

6:01 p.m.: Ray squeezes the trigger

By GEORGE McMILLAN

Last of a Series

AT 3:15 p.m. on April 4, 1968, James Earl Ray rented a room across the street from the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tenn. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had 2 hours and 46 minutes left to live.

Ray was armed, ready to fire the shot that would satisfy his obsession that King must die. Behind him was years of amphetamine-stoked dreams in a jail cell at the Missouri State Penitentiary at Jefferson City, where the drug intensified his depression and fortified his passionate mission to kill King.

Over, too, was a year of careful plotting as a fugitive, when he roamed the country at will and visited Mexico and Canada. In Canada, he had checked escape routes, learned how to obtain bogus passports, improved his wardrobe, enrolled in a mail-order course in locksmithing. He further changed his appearance in Los Angeles by having a nose job.

But during the year he always was haunted by his drive to kill King.

Ray's quest was in its final hours when he approached a building at 422½ Main, where Mrs. Beatie Brewer ran a rooming house on the second floor, above Campe's Amusement Co.

He climbed to the top of the stairs, where Mrs. Brewer, her hair in curlers, was in her office.

Ray wore a dark suit and tie, not the T-shirt and pants that were the accepted costume of most of Mrs. Brewer's roomers.

When he asked for a room, Mrs. Brewer questioned whether it would be for a one-night stay. "No, for the week," Ray said.

She showed him room 8, at \$10.50 a week—her most expensive room, and the only one equipped with a stove and a refrigerator.

Ray turned it down.

Then she showed Ray room 5-B. Ray glanced around the room, but Mrs. Brewer recalls, his attention seemed riveted on the grimy window. He ignored the unhooked light bulb with a dirty string pull cord, the rickety dresser, the brown metal bedsprings sagging under a soiled, lumpy mattress and the cracked linoleum that was turned up in the corners.

He simply glanced out the window, the curtain limp, greasy and sooty, the shade torn and frayed.

Ray then said he would take the room, walked back to Mrs. Brewer's office and paid her for a week with a \$20 bill. He got his change and left. Only then did Mrs. Brewer realize that Ray—who had registered as John Willard—had no luggage. He had found a room with the view he wanted, the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

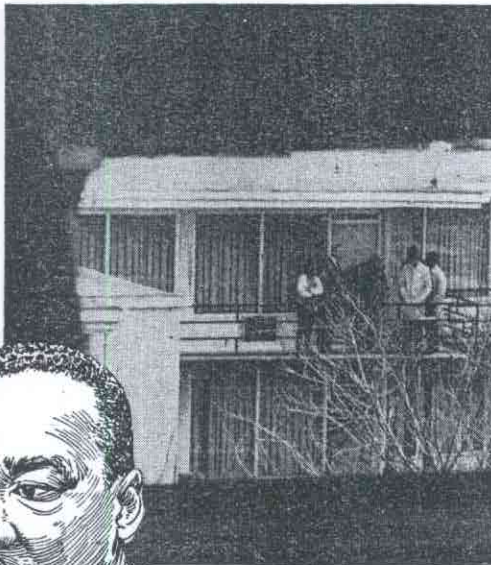
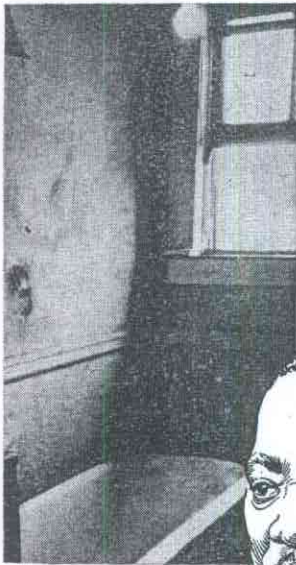
THE BALCONY OF King's room looked out across a lot strewn with trash and garbage. In the room King spent his last afternoon in a tense meeting with a group of young Memphis blacks known as the Invaders. This group, tough, angry militant and looking for trouble, had disrupted a March 28 demonstration in connection with a strike by Memphis garbage men. There was violence and looting.

Now the Invaders demanded that King turn over to them some of the money raised for his Southern Christian Leadership Conference. King refused, and asked them to promise not to loot, to be nonviolent. The meeting was a standoff.

After the meeting, the members of King's staff, who had proven their courage on the streets of dozens of Southern cities, gathered around King and began getting ready for a soul food dinner given by the Rev. Samuel B. (Billy) Kyles, a local minister.

The dinner was at 5 p.m., but King, always a meticulous dresser, took his time shaving and was running well behind schedule. He fussed with his white-on-white shirt. The one he had chosen was too small. He had gained weight.

After leaving the rooming house,



Target: The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. chatted with friends on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel as James Earl Ray lined him up in the telescopic sight of his rifle from the bathroom window in the rooming house across the way.

Ray got into his car, a white Mustang registered in the name of Eric Galt of Birmingham, Ala., and drove directly to the York Arms Co., where he bought a pair of field glasses for \$41.55.

After making the purchase, Ray drove back to the rooming house and parked in front of the amusement company. It was 4:45 p.m. In one hour and 16 minutes, King would die.

Ray stayed in the car for 15 minutes, then got out, opened the trunk and

a neatly pressed black suit with narrow lapels, a white-on-white shirt and a conservative narrow tie.

When King appeared, one of the men standing by the car yelled up to him: "Doc, this is Ben Branch, who plays in our band."

"How are you, Ben?" King replied. He remembered Branch and called down to him:

"Ben, I want you to sing for me tonight. I want you to sing 'Precious

wrapped the rifle in them and started down the hall.

Anschutz, again bound for the bathroom, met Ray in the hall.

"Hey! That sounded like a shot," he said.

"It was," Ray answered, and went downstairs and out the door.

At the moment he left the rooming house, Ray apparently became flustered. He dropped the bundle containing the rifle on a window ledge outside the amusement shop. Then he jumped into the Mustang and drove away, the tires squealing.

Memphis police, without telling King, had put a guard around the Lorraine, and the police fanning out on the main street nearly intercepted Ray. Within minutes they had found the rifle, and in 15 minutes police broadcast a description of Ray and the white Mustang.

Ray, by then, was out of the city driving south toward Mississippi. He drove all night, east through Alabama and into Georgia, listening intently to his car radio. Ray later told his brother, Jerry, that he was astonished to find that the broadcasts described the murder of King as a national disaster. Ray sincerely believed that someday he not only would be exonerated for this crime but also praised for it.

When he reached Atlanta, Ray parked the car in a lot, and walked away.

He felt whole at last, the way he always thought himself to be. All the threads of his life had been pulled together by an act of murder—his family's hopes that young Jimmy was going to amount to something, that Jimmy was going to make up somehow for their misery, atone for it and avenge it.

From the parking lot, Ray walked to Peachtree St. and picked up clothes he had left at a laundry before driving to Memphis. Then, as his final act, in Atlanta, he mailed in the last lesson in the correspondence course in locksmithing that he had started in Canada.

At 11:30 a.m., Ray boarded a bus to Canada. From there he went to England, where he was caught June 8, 1968, at Heathrow Airport, because he had handed a custom's officer the wrong passport.

Ray quickly went to his room, picked up the rifle and the bedspread,

Ray believed that his killing would be praised

lifted out a bundle wrapped in a green-and-yellow bedspread and carried it up to his room.

In the room, Ray took the bedspread off the carton containing his Remington 30.06 telescope-equipped rifle and left it on the bed. He went to the window, pulled a chair over against it, hooked the curtains back against the mantel and raised the shade. He opened his binoculars—seven power, the same magnification as the telescopic sight on the rifle—and sat down to watch the balcony outside King's room. The door remained closed.

There was an even more direct view of the Lorraine from the rooming house bathroom down the hall. Ray decided to have a look from there.

Outside the motel, the members of King's staff moved around, joking with each other. The crowd grew, swelled by people involved in the garbage strike and in King's Poor People's March to Washington. They gathered around a Cadillac limousine that had been loaned to King by a funeral home for his use during his stay in Memphis.

The Breadbasket Band, which had come from Chicago to play at King's rallies in Memphis, showed up and asked if they could go to dinner with King. They were told that there already were too many guests.

King, not satisfied with his appearance, came out on the balcony. He wore

Lord." Those were the last words Martin Luther King Jr. spoke.

Ray decided to shoot from the bathroom. He returned to his room for the rifle, went back to the bathroom and locked the door.

At 5:40, Willie Anschutz, another of Mrs. Brewer's roomers, went to the bathroom and found it was locked. The assassination was just 21 minutes away.

RAY RAISED THE small bathroom window as far as he could and knocked out the rusty screen, which fell two stories to the ground, then rested the rifle on the windowsill.

To aim the gun, Ray had to stand in the bathtub and lean one arm against the wall.

Ray was watching through his binoculars as King stood on the balcony 63 yards away. Through the glasses, and through the telescopic sight, King appeared to be less than 30 feet away.

When he was sure that it was King on the balcony, Ray picked up the rifle, aimed carefully, and fired a single shot. The bullet hit King in his right jaw, shattering that side of his face, and lodged in his body near his spine. King fell back on the balcony, mortally wounded.

Ray quickly went to his room, picked up the rifle and the bedspread,

©1978 by George McMILLAN. Reprinted by permission of Little Brown & Co., Inc.