

BRITISH MAJOR SAYS RAY MAY HAVE READ ABOUT HIS AFRICA VENTURE IN PRESS

By HOMER BIGART

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LONDON, June 13—Maj.

Alistair Wicks, former recruiter of white mercenary soldiers for the Congo, explained in an interview today why he believed James Earl Ray, the accused slayer of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was so desperately eager to see him.

Major Wicks, a handsome, 50-year-old Oxonian with graying hair, said he thought that Ray had probably seen his name in the London newspapers of May 19.

That would have been two days after Ray, an escaped convict traveling with a Canadian passport under the name of Ramon George Sneyd, returned from Lisbon, where he had offered himself as a mercenary to the Lisbon mission of Biafra, the breakaway eastern province of Nigeria.

Ray, who was arrested last Saturday at Heathrow Airport while trying to depart for Brussels, remained in Wandsworth Prison today while Home Secretary James Callaghan signed an order authorizing the Bow Street Magistrates' Court to begin extradition proceedings. A formal hearing is expected within the next ten days.

Major Wicks was mentioned in the newspapers because he had just been released after four months' imprisonment in Lome, the capitol of Togo. An executive of the Lisbon-based Air Trans-Africa, a small charter outfit, the major had chartered a DC-6 to a Dr. Kurt

Wallersteiner, whom he described as a West German banker with a Canadian passport.

Dr. Wallersteiner was carrying seven million pounds worth of old Nigerian currency to Lome, where a Lebanese banker was to exchange it for new Nigerian bills. The deadline for the exchange was only two days distant, and Dr. Wallersteiner was in a hurry.

Why the exchange had to be transacted in Lome Major Wick could not explain. But if he had landed in Lagos, the capital of Nigeria, he would certainly have been thrown in jail.

His airline, he admitted, had made "small" deliveries of arms and ammunition to the Biafrans early in the secessionist struggle, and had followed with shipments of medicine and other essentials.

Transferred From Jail

In any event, there was "some sort of doublecross," the major said, and the Togolese arrested everyone on the plane within half an hour after landing in Lome.

Everyone, including the unhappy Dr. Wallerstein, was charged with "attempting fraudulently to import merchandise." The banker, the seven-man crew, Major Wicks and his boss, Jack Malloch, a Rhodesian, slept the first five nights on the concrete floor of the local jail, which had no beds and swarmed with mosquitos.

Then, Major Wicks related, they were transferred to a building in a camp of the national gendarmerie, where they baked for months under a hot tin roof.

The major and two others were finally released in \$1,200 bail each and told by the Togolese magistrate that they need not return for trial, according to Major Wicks.

Meanwhile, the British Government had withdrawn Major Wicks's passport. He said that when he demanded the reason for this he was told that he "might have acted in a manner contrary to British policy."

All of this was aired in the local press when Major Wicks returned to London in May.

But what probably caught Ray's eye was the background information that Major Wicks was a former mercenary more recently engaged in supplying Biafra.

Ray called Ian Colvin, a writer for The Daily Telegraph, and pleaded desperately for the major's telephone number. But Mr. Colvin did not give the number.

"I would have told him [Ray] that I knew nothing about mercenary activity, and that to the best of my belief there weren't any mercenaries now operating in Africa," Major Wicks said during a two-hour interview at the Savoy Hotel. "I have never attempted to recruit for Biafra. The Biafran-Lagos conflict is quite different from the Congo. There is no real mercenary activity on

the Biafran side. There are only half a dozen Frenchmen acting as advisers."

He spoke with bitterness of the "massive aid" that he said Britain and the Communist countries were giving to the Lagos regime.

"A dreadful situation is building up," Major Wicks said, "a situation where millions — I use the word advisedly — would die by slaughter or starvation. Supplying arms to Lagos and denying them to Biafra may result in the complete slaughter of the Biafrans."

Major Wicks said he was certain that the Biafrans would have had no use for Ray.

"Biafra was never interested in white recruits," he said. "Their policy was, 'This is a private affair and if everyone will keep out of it, we can settle it ourselves.'"

Major Wicks was second in command of V Commando, a shock force of white mercenaries, numbering from 200 to 250, who operated for 18 months in the Congo against the rebel forces of Antoine Gizenga.

Moise Tshombe, now a prisoner in Algeria, was Premier during most of this period in 1963 and 1964. Major Wicks was an admirer of Mr. Tshombe and said he had trained a company of whites for the Katanga secessionists when Mr. Tshombe was Premier of that province in 1961.

From what he had learned of Ray, Major Wicks said he

doubted that the man would have been of any use in the Congo either.

Would-be mercenaries were interviewed in South Africa and Rhodesia, he recalled, and then given a month's training in a Katanga base camp. They had to be physically fit and knowledgeable in weapons.

The duty was harsh and dangerous — 52 mercenaries were killed — but the pay was attractive — 120 pounds a month (\$288) plus five pounds a day (\$12) for service in danger zones.

Calls Discipline Strict

Discipline was strict, Major Wicks said.

"Many people associate mercenaries with dirty uniforms and woolly beards a la Che Gueverra," he said. "But our idea was to have discipline as strict as in the British Army."

Major Wicks, a native of Britain, is the son of the late

Lieut. Col. Cairns Wicks of the Seaforth Highlanders.

Major Wicks spent two years at Oxford and was taking his bar examinations when World War II began. He served as a liaison captain with an aerial photography unit in France after D-day, retiring after the war with the rank of captain.

After the war he went to South Africa and farmed for 15 years in Eastern Transvaal. Then, he said, he became interested in Mr. Tshombe and the secessionist movement in Katanga.

"I felt Tshombe's action was very right and proper in trying to save Katanga from the horrors — the murder, rape and arson that was going on in the rest of the Congo."

He said he had sold his farm and gone to Elizabethville, capital of Katanga, where he ran a dry cleaning shop for a while and later, at the request of Mr. Tshombe, recruited a small European force.