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Court Hearing

An Informer's Story of the 'Kennedy Plot'

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New Orleans

A well-dressed insurance salesman swore in a heavily guarded courtroom yesterday that he heard free-lance pilot David W. Ferrie mastermind a plot to assassinate President John F. Kennedy with Lee Harvey Oswald and bachelor-businessman Clay Shaw.

The witness, Perry Raymond Russo, a 25-year-old college graduate from Baton Rouge, dramatically pointed an accusing finger at Shaw as the only man left alive, besides Russo himself, who attended the alleged meeting in Ferrie's flat in September of 1963.

Russo said he knew the man as "Clem Bertrand." His testimony was unfolded by district attorney James Garrison with carefully staged, story-book courtroom drama. It was often and apparently deliberately vague at times.

STAND

Anonymous until he appeared on the stand, Russo turned up as the mystery witness and "confidential informant" Garrison was relying on when he had Shaw arrested March 1 on a charge of conspiracy in the assassination.

"We've got lots more," Garrison was heard declaring during the recess in the preliminary hearing on Shaw's arrest. "This is just the beginning."

Neither the Warren Commission nor the FBI mentioned Russo in their investi-

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gations of the President's assassination, which concluded that Oswald acted alone. Garrison offered no explanation of why Russo had not come forward before although it is expected that if asked, he will claim that he was afraid for his life.

Talking too fast at times for either prosecuting or defense attorneys to keep up, Russo said he wandered into a party at Ferrie's flat that wound up with conspiratorial talk of how to kill the late President.

RIDE

"People were drinking and talking," Russo said. "There were maybe 8 to 10 there . . . it dwindled down to three." Russo said he stuck around as a fourth because he was waiting for a ride home.

"David Ferrie took the initiative in the conversation," Russo said. "He paced back and forth . . . he talked to Mr. Bertrand and Mr. Oswald. He said an assassination attempt would have to use diversionary tactics . . . one or two (men) would shoot diversionary shots, a third would be intended as a direct hit."

Russo quoted Ferrie as saying that one of the gunmen — whether there were to be two or three — "had to be a scapegoat." He said "Ferrie talked incessantly about the availability of exit — you had to get out. This man to be sacrificed would give just enough time for these two or one (other gunmen) to escape."

Ferrie, a pilot who died of a cerebral hemorrhage last month, suggested a flight to Brazil with a refueling stop in Mexico or a direct but more risky flight to refuge in Castro's Cuba, Russo swore. The witness said that Bertrand disagreed at this point, declaring that news of the assassination would spread too fast to permit any escape after a stop in Mexico.

POINT

At this point, Russo asserted, "Oswald jumped in. He said (to Bertrand): 'Shut up and leave him alone. He's the pilot. He knows what talking about.'"

"Bertrand," Russo continued, "said that as far as he's concerned, he's a 'washed up pilot.'" Ferrie had flown for Eastern Air Lines, but had been dismissed because of his record of homosexual arrests.

Except for the one outburst, Russo said, Oswald remained "detached" during the conversation. The witness said Bertrand's objection, however, prompted Ferrie to come up with an alternate plan. Russo said Ferrie suggested that the three — Ferrie, Oswald and Bertrand (Shaw) — "should be in the public eye, around where a lot of people could see them on the day of the assassination."

SPEECH

"Ferrie said he would make a speech at Southeastern" (Southeastern Louisiana College at Hammond, La.), Russo testified. "Bertrand said he would go on business with his company to the west coast . . . Oswald didn't say anything." In fact, Shaw was in San Francisco on the day of the assassination.

The testimony fit in neatly with the conspiracy theory

that Garrison had been developing. He claims that Oswald was actually a "decoy and fall guy."

Garrison is now understood to be hunting the one or two gunmen he claims really killed the President.

Russo said that both Oswald and Bertrand showed reluctance to having him stay around for the assassination talk but asserted that Ferrie assured them, "He's all right. Let him stay. He doesn't know anything."

Russo swore that he had seen Oswald at Ferrie's apartment several other times, including once "near the end" of September and on another occasion when he swore he found Oswald on the couch "either polishing or cleaning or wiping a rifle."

Oswald left New Orleans September 25. Russo said, however, that near "the end of the month," he dropped in to find Oswald and Ferrie having "some words."

"Evidently Oswald was having trouble with his wife," Russo said. "Dave said, 'Don't worry. Calm down. I'll handle it.'"

PARTY

Russo said the "party" took place in "mid-September." He is said to have told Garrison's office that it was September 16. In any event, Russo testified that he came across Oswald for the first time a few days before this, cleaning the gun in Ferrie's apartment.

"It was just a rifle," Russo said. "It had bolt-action, I know that. (Bud) I'm no authority on rifles."

Garrison, appearing in court for only the third time in his career as district attorney, produced a rifle, "similar" his aides later said, to the rifle Oswald got by mail order. They added that the rifle was found in Ferrie's apartment.

Russo testified that it wasn't quite like the rifle he saw Oswald cleaning.

STUDENT

A student at Tulane University and later at Loyola where he graduated in 1964

with a bachelor of social sciences degree, Russo testified that he at first met Ferrie about seven years ago as a teen-ager. He said he met him at a Civil Air Patrol meeting in suburban Kenner, near New Orleans International Airport.

"He put on a couple of demonstrations to impress me . . . (with) his hypnotic ability," Russo said. Subsequently, he said, Ferrie "gave me an open book invitation to come to his house when I wanted."

Russo said Oswald was introduced to him as "Leon Oswald" and Shaw as "Bertrand." He identified "Leon Oswald" as Lee Harvey Oswald through photographs. Garrison prompted the identification of "Bertrand" with flair.

"Do you see him in the courtroom?" The district attorney — just recently returned from a week's rest in Las Vegas under an alias of his own (W. O. Robinson) — asked. "Point him out. What color suit is he wearing? What color is his hair?"

Russo responded on cue, nodding at Shaw's brown tweed business suit and his white hair.

"Who introduced him to you?"

REPLIED

"Dave Ferrie," Russo calmly replied. He ended his morning session on the witness stand by stepping down at Garrison's suggestion, walking behind Shaw at the defense table, and holding his hand over the businessman's head.

Russo also testified that he had run into Shaw, or "Bertrand," though he was unaware of his name, in 1962 when President Kennedy came to New Orleans to deliver a "trade or fade" speech at the dedication of the new Nashville Avenue wharf.

"Very few people were not looking at the President," Russo said solemnly. "He (Shaw) was one of the few. That's why I said at the time he had to be a Secret Service man."

Russo also swore that he saw Shaw again, in the company of Ferrie, 4 to 6 months after the assassination at a gas station Ferrie had started.

Shaw, 54-year-old former director of the International Trade Mart here, maintained his composure throughout the day though he occasionally daubed sweat from his neck and forehead as the hearing got under way in the stuffy courtroom.

His attorneys protested hotly against admission of what they said was improper hearsay evidence. They will get their turn with Russo on cross examination today.