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An Unmarked Car Watergate Break?

By Alfred E. Lewis

Washington Post Staff Writer

If a police scout car had not run low on gas in the early morning hours of last June 17, the affair that has come to be known nationwide as the Watergate scandal might never have come to light.

According to police, scout car Officer Dennis P. Stephenson received a call by radio about 2:30 a.m. to respond to a break-in report at the Watergate. Stephenson had just brought his scout car into second district headquarters at 23rd and L Streets NW to gas up.

Capt. Ernest Garner, the watch commander that night, said Stephenson called him back and said he was low on gas. Also, Stephenson said, he had some reports he wanted to catch up on, so he asked if someone else could be sent, Garner said.

A call then went to the nearest car in the area, which happened to be an unmarked vehicle manned by three tactical squad members wearing old clothes, Garner said. Tactical squad members cruise the city and seek to blend into crowds as unobtrusively as possible if there is trouble.

Across from the Watergate, in the Howard Johnson Motor Lodge, the Watergate break-in gang had posted lookout, Alfred C. Baldwin III. Baldwin later testified that he eventually tried to warn the others when he saw some other unidentified men in the Watergate, but by then it was too late.

Garner said Baldwin obviously had no way of knowing that the three men who got out of the unmarked car were policemen—Sgt. Paul Leper and Officers John Barret and Carl Sholfer. Had Stephenson responded to the call, Garner said, Baldwin undoubtedly would have spotted him and tried to give his associates an early warning.

"If it weren't for the freak timing, we might never have had the Watergate affair," Garner said.

The arrests of the Watergate break-in gang set in motion a series of events that resulted in disclosures that White House officials and high former Nixon administration officials were involved in the planning of the Watergate operation and the later efforts to cover up White House and administration involvement.