

Rep. Sikes Recovers Frozen Fish

By Jack Anderson

A rueful Rep. Robert Sikes (D-Fla.) has learned that shipping frozen fish by military mail can cause complications. He almost lost a package of salmon in the Air Force transportation system.

Sikes has a weakness for fresh Alaskan salmon. He acquired a few fish while he was in Alaska recently, froze them for shipping and put them aboard a military plane bound for Andrews Air Force Base, outside Washington.

Inadvertently, Sikes' salmon got mixed up with the armed forces courier mail and wound up at Ft. Meade, Md. An Army lieutenant plunged his hand into the mailbag and came up with the cold fish.

Sourly, the naive young officer called the congressman's office and informed the staff of the whereabouts of Sikes' fish. If the congressman wanted them, said the lieutenant, he could come and get them.

Sikes, it turned out, wanted front door delivery. A Sikes aide called the military liaison office on Capitol Hill, and the young lieutenant hastened to Washington to deliver the frozen fish in person. He apologized profusely, say our sources, for his impertinence.

Footnote: Sikes acknowledged that he had visited Alaska but said the fish were

sent to him by "a friend." He knew nothing about them, he said, until he got the call from the "overbearing officer." The salmon, he added, "were very good."

Political Squeeze—Two of President Nixon's political operators, Murray Chotiner and Harry Dent, helped run up a contractor's claim against the Veterans Administration from a \$1 million offer to a \$10.3 million settlement.

The whopping settlement was paid to the Donovan Construction Co., a St. Paul firm, for cost overruns on an \$18 million hospital construction project at Northport, Long Island.

The VA first offered to settle the claim for \$1 million. This was rejected by the contractor, John Donovan, who hired Chotiner to apply political pressure. Chotiner worked the settlement up to \$9 million.

Then Donovan, operating through former White House aide Peter Millspaugh, brought in Dent. For a \$2,500 fee, Dent pressed for outside arbitration, which the VA turned down. Instead Veterans Administration Donald Johnson accepted an arbitrary \$10.3 million settlement.

Now the General Accounting Office has charged that the \$10.3 million was paid without validating the contractor's claim. "No audit by a government agency of the contractor's claim was performed prior to the execution of the settlement agree-

ment," contended the GAO.

In a private, four-page letter to Johnson, the GAO also made these blistering allegations:

- Many of the costs claimed by Donovan, said the GAO, were "of dubious allowability."

- The Justice Department "is currently investigating allegations," the GAO reported, "that the contractor violated the False Claims Act" in connection with the contract.

- GAO investigator questioned "the total cost method" used by the VA in reaching the settlement. This method shouldn't have been used, it was asserted, without certain prerequisites. "We have found no evidence that any of these conditions were met in this case," declared the auditing agency.

- Within the VA, officials differed widely over the size of the settlement. "Knowledgeable individuals," according to the GAO, supported settlement figures "less than half of that reached."

- The contractor made six appeals that were denied by the Contract Appeals Board, another 13 claims that were dismissed with prejudice. Yet the GAO charged: "It is our understanding that these claims are now included in the settlement amount."

The intervention of Chotiner and Dent, nevertheless, magically overcame all these derogatory facts. Sources close to the GAO investigation point out that

Johnson's job has been hanging in balance and, therefore, that the political clout of Chotiner and Dent could have influenced Johnson's decision.

Johnson admitted that Chotiner had dropped by and had mentioned Donovan was his client. But Johnson claimed they never discussed the settlement. Chotiner told us he had "always followed the practice never to discuss my clients' affairs."

Dent said he had "talked to Don Johnson and one or two of his assistants a couple of times." This was disputed by Johnson, who insisted: "He's never contacted me." The administrator admitted only that he was "certainly aware" of Dent's role on behalf of the Donovan firm. In any event, Johnson denied playing a major part in the settlement.

Footnote: The GAO probe of the \$10.3 million deal was requested in late August by hard-working Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.). He has called for public hearings on the matter and a freeze on funding the contractor's claim. Sen. William Proxmire (D-Wis.), chairman of the Veterans Appropriations subcommittee, told us through a spokesman that he "would oppose appropriations of these funds until GAO's questions have been completely resolved."