

DEATH SAILS WEST

The green waters of the Florida Straits, which lap the chain of the Florida Keys separating the Atlantic Ocean from the Gulf of Mexico, have an almost irresistible look of languor. But these waters have known their share—and more—of murder most foul. From the time of cutlasses and cutthroats on the Spanish Main in the 16th Century, the straits have attracted true-life happenings involving violence, disaster—and mystery.

There was, for instance, the case

of the *Bluebelle*, four years ago. *Bluebelle* was a pleasure ketch operated by a lean, handsome charter skipper named Julian Harvey. Five days out of Fort Lauderdale, Harvey turned up in the yacht's dinghy with the dead body of a 7-year-old girl, René Duperrault. He told of a savage storm and fire which had taken the lives of his wife and the four other members of the Duperrault family. Three days later 11-year-old Terry Jo Duperrault was found alive on a small raft, and

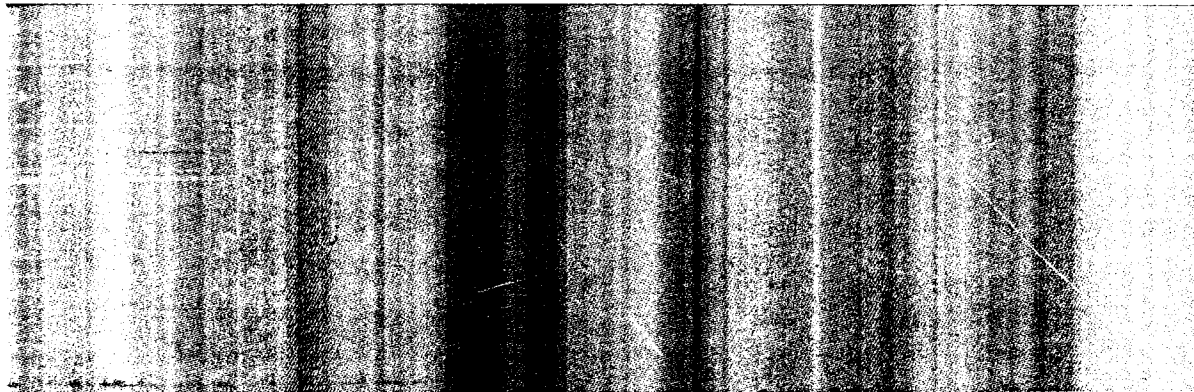
she told another story: murder. When Harvey learned Terry Jo was still alive, he slashed his throat with a razor blade.

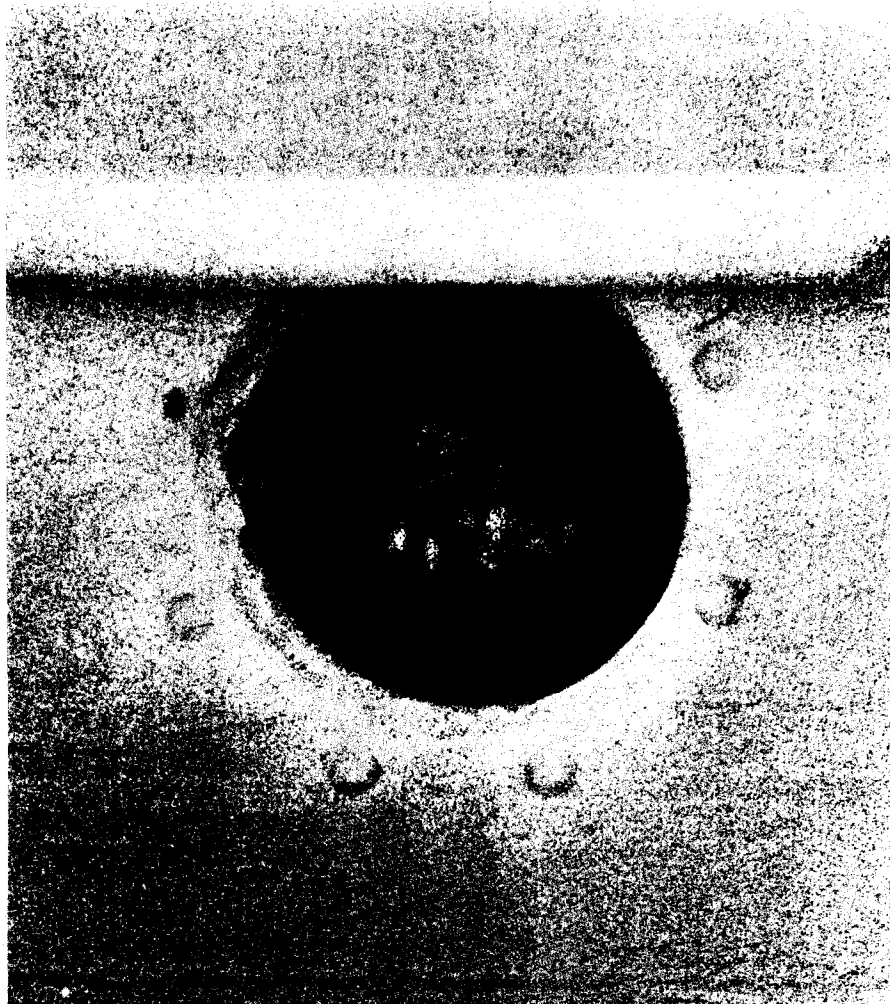
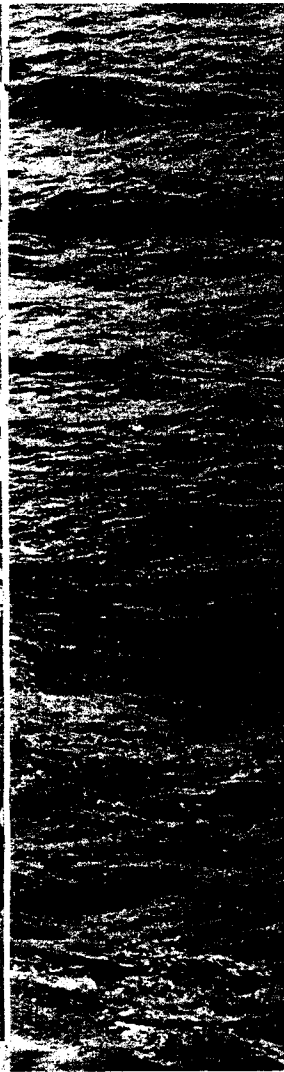
Only two years ago the 15,000-ton tanker *Marine Sulphur Queen* vanished in the straits with a crew of 39 men. Two weeks later a life jacket and an oar stenciled *Sulphur Queen* were found washed up on a Florida beach. This time there was neither raft nor survivor. The story

went down with ship and crew.

Last week the Florida Straits made headlines again with still another mystery, as strange and sordid as any in the eerie past of these waters. Murder had taken place—for no immediately understandable reason. A teen-age sailor had been cramped for 19 hours in a stifling anchor-chain locker. Finally, there was the element of Cold War politics.

The ship was the *Seven Seas*, a 160-foot banana boat of Panama-





With a Coast Guardsman manning a machine gun on its bow, a patrol boat escorts the ill-starred banana

boat *Seven Seas* (left) to Key West, some 32 hours—and five murders—after she sailed from Miami. Above:

the head of one of the slain men is visible through a porthole. The man lies where he was shot, on his bunk.

ON THE 'SEVEN SEAS'

nian registry which operated out of Miami. When *Seven Seas* was built in 1931 she was *Sonia II*, a three-masted, steel-hulled schooner that a wealthy Englishwoman used as a pleasure craft. At some point during the war years *Sonia II* was put to work and rechristened. *Seven Seas* became a cargo vessel and wound up, three years ago, bobbing at the Watson Island pier in Miami. Her owner is Daniel Garcia, a Cuban-born businessman. When she put out of Miami on

the morning of Saturday, Aug. 7, *Seven Seas* carried no cargo. She had a crew of eight—captain, first mate, two engineers, a cook and three seamen. She was headed for drydock and repairs in Tampa, on Florida's west coast. The crew was a Spanish-speaking hodgepodge. Captain Rogelio Diaz was a Spaniard. Three other crewmen were defectors from Castro's Cuba. The other four were Hondurans.

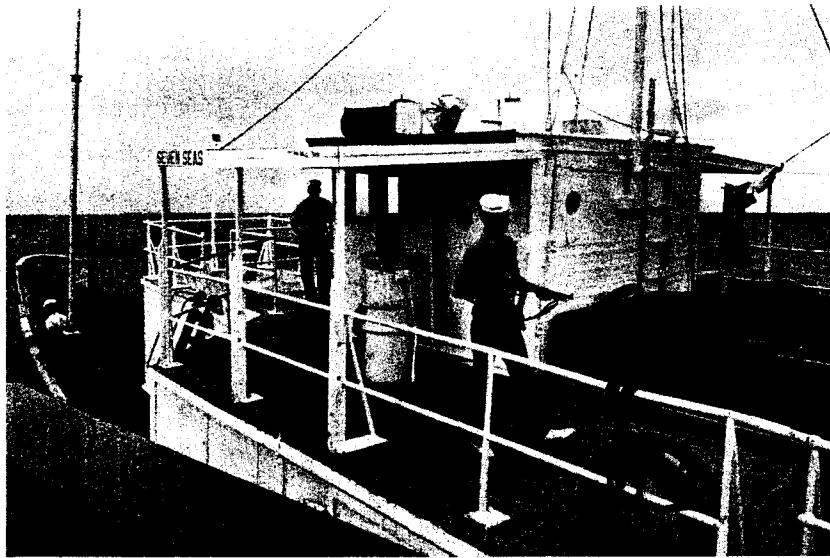
Saturday afternoon, with the crew taking turns at the wheel in

four-hour watches, the ship sailed south and west through the straits. When Burywise Elwin, a 17-year-old Honduran farm boy who was the youngest aboard, came off his noon-to-4 p.m. watch, he sat down beside Roberto Ramirez, a 35-year-old Cuban, under a canvas canopy on the stern. The two talked lazily for an hour or so. "He told me about his three daughters in Cuba," Elwin recalled, "and about lobster fishing in Cuba and how much money he made at it."

After the evening meal, according to Elwin, the captain went to the wheelhouse. Ramirez joined him there at 8 o'clock. At 10 o'clock Captain Diaz made a log entry. The *Seven Seas* was about two miles west of Sombrero Light and 36 miles east of Key West. By that time most of the other crewmen, including Elwin, were in their bunks.

"I was trying to sleep, but it was very hot in the cabin," Elwin said. "At about 15 minutes after 10 I

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Headed for Key West, armed Coast Guardsmen stand guard (above) on wheelhouse deck of *Seven Seas* after the ship has been taken under tow by a cutter. Right: a Coast Guard inspection team removes one of the three bodies found aboard the ship. Burywise Elwin (center picture, in sweatshirt), the only person alive on *Seven Seas* when it was found adrift in Florida Straits, is taken ashore in Key West by an FBI agent and Coast Guardsmen after spending 19 hours in a cramped, stifling anchor-chain locker. He has been a seaman a year, the last eight months on *Seven Seas*.



SILVER-TIPPED BULLETS IN A BABY-FOOD JAR

SEVEN SEAS CONTINUED

decided to get up. I put on my pants, threw a T-shirt over my shoulder and started out the port doorway when Roberto came in the starboard door. He was walking very fast. He looked right at me but he didn't look mad or anything. I started out the door, and then I heard the first shot. I looked and Roberto had a pistol pointing at the first mate. He had the gun about even with the mate's head and maybe three feet from him. There were two more shots, but I didn't see where he was shooting. I was very frightened and ran up to the wheelhouse to tell the captain. My voice wouldn't work good, but I tried to yell 'Capi, Capi.' The captain was lying cross-

ways in the wheelhouse. I touched him on the leg, but he was dead."

Elwin ran to the chain locker, a small compartment in the bow where the anchor chain is stored. "I pulled some boards over the locker and squeezed down there. I pulled the boards back in place and waited. Sitting on the chains, I couldn't straighten up. My head hit the deck if I tried to. It was so hot that water ran out of my ears. I was thinking that if he came down there with a light he could shoot me and kill me."

Elwin crouched in the locker, without food or water, through the night and most of the next day. At about 2:30 p.m. Sunday he heard a plane low overhead, but he stayed in his hiding place. Finally, at about 5:15 or 5:20, a Coast Guard cutter drew along-

side and blew its whistle. Elwin gingerly opened the locker and emerged on deck. "My hands were trembling and my legs had gone to sleep. I kept looking for Roberto on deck and kept waving at the Coast Guard. If I saw Roberto coming for me I thought I would dive overboard. After I got on the cutter a great big shark came alongside, right up on top of the water, so I guess it was a good thing I didn't jump in. The Coast Guard men gave me some water and some lunch, and I knew I was going to be safe."

Coast Guardsmen who boarded the drifting *Seven Seas* found the dead bodies of First Mate Aldrick Hinds, Chief Engineer José Abad and seaman Antonio Fournier. Each had been shot in the head at close range. The four other crew-

men, including Ramirez, were missing. So were a 14-foot, green-and-white aluminum skiff, two oars and three life preservers.

The ship was just off Elbow Cay, 75 miles southeast of Key West and 50 miles closer to Cuba than it had been at 10 o'clock the night before. Someone had apparently changed course from west to southeast and, sometime later, abandoned the ship. Elwin says he heard the engines go dead about two hours after the gunfire.

But where was the little skiff? It had no motor. About 3 o'clock Tuesday morning, crewmen aboard the German freighter *Bellavia* heard a shout from the dark water off Alligator Reef, some 50 miles north of where the *Seven Seas* was



Coast Guardsman points to a bullet hole in the ship's wheelhouse, where Captain Diaz was shot to death. Below, Roberto Ramirez is shown in Miami after he admitted killing the captain and four other crewmen.



found. The German ship swung a searchlight beam and discovered Roberto Ramirez, alone in the skiff. Ramirez had with him a loaded revolver, several knives, a baby-food jar full of silver-tipped bullets, and several soggy pieces of bread. The freighter took him aboard and, two hours later, transferred him to a Coast Guard ship off Miami, where he was taken into custody.

Under questioning by the Coast Guard, FBI, police and Immigration agents, Ramirez told a fantastic tale. He said he had had a running fight with Diaz, Hinds and three other crewmen about Cuban Premier Fidel Castro. Ramirez, though an exile himself, was defending Castro. As he told it, the climax came Saturday night, when he argued violently with Diaz in the wheelhouse. The captain, he

said, threatened to turn him over to anti-Castro Cuban refugees in Tampa. Ramirez said the captain pulled a knife on him. At that point, according to Ramirez, he drew his .38-caliber revolver and shot Diaz. Then he killed Second Engineer Salomon Franco on deck. Then he went below and shot Hinds, Abad and Fournier. He explained that he left Elwin alone because he had not been involved in the argument. He claimed that he spared the cook, Gerald Davison.

The federal authorities listened to Ramirez' story and charged him with five counts of murder and one count of piracy. But a dozen questions remained. If Ramirez shot Franco and Diaz, where are their bodies? He said he spared Davison; but what happened to

Davison? Who took the three missing life preservers? If Ramirez was a loyal Castro man, why had he left Cuba in the first place? Was he heading the *Seven Seas* for Cuba? If so, why did he abandon her 50 miles short of the Cuban coast? Did he intend to row to Cuba? If so, why was he picked up 50 miles north of where the *Seven Seas* was found?

And how about Captain Diaz? He had a wife and two children in Spain, but his passport was Venezuelan (it listed his occupation as "baker"), and it showed that he had spent several years in and around Cuba. Who was Diaz, and what was his business?

Perhaps the whole truth will come out some day. It is more likely that it won't. Strange things do happen in the Florida Straits.