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Was Anti-Castro Plot a Cover For Car-Theft Ring in Mexico?

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The new red-and-white Olds, Florida license tag 10E-3017, a rental car from King Motor Co., Fort Lauderdale, pulled into the Mexican border station on a Sunday night, dusty from a long drive.

There were three men in the car, and a bag of oranges lay on the shelf under the rear window.

Three things made this car different from others coming into Mexico from Texas on a hot September weekend.

The Olds had a very hard back seat. It weighed more than General Motors ever meant it to. And it eventually would be listed as stolen.

THE BACK SEAT was solid as a stone because the springs had been removed and replaced with disassembled rifles. The Olds was overweight because the side panels had been stuffed with handguns, ammunition, guerrilla warfare training manuals and military uniforms.

And the car would be listed as stolen because King Motor Co. never would see it again.

The driver, a skinny young man with sharp blue eyes,

long hair and a reddish beard, got out and gave the Mexican border guards a dollar each. He went inside the border station and gave their captain \$5.

The Olds crossed into Mexico without a search.

That was the beginning of the Mexican caper of Frank Fiorini, alias Frank Sturgis, Watergate burglar, and his South Florida soldiers of fortune.

WHEN IT HAPPENED, in 1968, Sturgis told reporters it was a commando raid on Castro's Cuba.

Now, almost five years later to the day, the U.S. Justice Department is preparing to prosecute him and six other South Florida men on charges that the mysterious Mexican mission really was a conspiracy to smuggle stolen automobiles out of the United States.

Scheduled for arraignment in Miami Sept. 10, Sturgis now is in the federal prison in Danbury, Conn., serving a 40-year provisional sentence for his part in the Watergate break-in.

In Texas, a codefendant, former South Florida resident Jerry Buchanan, has claimed the whole car theft case merely is a government

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ploy to force Sturgis to talk about the 1972 burglary of the Democratic National Committee headquarters.

WHAT REALLY happened during the 1968 Mexican adventure until now has been a closely guarded secret, known only to the participants and, possibly, the FBI agents who have been tracking them for five long years.

Last week, however, Robert Curtis of Pompano Beach, a member of Sturgis's "Secret Army Organization" and a key government witness scheduled to testify at this month's upcoming trial, told his story in an exclusive interview with The Herald.

With Sturgis on record as claiming the entire affair was an anti-Communist foray against Castro, and with the Justice Department claiming it was merely a cover for car theft, Curtis takes a middle position.

According to him, it was some of both. And Robert Curtis has reason to know. He was the bearded man who drove the red-and-white Olds across the border. And later he did the same with two other allegedly stolen cars listed in the government indictment.

As Curtis relates it, the whole thing began with a classified ad.

APPEARING SPORADICALLY in various newspa-



—Associated Press Wirephoto

Sturgis On Way to Washington, D.C., Jail
... after arrest in Watergate

pers in July and August 1968, the ad called for "young men interested in adventure, intrigue and foreign travel."

It indicated that the work was with a mercenary army in South America. Pay was described as "very high." Those interested were invited to contact Col. Francisco Quesada in care of Ray Sandstrom, a Fort Lauderdale lawyer.

When reporters inquired about the ad in 1968, Sandstrom, who spent weekends flying cargo to Saigon for Airlift International as a part-time pilot, said the ad was placed without his knowledge.

Last week, however, Sandstrom told The Herald that the advertisement appeared after Sturgis "asked me if he could use my address to get some mail, and I let him."

Sandstrom said Sturgis told him the mail concerned an anti-Castro mission into Mexico; no one, according to him, said anything about car theft.

ALONG WITH others who answered the ad, Robert Curtis was told that the mysterious "Col. Quesada" was in charge. Sandstrom said Quesada "may be Cuban," and Sturgis described Quesada as a former Cuban doctor who had fled into exile and formed a "Secret Army Organization" in Venezuela.

There was some vague talk, later, that the colonel was flying as a mercenary in the Congo. No one ever saw him. Government sources are now convinced that "Col. Quesada" actually was Sturgis.

At any rate it was Sturgis, identifying himself as "Frank Fiorini," who greeted the 50 men who answered the ad and came to a meeting in the back room of a truck sales company on Miami's NW 36th Street.

ANYONE WHO KNEW much about the anti-Castro movement in Miami had heard of Frank Fiorini. He had fought with Castro, and once was photographed, gun

in hand, standing proudly on the fresh mass grave of 75 Batista loyalists executed by the Castro regime.

Later, he switched sides and claimed to have made a daring propaganda raid in which anti-Castro leaflets allegedly were dropped from a plane over Cuba. Sturgis — or Fiorini, as he then was known — was a controversial soldier of fortune, and precisely the kind of man who might advertise for followers who wanted adventure, danger, and high pay.

"He told us men with two kinds of experience would get preference for this job," Curtis says. "Ex-cons and military."

There were more meetings. According to the indictment, they continued "during July, August and September of 1968 . . . at various locations," including Sturgis's residence at 2515 NW 122nd St.

Sturgis was present, the indictment charges, as were codefendants Jerry Buchanan and Max Gonzalez (also known as Max Gorman) and two unindicted conspirators, Richard G. Brown and Robert Curtis.

CURTIS SAYS Sturgis told the others that he was organizing a "Secret Army Organization" to "attack Castro ships and stop trade with Cuba, and eventually attack Cuba itself."

Curtis, then 31 and a former Marine, was impressed.

"Frank painted a beautiful picture. He said he was the phantom flyer who had dropped leaflets over Cuba. He said we was going in and infiltrate with the Cuban people in the mountains, and 50 per cent of them would join us.

"He said it could be a one-way trip, but we could make \$60,000 in three years, and we'd have a \$10,000 insurance contract.

"I thought it was an adventure."

According to Curtis, he and about 15 others signed formal contracts with the "Secret Army Organization," and Sturgis stamped the contracts with a notary's seal, but kept all the copies.

FIVE YEARS ago this weekend, Curtis and other members of the group prepared to leave for Mexico. Curtis recalls the experience as "just like going back in the service . . .

"I quit my job and sold my car and my truck. I purchased a rifle with a scope. Then there was a delay, and I sat for a week in a motel in Fort Lauderdale, waiting."

The waiting would be Curtis's eventual undoing, for it was then that he rented that red-and-white Oldsmobile, vehicle identification number 354878D118437.

In what the U.S. Attorney's office admits may be a self-serving claim by their prospective witness, Curtis blames Sturgis for the car's ending up in Mexico.

"Frank said, 'You're gonna have to take the rental car.' I said, 'What do you mean? That car's rented in my name.' He said, 'That's all right.'"

(If Sturgis indeed said it was all right, he was wrong. In 1969, a Broward County jury took just 20 minutes to find Curtis guilty of unauthorized use of the car, a crime for which he went to jail.)

ACCORDING TO the indictment, the rented Olds was one of at least three South Florida cars that entered Mexico with Sturgis's self-styled army. Max Gonzalez allegedly

drove a new red Chevrolet, and Lomen Ray Bruce transported a new ivory-colored Chevrolet. The ivory Chevy, like the Olds, was a rented car. It isn't clear where the red one came from, and the government does not claim it was stolen.

By October 7, the indictment says, the Floridians traveling in the various cars had regrouped in Guadalajara, Mexico. According to Curtis, the cars disappeared and the would-be freedom fighters "hung" around a Mexican motel.

Then, Curtis says, he and Richard Brown were told that "we had to go back to Texas and rent another car. Frank had a typewriter with a leather case. Sewn into the case were Florida license tags, blank titles, birth certifi-

cate forms and blank registration forms."

Armed with the typewriter kit and a Gulf Oil travel card in the name of Charles Connell, Curtis and Brown went to Brownsville, Tex., and rented a 1969 maroon Ford Torino with a black stripe on the side.

"We put on a Florida tag and throw away the Texas tag." Then they drove the car into Mexico.

LESS THAN a week later, according to the indictment, Curtis was at it again, on orders from Sturgis and Buchanan.

Curtis remembers this trip as the wildest one: "Frank said, 'Bob, you got to go back into Texas and get another car. You have 15 minutes to get ready.'"

Curtis took a bus to Brownsville. This time he used the Gulf card to pick up a red 1969 Mustang so new that the odometer showed only three miles. Averaging 110 m.p.h., Curtis sped back across the border. The car had 800 miles on it when he got to Guadalajara.

"I FELT kind of bad about it, because the rental guy said he just had two, and somebody had taken one, and what was thinking was, 'Well, now you don't have any.'"

Finally, the time came to launch the long-promised commando raid. The group moved to Progreso, Mexico, and boarded a yacht called the Amigo. The Mexican captain later claimed the Americans hijacked his ship. Curtis confirms it, saying the captain and his mate were forced at gunpoint to sail where Sturgis told them.

The directions apparently weren't overly expert. The raiders never came anywhere near Cuba. The Amigo ran aground on the reefs off British Honduras, and the soldiers of fortune found themselves jailed in that country's capital, Belize.

What happened after that is not altogether clear. Curtis is under the impression that George Smathers, then a U.S. senator from Florida, intervened on behalf of the Sturgis group. But his account admittedly is based only on what he says Sturgis told him:

"THEY LET FRANK make a phone call. He called Sen. Smathers in Washington, D.C., and then he (Sturgis) came back and told us we were going to get some political help."

Efforts to reach Smathers for comment were unsuccessful last week, although messages were left with his Miami and Washington offices.

It seems clear that somebody in Washington stepped in to help because Sandstrom, the Fort Lauderdale lawyer, says he got a call "from a man at the State Department, wanting to know if I could go down to British Honduras and represent them (the Sturgis group)."

It wasn't necessary. Three at a time, the men were freed and flown to the United States, where they were not arrested upon their return.

"It seemed strange to me," Sandstrom says. "I gather it (the raid) had the tacit approval of somebody in the government, or they would have been in trouble."

SOME OF THE reporters who interviewed Sturgis upon his return to Miami were skeptical as to whether the raid actually was intended to reach Cuba. They pointed out that to sail from Progreso, supposedly for Cuba, and to hit Honduras instead is to miss the ostensible target by nearly 400 miles.

Sporting a gray-streaked beard, the chubby, dark haired Sturgis stood his ground. The plan had been to rendezvous with another

boat, he insisted.

"We planned to stage the raid with about 40 men after the rendezvous," he said.

Curtis, who claims to have been at Sturgis's side during most of the mission, never heard of the second boat or the additional men.

Nor, Curtis says, has he ever seen any of the "very high" pay he was promised.

On his return to the states, he was interviewed by the FBI and told to go home. For six months, the entire affair seemed to be over.

THEN ONE DAY he parked his custom Corvette in front of a Fort Lauderdale Seven-11 and found himself surrounded by policemen. He was charged with stealing the rented Oldsmobile, and convicted of the lesser charge of unauthorized possession.

Curtis is the only member of the Sturgis group yet to go to jail as a result of the Mexican mission. He has agreed to testify as a federal witness, and he says a federal prosecutor has told him the case involves more than 100 stolen cars.

Curtis disagrees with

Buchanan's argument that the car theft conspiracy case is merely a government move to pressure Sturgis into talking about Watergate.

(In a recent interview in Texas, Buchanan questioned the timing of the indictments. "Why, after five years, do they bring up these charges?" he asked.)

Pressed to explain why it took the government five years to get around to prosecuting car theft, U.S. Attorney Robert W. Rust of Miami explained that "we wanted to include all possible evidence" and that some of the evidence had to be gathered in Texas, and some in Florida, which made for a disjointed investigation.

UNLIKE BUCHANAN, Curtis is satisfied with the government's explanation that it simply took a long time to put the case together.

But Curtis admits he has plenty of unanswered questions of his own.

Was the mysterious "Col. Quesada" really just another name for Sturgis, alias Fiorini?

When Sturgis spoke vaguely of higher-ups, telling the men that he was receiving orders from someone above him, was he referring to the CIA?

Or was the great anti-Castro expedition merely a highly original cover for car theft, as the government contends?

Curtis has his own opinion:

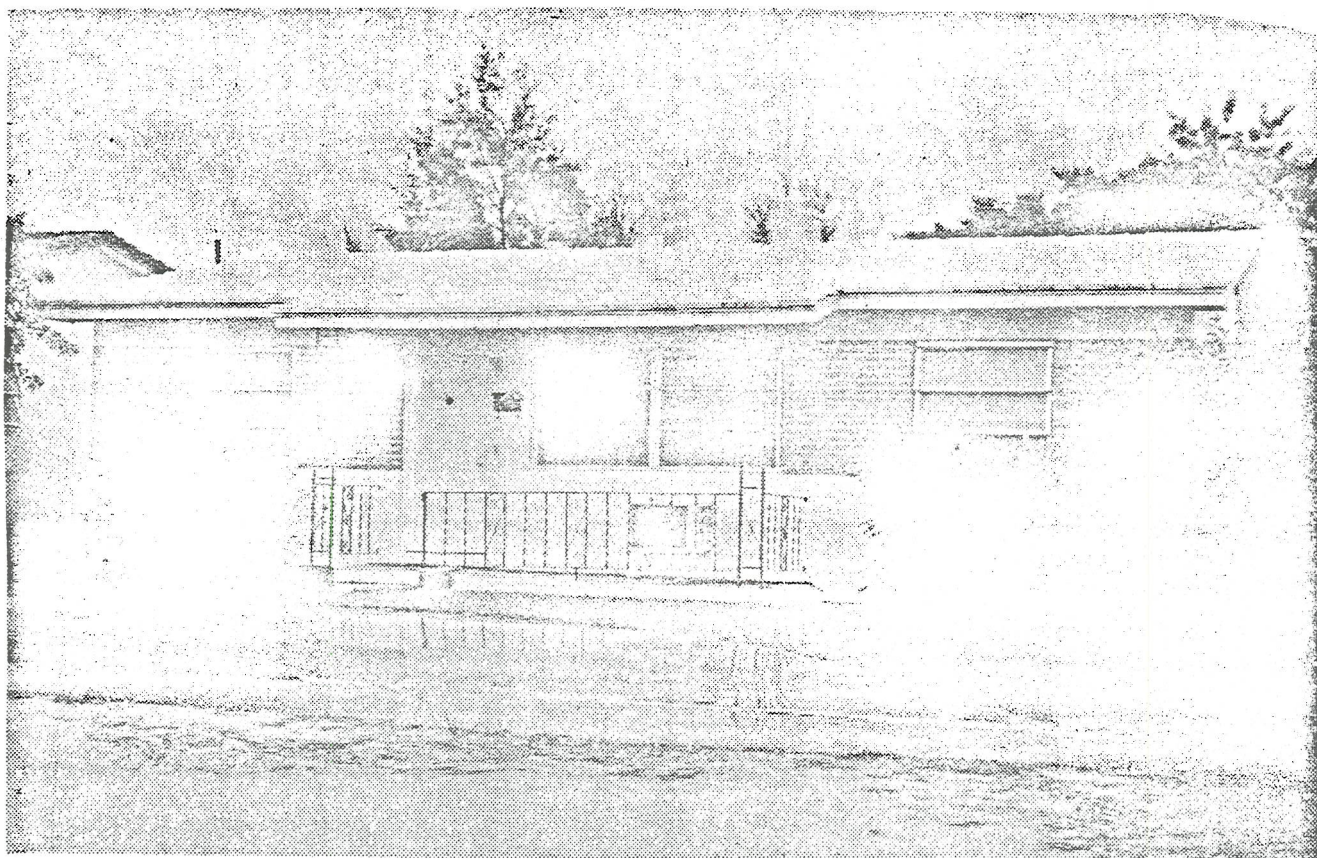
"He (Sturgis) stole the cars to finance the expedition. He was sincere about fighting Castro — Frank's whole life was to fight the Communists.

"The problem was how he done it," Curtis says. "Frank was just a born con man. He'd lie to you and make you believe it.

"He said there was thousands of dollars in Swiss and Bahamas banks to cover the organization.

"He said there was big money behind him in a lot of South American countries.

"He really set us up...and he could of got us all killed."



—Herald Staff Photo by DAVE DIDIO

Sturgis' Mexican Adventurers Sometimes Met at His Miami Residence
... the house, at 2515 NW 122nd St., was one of several places the group held sessions