

A Bum Rap for Frank Sturgis in Miami

Jack Anderson

Long before Frank Sturgis joined the world's most celebrated burglary crew and broke into the Watergate, he was my friend.

I knew him as a soldier of fortune, a pilot and gun runner, a romantic who bloomed ill-timed in a programmed age, an adventurer whom humdrum could never quite assimilate.

He was also a Don Quixote, square jaw set against the enemy, drawn irresistibly to such calamities as the Bay of Pigs and Watergate.

We have kept in touch over the years, but he has periodically dropped out of sight, forever chasing adventure, usually finding misadventure.

Once in his youth, he confounded the odds and became part of a legend, one of the ragged few who persevered in the mountains with Fidel Castro.

After their incredible victory, he could be seen on Havana's streets in the regalia of an Air Marshal. For a time, he was Castro's man in charge of "liberated" gambling casinos and luxury hotels.

On matters of principle, having to do with Castro's repression and his turn toward Russia, Frank defected from the Revolution to become a gain the longshot gambler against the house. Thereafter, he risked his neck against Castro in foredoomed ventures of the Cuban "freedom fighters."

He progressed from the Bay of Pigs to Watergate, where he thought he was seeking evi-

dence that Castro was contributing to the George McGovern campaign.

After Frank and his friends were arrested at gunpoint inside Democratic headquarters, they were pictured in the press as figures of fun, bunglers and petty thieves.

On another level, they became caricatures of Orwellian enemies of the American system. It was even whispered that they had been behind the plot to assassinate President Kennedy. As evidence, one group brought me a news photo taken on the streets of Dallas on assassination day. They eagerly pointed out a man they said was Sturgis lurking in the shadows. The man resembled Sturgis but definitely was not Sturgis.

And in Miami, the Justice Department solemnly charged that Sturgis had recruited mercenaries, a dirty dozen, ostensibly to fight Castro but really to steal cars. The prosecutors waited five years until after the Watergate caper to bring the charges. When they couldn't convince the jury, they convened another jury which finally convicted Frank of transporting stolen cars to Mexico.

Frank has told me that the Watergate figure he admires most is G. Gordon Liddy who has maintained a grim, tight-lipped silence in the face of a harsh, 20-year sentence. So Sturgis, Liddy-like, sat through the auto theft trial without testifying in his own defense.

I have now persuaded him to tell his story, which I have care-

fully checked with the witnesses I could reach. They have confirmed most details as he related them, but there are no available witnesses to other events.

Frank has always been ready at the crook of a finger to pick up his carbine and rush off to a new adventure. It was altogether characteristic of him, therefore, to volunteer in 1968 to lead a mission for a total stranger who identified himself as Col. Francisco Quesada. The colonel sought out Sturgis to help hijack a Soviet freighter and hold it hostage for the return of the U.S. spy ship Pueblo, which the North Koreans had captured in January, 1968.

Frank advertised in the newspapers for adventurers and selected his dirty dozen from the toughest applicants. He gave no thought to the possibility that some of them may have applied from the wrong side of the law.

In obedience to the colonel's instructions, Frank told them only that they would participate in a mission against Castro and would be paid after the mission was completed. He never learned until later, he swears, that a couple of his troopers raised drinking and gambling money by leasing two cars and selling them in Mexico. Indeed, one had been sentenced to a federal penitentiary in 1966 for a similar crime.

Eventually, Frank rounded up his undisciplined band from Mexican bars and bawdy houses, loaded them aboard a fishing boat and set out for a se-

cret rendezvous with a gunboat that he had been told would assist them with the hijacking.

But Frank's boatload of adventurers, alas, ran aground on a reef off the coast of British Honduras. Frank put eight men and all the firearms ashore on a mangrove swamp. Then he and four others made their way to Belize, British Honduras, seeking to repair the boat.

The motley mercenaries, of course, were spotted and rounded up by the British authorities, and Frank's Mission Impossible ended in a Honduran jail.

They were shortly deported back to the United States and the missing autos were traced to Frank's men. Angry at Frank because they hadn't been paid for the abortive adventure, they told the authorities he had directed them to sell the leased cars.

I have always known Frank Sturgis as a man of touching sincerity, sober habits and fierce patriotism. Although misguided, he fully deserved the sentence for his role in the Watergate break-in. But the auto theft conviction, I believe, is a bum rap.

Footnote: U.S. Attorney William Northcutt, who has a reputation in Miami for decency and integrity, noted that Sturgis "had every break. If he failed to bring forth evidence that was material, the prosecution was not to blame." Northcutt also emphasized: "There was no relationship between the car case and Watergate."