safe-deposit box in a bank. He used the name Galt—the name of the hero in conservative author and philosopher Ayn Rand's book "Atlas Shrugged."

In October, Ray left Birmingham for Mexico and spent the next month in Puerto Vallarta, where he made a try at establishing a pornographic film business with a local prostitute. He was dissatisfied with the pictures, the romance cooled, and Ray moved on to Los Angeles, arriving Nov. 10, 1967.

Ray could feel that he was losing control and had become anxious. He consulted a psychologist, Dr. Mark Freeman. Freeman said Ray had told him he wanted to "overcome his shyness, gain social confidence, learn self-hypnosis so that he could relax, sleep better and remember things better."

Bucks Wallace's Candidacy

Freeman had a good impression of Ray. "I get a lot of rough stuff around here. I mean psychotic, that stuff. But I couldn't pick up on any of that with Ray... I gave him lots of positive feelings of confidence."

Ray also was preoccupied with Wallace's 1968 presidential candidacy. At that time Wallace supporters were making a hectic bid to get Wallace's name on the California ballot through petitions.

Ray became well known at Wallace headquarters and got a telephone quickly installed in his rented apartment by telling the phone company he was a campaign worker.

His work for Wallace nearly sent Ray back to jail. While drinking in the Rabbit's Foot Club, he "preached Wallace for President," in a running argument with the bartender, Jim

Morrison, that turned into a brawl. But no one called police.

In March, Ray had his nose bobbed as a disguise. Then, on March 19, Dr. Martin Luther King came to Los Angeles and spoke to the California Democratic Council's state convention.

Excerpts from King's talk were carried on all three networks and undoubtedly were heard by Ray, an inveterate viewer of the TV news. The next day, Ray left Los Angeles for New Orleans.

Goes to Selma

While Ray was in New Orleans, the newspapers announced that King was going to be in Selma, Ala., on March 22 to recruit blacks for his Poor People's March on Washington.

Ray went to Selma, but when King was delayed and did not arrive, Ray returned to Atlanta, where he registered in a rooming house and began planning his deadly campaign.

Ray spent four days in Atlanta, firing the locations of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, where King had an office, the Ebenezer Baptist Church, where King was pastor and King's home.

Ray circled these sites on a map that he left behind in the rooming house and that later was found by the FBI. He also circled a parking lot where he could leave his car.

But King was then in Memphis, attempting to lead a strike of municipal garbage workers.

Ray returned to Birmingham and went shopping for a rifle. At the first two gun shops, Ray looked at high-powered rifles and collected literature.

Buys Rifle and Scope

His third stop was the Aeromarine Supply Co. opposite Birmingham Airport, where Ray bought a Remington Gamemaster .243-caliber rifle and a Redfield 2x7 power telescope under the name Harvey Lowmyer. He paid cash and left with the gun under his arm.

Ray returned to the store that afternoon and exchanged the .243 for a \$265 Remington Gamemaster .308 rifle with a seven power scope, saying he has going big-game hunting in Wyoming.

The rifle is nearly ideal for an assassin because its bullet would drop less than .01 inch in 100 yards and, striking a person in the torso or head, was almost certain to kill.

Ray returned to Atlanta to wait his chance.

King also came to Atlanta for meetings with associates on March 30, then announced that he would return to Memphis on Wednesday, April 3.

The civil rights leader checked in to the Lorraine Motel, that day and later spoke at the Masonic Temple. As King spoke, Ray, "Eric S. Galt," took room 34 at the New Rebel Motel.

On his way to Memphis from Atlanta, Ray made two stops, the site of the Battle of Shiloh, one of the bloodiest of the Civil War, and a few miles down the road, to test-fire the rifle and set the sight.

Sees Room Number

After he got to Memphis, any difficulty Ray may have had in finding King was settled when the nightly television news carried pictures of King standing on the second-floor balcony of the Lorraine in front of his room. The number 308 was easy to see. The next morning's Commercial Appeal also carried a picture of King on the balcony. A copy of the newspaper was found later among Ray's belongings.

It had now been 11½ months since Ray escaped from Jefferson City. During that time, he had been in touch with his brother Jerry.

Ready to fulfill his obsession, Ray made one final call.

"I don't know where he was in Memphis when he called, Jerry said. "He was excited and all worked up. What he said was: Jerry, tomorrow it will be all over. I might not see you and Jack for a while. But don't worry about me. I'll be all right. Big Nigger (Ray's name for Martin Luther King) has had it."

Next: The final day.

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