

4 Millionaire's 10-Second Jailbreak

By Warren Hinckle

Warren Hinckle is co-author (with William Turner and Eliot Asinof) of "The Ten-Second Jailbreak: The Helicopter Escape of Joel David Kaplan" (Holt; \$6.95), which he discusses here.

DURING the downslide of the 1960's, when I was editing Ramparts, I found the CIA susceptible to the journalistic metaphor of a train run amok — it seemed most everywhere outside the kitchen sink of intelligence where it belonged.

Those were the years before muckraking became trendy, and for a heady time Ramparts had the field almost to itself in exposing the CIA's domestic dirty tricks. That made for a journalistic game plan which gained Ramparts many scoops of the day but exposed us to occasional overdoses of paranoia. Of no case was this more true than the enigmatic matter of one Joel David Kaplan, a story which proved so bizarre and elusive that even Ramparts did not dare to go to press with it.

The story came to the attention of Bill Turner, then a Ramparts senior editor, in 1966. Turner was the head of the magazine's "spook desk," an assignment which befell him because he had been a Special Agent of the FBI for ten years before turning investigative reporter: the "spook desk" tried to sort the genuine articles from those which might be phonies or plants in the flood of crankish manuscripts — the subject matter of which stood their authors little chance of publication in the more conventional press — which each week overflowed Ramparts editorial offices on Broadway's topless strip.

A waiter in Brooklyn had written claiming to know about startling ties of the CIA to the puzzling imprisonment of Joel Kaplan, an American millionaire with a history of amateur gunrun-



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'Five years on the story . . . now out in the cold'

ning, who was serving a 28 year sentence for murder in a Mexico City jail.

We had learned to check out even the craziest stories involving the CIA, so the waiter was sought out by Turner and Sol Stern, another Ramparts editor who had written our expose of the CIA's infiltration of American student groups. The waiter was at first effusive, but then became hostile and finally abusive, accusing the two journalists of being CIA agents trying to sap his vital juices.

But some of the leads the screaming waiter had suggested checked out, and dove-

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tailed with an independent investigation Ramparts was then mounting into the complicated affairs of Joel Kaplan's uncle, the renowned financier J. M. Kaplan, a capitalistic buccaneer of the old school, a Caribbean molasses baron and Democratic Party sugar daddy whose \$20 million nonprofit Kaplan Fund was an admitted CIA "conduit" for the covert transmission of funds to domestic organizations.

Deeper Ties Suspected

We had reason to suspect even deeper ties of the Kaplan family to the CIA. A former employee of J.M. Kaplan who had no love lost for his old boss had secretly approached us. In the course

of a series of furtive meetings with Turner, Bob Scheer and I in obscure Manhattan restaurants and Grand Central Station, he presented a picture of J.M. Kaplan — backed up by pounds of documents xeroxed on the sly from the old man's files — which suggested a marriage of sugar politics and cold war politics and, among other things, a hidden connection between the multimillionaire uncle and his convicted murderer nephew, with the CIA somewhere in the middle.

We were to spend the better part of the next two years trying unsuccessfully to make that connection. The most cursory examination of the "murder" of which Joel Kaplan stood convicted indicated a frame up of Marx Brothers proportions.

He was said to have killed Luis Vidal, Jr., his partner

'We could tell the story but we had no publisher'

in the gunrunning business. Vidal was a lowlife spinoff from the silver spoon set. He was the godson of Dominican dictator Trujillo and a distant relative of both Jacqueline Bouvier and Gore Vidal. But he made his living in less classy circles as a CIA handyman and successful dabbler in prostitution, narcotics, arms smuggling and other businesses listed on the central exchange of the Caribbean black market.

The body identified as Vidal's appeared to be some 30 years older than the alleged deceased: the victim's clothes were several sizes too small for the corpse; moreover, Vidal had brown eyes, yet the cadaver had blue eyes. When this discrepancy was respectfully pointed out to Vidal's widow, she explained: "Someone must have changed the eyeballs."

Nevertheless, Joel Kaplan

was sentenced to 28 years. His 1962 extradition to Mexico from Spain was itself exceptional since the two countries had no diplomatic relations nor extradition treaties. Kaplan kept saying that someone was framing him, but seemed afraid to say who.

In 1969, Ramparts, always a potential Titanic on the stormy sea of publishing, sank beneath the waves, a begrudging New Left precursor of the financial collapse of the Saturday Evening Post and Life. Ramparts was raised again as a less muckraking craft, and I launched a new magazine, Scanlan's, which, as Ramparts before it, stubbornly took up the unprofitable pursuit of riddles such as that of Joel Kaplan. Turner, taxing his FBI-man's patience, again took up the tortuous assignment of retracing the paths we had followed before.

Instant Folk Hero

On August 18, 1971, Joel Kaplan escaped, James Bond fashion, in a supercharged helicopter which dipped through a misty rain into the courtyard of the Santa Marta Acatitla maximum security prison in Mexico. It took off in ten seconds with Kaplan and his cellmate aboard. Not a shot was fired. The armed guards along the 30-foot prison wall said later that helicopter was painted in the royal blue of the Attorney General of Mexico, and they were unable to decide during the swift descent and ascent whether "to shoot it or salute it." Newspapers the next day branded it "The Jailbreak of the Century." Kaplan, the millionaire loser, was suddenly an instant

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folk hero, the world's first "Hellifugitive." Most press accounts called the airborne escape "CIA engineered."

I telephoned Turner. Hell has no fury like two writers who have put in five years on a story and suddenly find themselves out in the cold. We prevailed on Kaplan's sister Judy, and on his attorney, Vasilios Choulos, to let us visit him — wherever he was. Two weeks after Kaplan's dramatic escape, while scores of other reporters thundered by fruitlessly in journalistic possees, Turner and I met with Kaplan in his Southern California hideout.

A Shy Man

I found him a shy, thin man of Napoleon height, given to downcast glances and furtive half smiles. He was still dressed in the Mexican-issue gaberdine trousers and v-necked white t-shirt which had been his wardrobe during almost ten years in Mexican prisons. A ring of hippie love beads hung around his neck. He was not the type to give out the time of day without close cross examination, but after ten hours of conversation and several bottles of Jack Daniels he agreed to tell us his atory.

That made for another complication. Just a few months before Kaplan flew out of jail Scanlan's had, also, run aground on the publishing shoals. Turner and I found ourselves in the checkmated position of being the two journalists in the country who could tell the story of the man who had made the most sensational jailbreak of the century — and we had no magazine to tell it in. We ultimately piggy backed on Playboy, and wrote a book,

for which we added a third writer Eliot Asinof, to our team. It took the three of us another year of investigation to separate the wheat of fact from the chaff of lies and illusions.

The publisher titled the book "The Ten Second Jailbreak," which reflects the exciting escape story that is told therein. But for all the inherent analogies to the modern novels of espionage, it was Melvin Belli, one of Kaplan's attorneys, who I think best capsulized the Kaplan saga with a different reference to contemporary literature. "That book," Belli said, "should be called 'Two Flew Over the Cuc-koo's Nest.'"

S. F.