



By James K. W. Atherton—The Washington Post
James Earl Ray, right, with attorney Mark Lane.

Ray Tells Committee He Didn't Kill King

By T. R. Reid

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In a rambling, picturesque narrative of his life on the run, a nervous but defiant James Earl Ray told a House committee yesterday that he was the victim of a frame-up in the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

"I did not shoot Martin Luther King Jr.," said Ray, who pleaded guilty to the shooting in 1969 but then recanted his confession. "The plea was procured by fraud."

With some variations, Ray spun out for the Select Committee on Assassinations essentially the same version of the King case he has been relating for years.

Ray told a hearing room crowded with reporters and U.S. marshals that a mysterious smuggler named "Roual" (so Ray spells the name, but he pronounces it "Rah-ule"), who helped finance Ray's travels through the United States, Canada and Mexico in 1967-68, set a trap so Ray would be blamed for the King killing.

Ray's colorful, 90-minute opening statement, cov-

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ering his escape in a breadbox from a Missouri prison in April 1967, his flight from Memphis after King was shot there on April 4, 1968, and his arrest in London three months later, contained all the elements of a paperback thriller: grand conspirators and petty crooks, brothels and B-girls and numerous close scrapes with the law.

Ray's memory of his fugitive days was inconsistent. He could reel off the precise street addresses of flop-houses and bars he had visited in three countries, and the names and nationalities of people he had met briefly there.

But he could recall almost nothing about the room he had rented in a Memphis boarding house across the street from King's motel on the day King was shot. He had forgotten the names and precise locations of the drugstores and bars he said he visited on the day of King's murder — the places that would constitute his alibi.

When Ray finished his presentation, committee Chairman Louis Stokes (D-Ohio) began questioning him about discrepancies between the statement he had just given and several prior versions he has offered.

After about an hour of Stokes' questioning, Ray's lawyer, Mark Lane, asked that the hearing be stopped for the day.

Lane said Ray was exhausted because of harsh conditions at a nearby federal prison where he is being confined this week. The committee agreed to stop the session.

"He's made his pitch," observed Rep. Samuel L. Devine (R-Ohio), a committee member after the abrupt

adjournment. "I'm not sure he wants to be cross-examined."

After the hearing Ray and Lane complained to U.S. District Court Judge William B. Bryant that federal prison officials had mistreated Ray. Bryant ordered the U.S. Marshal Service to take over Ray's custody from prison authorities. Lane said he was satisfied.

Ray is scheduled to return to the witness table at 9 a.m. today. His testimony will be broadcast by WETA-TV (Channel 26) and WETA-FM radio (90.9).

Mindful of the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald, the accused assassin of President Kennedy, and of Ray's history of prison escapes, the committee draped a heavy blanket of security over the Rayburn House Office Building hearing room.

There were 17 badge-wearing U.S. marshals in the room, and presumably others were interspersed among the spectators. Other marshals and Capitol police guarded the corridor outside. Seven Marshals accompanied Ray when he came in.

The committee ordered all spectators to remain seated and stationary when the witness was moving in or out. Accordingly, Ray's first entrance was made to a virtually hushed cham-



Associated Press

James Earl Ray, in plaid coat, is escorted to his seat in the House panel's hearing room by U.S. marshals.

ber. For two minutes the only sound was the chirping of still cameras and the whirr of videotapes.

Ray, 50, a thin man who wears his hair in a high wave above his forehead, appeared tired and anxious as he entered the room looking like a traveling salesman who had driven all night to meet a hostile customer.

Ray was placed under oath before he testified, but the procedure had no practical import. He is serving a 99-year prison term for the King killing, and could face additional charges for escapes and other crimes. Thus the prospect of a jail sentence for perjury or contempt of Congress would presumably not be a serious deterrent in his case.

Ray read his 38-page statement in a clipped, nervous voice barbed with a soft country twang. At first, as he read the paragraphs asserting his innocence, his tone was defiant. Toward the end, he seemed anxious just to finish.

Ray's picaresque narrative began on April 23, 1967, when he escaped from the Missouri State Prison at Jefferson City by hiding in a large box of bread loaves that were shipped fresh daily out of the prison bakery. He had \$250 and a portable radio with him, he said.

(That radio was discovered a year later outside the Memphis boarding house just minutes after King had been shot. It was one of the keys that led the FBI to pursue Ray for the murder.)

Ray then zig-zagged through the

Midwest, living on odd jobs and burglaries. "At this period," the statement said, "My shoes had fell off, consequently I had to make forcible entry into a store to obtain another pair."

Through the assistance of a friend, Jack (the Cat Man) Gorwin of St. Louis, Ray said, he obtained a pistol. He then set out for Canada and, running low on funds, used "the pistol Mr. Gorwin had purchased for me" to rob a brothel of \$1,700.

Soon thereafter, "in the Neptune Tavern, 121 West Commissioners St.," Ray said, he met Roual. Ray has previously described this person as a "reddish-haired French-Canadian" and as a "Latin" with sandy-colored hair. Yesterday he said Roual had "dark hair with a red tint in it" and "spoke with a slight Spanish accent."

Roual and Ray worked together smuggling goods across international borders, Ray said, first from Canada to the United States and later from the United States to Mexico. Several times, Ray recounted, customs officers almost caught them, but they escaped, barely, each time.

Early in 1968 Ray and Roual lost contact. Ray busied himself taking a correspondence school class—"a locksmith or rather, a lock-picking course," he called it—and answering an advertisement in a Los Angeles newspaper placed by a woman "who listed herself as a nympho-something."

"Of course, I had been in jail six years," Ray said.