

## A Classic Case of Deception

Antonio J. Mendez

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### **Background: Exfiltration and the CIA**

When briefing the CIA's Directorate of Operations (DO) or other components of the Intelligence Community (IC) about the Office of Technical Services' (OTS) exfiltration capability, I always made a point to remind them that "readiness" is the key. This is one of the full-time concerns of my former OTS office, the Graphics and Authentication Division (GAD).

In arranging for the escape of refugees and other people of potential intelligence value who are subject to political persecution and hostile pursuit, prior planning is not always possible because they show up at odd hours in out-of-the-way places. Current surveys and collection of up-to-date intelligence regarding travel controls and procedures are vital. OTS engages in this activity worldwide.

The readiness to move clandestine agents out of harm's way using quasi-legal methods is equally important. CIA's policy and practice are to bring its valuable human assets in from the cold when they can no longer remain in place. Sometimes this includes their families. Public Law 110 gives the IC the authority to resettle these people in the United States as US persons when the time comes and the quota allows.

OTS/GAD and its successor components have serviced these kinds of operations since OSS days. The "authentication" of operations officers and their agents by providing them with personal documentation

and disguise, cover legends and supporting data, "pocket litter," and so forth is fundamental deception tradecraft in clandestine operations. Personal documentation and disguise specialists, graphic artists, and other graphics specialists spend hundreds of hours preparing the materials, tailoring the cover legends, and coordinating the plan.

Infiltrating and exfiltrating people into and out of hostile areas are the most perilous applications of this tradecraft. The mental attitude and demeanor of the subject is as important as the technical accuracy of the tradecraft items. Sometimes, technical operations officers actually lead the escapees through the checkpoints to ensure that their confidence does not falter at the crucial moment.

### **Operation in Iran: Going Public**

The operational involvement of GAD officers in the exfiltration from Iran of six US State Department personnel on 28 January 1980 was a closely held secret until the CIA decided to reveal it as part of the Agency's 50th anniversary celebrations in 1997.

David Martin, the CBS News correspondent covering national security issues in Washington, DC, had the story early on, as did Mike Ruane of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. The Canadian Broadcasting Company and *Reader's Digest* both have done serious pieces since the CIA opened the files on this important success story.

Jean Pellerier's book, *Canadian Caper*, published in 1980, mentions that Canada—whose diplomats in Tehran had hidden and cared for the six American "houseguests" after Iranian militants seized the US Embassy—had received CIA help in the form of forged entries in Canadian passports to enable Canadian Ambassador to Iran Kenneth Taylor to engineer the escape of the six from Iran. A brief passage in Hamilton Jordan's book, *Crisis*, alludes to CIA officers on the scene in Tehran. After he left office, former President Carter, in statements to the media, gave hints of even more credit due his administration for the only true operational success of the hostage crisis.

My recollections of the long national emergency—which began on 4 November 1979 with the US Embassy takeover and ended with the release of the 52 hostages<sup>1</sup> on Inauguration Day in January 1981—encompass several major plans and operational actions focused on Iran that were supported by OTS. These included intelligence-gathering, deception options, the hostage rescue effort, secret negotiations with the Iranian Government; and exfiltrations of agents and the "Canadian six."

In those days, the atmosphere in CIA was one of full alert. OTS, like many Agency components, was buzzing with intense activity. There are numerous stories about technical and operational innovations resulting from the emergency-like environment; the rescue of the six is one of many such stories.

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### **New Job, New Challenge**

On 11 December 1979, about a month after the takeover of our Embassy in Tehran, I moved from my job as Chief, OTS, Disguise Section, to Chief, OTS, Authentication Branch. I had operational responsibility worldwide for disguise, false documentation, and forensic monitoring of questioned documents for counterterrorism or counterintelligence purposes.

I had already spent the first days of the crisis creating a deception operation designed to defuse the crisis. President Carter decided not to use this plan, however. He has since lamented that decision.

The requirement for dealing with the six State Department employees hiding under the care of the Canadian Embassy in Iran was one of many challenges I had to address on my first day on the new job. I immediately formed a small team to work on this problem.

The complexities were evident. We needed to find a way to rescue six Americans with no intelligence background, and we would have to coordinate a sensitive plan of action with another US Government department and with senior policymakers in

the US and Canadian administrations. The stakes were high. A failed exfiltration operation would receive immediate worldwide attention and would seriously embarrass the US, its President, and the CIA. It would probably make life even more difficult for all American hostages in Iran. The Canadians also had a lot to lose; the safety of their people in Iran and security of their Embassy there would be at risk.

But we had maintained a very impressive record of success with operations of this type over many years.

### **Collecting Basic Data**

We had recently moved one agent out of Iran through Tehran's Mehrabad Airport. As a result of this operation, we had a body of technical data on the airport controls and the competence and efficiency of the people operating them. The task of collecting and analyzing current document intelligence thus would be a matter of verifying fairly recent information and ensuring that it was up to date, rather than having to start from scratch.

We also were continuing to support the infiltration and exfiltration of a few intelligence officers and agents who were traveling in and out of Iran on intelligence-gathering and hostage-rescue planning operations. We could use these people as collection sources.

### **Major Potential Obstacles**

We were most concerned about the exit controls at the airport. Long

before the revolution, Iranian authorities had adopted a two-sheet embarkation/disembarkation form. This form was printed on carbonless paper and filled out by the traveler upon entry. The authorities retained a white sheet, and the traveler retained a yellow copy to present at the exit control point when departing. The clerk was supposed to match the two forms to verify that the traveler left before his visa expired. Many countries in the world have similar systems; few complete the verification process on the spot, if ever.

We hoped to determine whether the militants operating at Mehrabad were completing this kind of positive check before travelers cleared the airport. Earlier in 1979, the control personnel were unprofessional and did not collect the forms unless the departing traveler volunteered them. We had to determine whether this was still the case.

Another significant challenge we faced was to come up with a cover story and supporting documentation for a group of North American men and women. We debated three interconnected issues related to this aspect of our planning: the type and nationality of passports we should use, the kind of cover, and whether we should move the six out in a group or individually.

CIA management had strong opinions on these points, as did the State Department. And the Canadian Government would have to be drawn into the discussions at some point. Once it was, it too would also tend to take strong positions.

### The Passport Question

The debate over passports began with the question of whether to use ordinary US passports, Canadian passports, or other foreign passports at our disposal. CIA managers were not comfortable with the idea of using foreign passports. They were concerned that persons who were not intelligence professionals could well prove unable to sustain a foreign cover story.

The Iranians, moreover, had embarrassed the US by finding a pair of OTS-produced foreign passports in the US Embassy that had been issued to two CIA officers posted in Tehran. One of these officers was among the hostages being held in the Embassy. The discovery of the passports was the topic of extensive media coverage in Iran and other countries.

Regarding Canadian passports, we initially doubted that Canada would be prepared to overlook its own passport laws. We also did not think Ottawa would be willing to put Canadian citizens and facilities in Iran in the increased danger they would face if the true purpose and American use of the passports were exposed.

Given these drawbacks and obstacles to the Canadian and other foreign passport options, it seemed that OTS would have to take on the task of building a cover for the use of US passports. But we feared that such an exercise would call unwanted attention to the six subjects and put them at greater risk.

On balance, our experience and judgment ultimately favored using Canadian passports, despite the risks.

We decided to push for this option, but to concentrate first on devising cover for the six before making final recommendations on the type of passport to be used.

### Quest for Information

We began an all-source quest for information on the types of groups traveling in and out of Mehrabad Airport. In the meantime, the DO's Near East (NE) Division was developing information on overland "black" exfiltration options, hoping to identify a smuggler's route or a "rat line" into Turkey. Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot had used such a plan to exfiltrate two of his employees early in the Iranian revolution. He had already offered support to the Agency for hostage rescue efforts.

We soon developed information which indicated that groups traveling legally to Iran included oilfield technicians from European-based companies, news teams of all nationalities covering the hostage situation, and all sorts of curiosity seekers and do-gooders from around the world. Many of these people were US citizens. None fit our purposes, given the profiles and patterns of these groups and the careful scrutiny and control applied to them by the Iranian security and immigration services. We believed it was important that professional intelligence officers make the final probe into Iran and meet personally with the six in order to assess their state of mind and their ability to carry out the operation.

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### Talks with the Canadians

We requested a meeting with senior NE managers to present our position and to review the options. We were also aware that the senior NE officer in charge of rescuing the six and conducting liaison with the Canadians on the crisis had already visited Ottawa, where his talks with officials in a Canadian government ministry had included the topic of Canadian passports. Our meeting with NE Division officers went fairly well, and they agreed in principle with our position.

Because the Canadians were understandably concerned with the mechanics of the exfiltration and how their passports would be used, we suggested that OTS get approval to go to Ottawa to explain these details. An OTS documents specialist, "Joe Missouri," and I arranged to depart for Ottawa immediately. We prepared passport photos and appropriate alias bio data for the six, which we would take with us to Ottawa in the hope that we could win the Canadians over. We had already directed many questions to Canadian Ambassador Taylor, and his replies had given us a good feeling about his penchant for clandestine planning.

In our discussions with Canadian officials, we learned that the Parliament in Ottawa had already approved the use of Canadian passports for non-citizens for humanitarian purposes. We immediately requested six spares for the six houseguests to give us a redundant capability for the operation. We also asked for two additional passports for use by CIA "escorts." The Canadians agreed to the spares, but they declined to give us two additional passports because Parliament had not approved the exception to their passport law to

cover professional intelligence officers.

We had an opportunity while meeting with our Canadian ministry contact, "Lon DeGaldo," to display a bit of magic. He thought one of the proposed aliases had a slightly Semitic sound—not a good idea in a Muslim country. We quickly picked another name, and I forged a signature in the appropriate handwriting on the margin of a fresh set of passport photos. This trick was mostly showmanship, but it helped to establish our credentials as experts.

Next, we discussed cover legends. We explained the different points of view on group cover versus individual cover, the need to gather more information on travelers, and our intention to send an officer or officers into Tehran to do a final probe of the controls and to meet with the six houseguests.

This gave me an opportunity to try out an idea for a cover legend that had occurred to me the night before at home in Maryland while I was packing. Cover legends hold up best when their details closely follow the actual experience or background of the user. If possible, the cover should be sufficiently dull so that it does not pique undue interest. In this case, however, I believed we should try to devise a cover so exotic that no one would imagine it was being used for operational purposes.

### Hollywood Consultation

In my former job as chief of the OTS Disguise Section, I had engaged the services of many consultants in the entertainment industry. Our makeup consultant, "Jerome Calloway," was a technical makeup expert who had received many awards. (He recently was awarded CIA's Intelligence Medal of Merit, one of the few non-staffers to be so honored.) His motivation for helping us was purely patriotic.

We had already involved Jerome in the hostage crisis. One week after the takeover, I had invited him to Washington to help prepare a deception option related to the crisis. He, the disguise team, and I had worked around the clock to complete this option in five days.

When we received orders to stand down on that undertaking, Jerome returned to California. Before leaving, he reaffirmed his desire to help in any way possible in the rescue of our diplomats. As soon as I checked into my hotel in Ottawa, I called Jerome at his home. He had no idea what I was working on. I simply said that I was in Ottawa and that I needed to know how many people would be in an advance party scouting a site for a film production.

Jerome replied that this would require about eight people, including a production manager, a cameraman, an art director, a transportation manager, a script consultant, an associate producer, a business manager, and a director. Their purpose would be to look at a shooting site from artistic, logistic, and financial points of view.

The associate producer represented the financial backers. The business manager concerned himself mainly

with banking arrangements; even a 10-day shoot could require millions of dollars spent on the local economy. The transportation manager rented a variety of vehicles, ranging from limousines to transport the stars to heavy equipment required for constructing a set. The production manager made it all come together. The other team members were technicians who created the film footage from the words in the script.

Because movie-making is widely known as an unusual business, most people would not be surprised that a Hollywood production company would travel around the world looking for the right street or hillside to shoot a particular scene.

### Cover Options

Recommending this kind of cover for most clandestine activities would be out of the question, but I sensed that it might be just right for this operation. I tried the idea on Lon, our ministry contact, and he was intrigued with it. Certainly it was not incompatible with the Canadian passport option. Film companies are typically made up of an international cast of characters. The Canadian motion picture industry was well established.

We discussed the motion-picture cover option as well as another idea or two. Lon too had thought about the problem of cover; he had an idea for a group of food economists who might be seen traveling to various places in the Third World. The State Department had already given us a suggestion about a group of unemployed school teachers looking for jobs in international schools around the world. We felt obliged to

mention this idea, even though we were not too excited about it.

We adjourned our meeting and made arrangements for follow-up talks. We then sent a cable to CIA Headquarters outlining our accomplishments, including our discussions on cover options. This was the first time that we reported the movie idea.

Over the next week (it was now late December), I commuted between Ottawa and Washington. An OTS team began forming in Ottawa to prepare the documentation and disguise items for a Canadian pouch to Tehran. The GAD team at OTS continued to collect information on Iranian border controls. All worldwide messages on the subject were being sent and answered with the Flash indicator, CIA's highest precedence.

Senior CIA managers did not summarily reject the Hollywood option, recognizing that it could have advantages even beyond the problem of rescuing the six. The thinking was as follows:

The idea of using paramilitary means to rescue the hostages held at the US Embassy had seemed impossible, given Tehran's geographical location. The movie cover might enable us to approach the Iranian Ministry of National Guidance with a proposal to shoot a movie sequence in or near Tehran. The Ministry had been charged with countering negative publicity on Iran by promoting tourism. Tehran was also looking for ways to alleviate some of the cash-flow problems caused when the United States froze Iran's assets in the US. A motion picture production on Iranian soil could be an economic

shot in the arm and would provide an ideal public relations tool to help counteract the adverse publicity stemming from the hostage situation.

A relative "moderate"—Abulhassan Bani-Sadr—was about to be elected President of Iran, and we judged it possible that he could be sold on these economic points and then might be able to gain agreement from the radical factions of the regime. If so, the cover for infiltrating the Delta Force (in preparation for a hostage rescue attempt at the Embassy) as a team of movie set construction workers and camera crews to prepare the set was a natural. We imagined that it might be possible to conceal weapons and other material in the motion picture equipment.

### Forming a Film Company

One weekend in early January, between trips to Ottawa and planning sessions with NE Division, I made a quick visit to California. I brought along \$10,000 in cash, the first of several black-bag deliveries of funds to set up our motion picture company. I arrived on Friday night and met with Jerome and one of his associates in a suite of production offices they had reserved for our purposes on the old Columbia Studio lot in Hollywood. I had invited a CIA contracts officer to the meeting to act as witness to the cash delivery and to follow up as bagman and auditor for the run of the operation. It would take two years to clear all accounts on these matters.

Our production company, "Studio Six Productions," was created in four days, including a weekend, in mid-January. Our offices had previously

been occupied by Michael Douglas, who had just completed producing *The China Syndrome*.

Jerome and his associate were masters at working the Hollywood system. They had begun applying "grease" and calling in favors even before I arrived. Simple things such as the installation of telephones were supposed to take weeks, but we had everything we needed down to the paper clips by the fourth day.

We arranged for full-page ads in *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*, the two trade papers most important to any business publicity campaign. We tried to keep Jerome's well-known name hidden, but the "trades" had their reporters hot on our trail, and the word was out that something big was brewing in the industry.

When the press discovered that Jerome was connected with this independent production company, interest mounted and more press play followed. Our efforts to keep Jerome's involvement secret actually added credibility to our putative filmmaking company. Hollywood, moreover, was an ideal place to create and dismantle a major cover entity overnight. The Mafia and many shady foreign investors were notorious for backing productions in Hollywood, where fortunes are frequently made and lost. It is also an ideal place to launder money.

### Picking a Script

Once Studio Six Productions was set up, we tackled the problem of identifying an appropriate script. Jerome and I sat around his kitchen table

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discussing what the theme should be. Because *Star Wars* had made it big only recently, many science-fiction, fantasy, and superhero films were being produced. We decided we needed a script with "sci-fi," Middle Eastern, and mythological elements. Something about the glory of Islam would be nice, too. Jerome recalled a recent script that might serve our purpose, and he hauled it out of a pile of manuscripts submitted for his consideration.

This script fit our purpose beautifully, particularly because no uninitiated person could decipher its complicated story line. The script was based on an award-winning sci-fi novel. The producers had also envisioned building a huge set that would later become a major theme park. They had hired a famous comic-strip artist to prepare concepts for the sets. This gave us some good "eyewash" to add to a production portfolio.

We decided to repackage our borrowed script by decorating it with the appropriate logo and title markings. The only copy of the script we needed would be carried by me as a prop to be shown to the Iranians in my role as production manager—and only in the event we were questioned at the airport in Tehran.

### Argo

Jerome and I then set about picking a name for our movie. We needed something catchy from Eastern

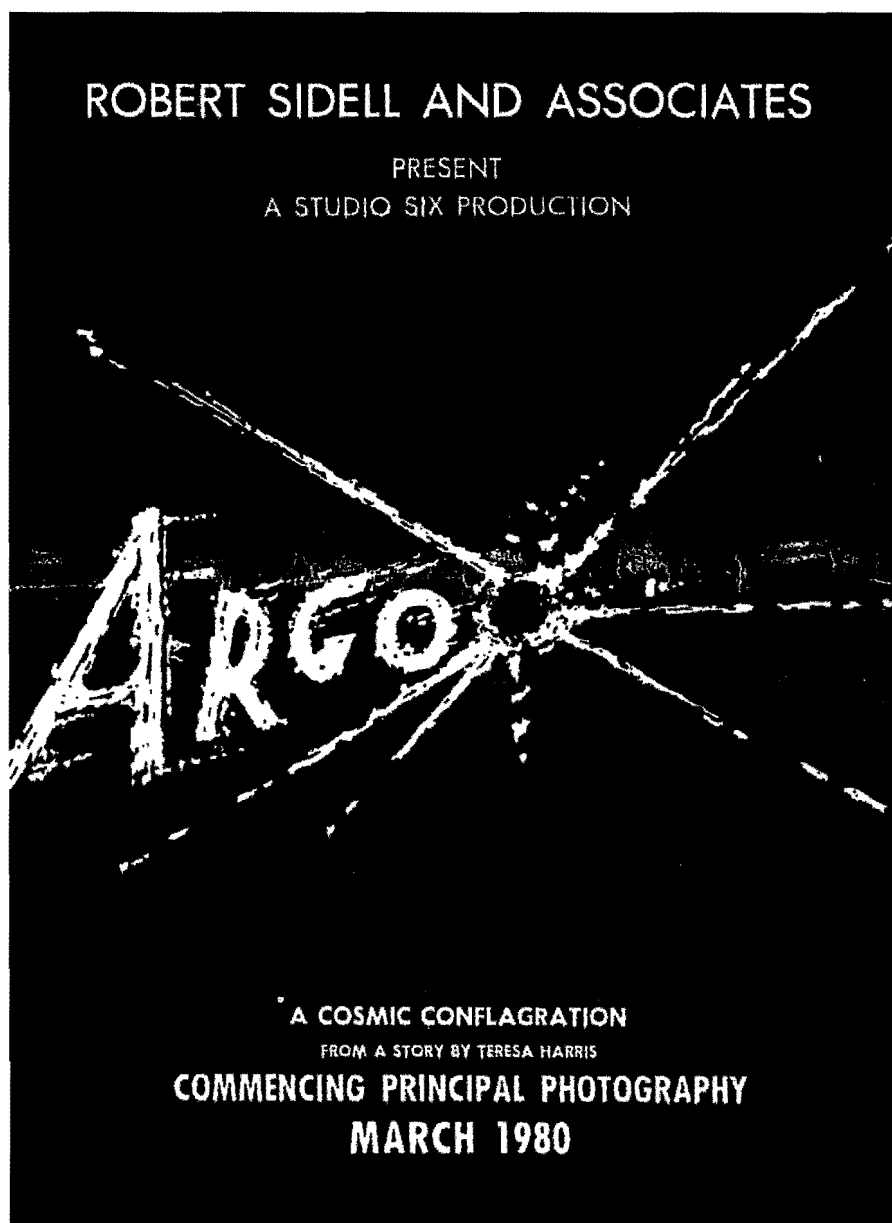
culture or mythology. After several tries, we hit on it! During our 10-year association, he had proven to be a great story and joke teller. He once told a group of us a profane "knock-knock" joke, with the word "Argo" in the punch line.

This word became an in-house disguise-team recognition signal and battle cry. We used it to break the tension that often built up when we were working long hours under difficult circumstances preparing for an important operation. Jerome remembered this. He also recalled that the name stemmed from mythology. He looked up the definition of Argo and confirmed it as the name of the ship on which Jason and the Argonauts sailed to rescue the Golden Fleece from the many-headed dragon holding it captive in the sacred garden. Perfect! This precisely described the situation in Iran.

I quickly designed an "Argo" logo, which we used for full-page ads in the trades. The ads proclaimed that "Studio Six Productions Presents 'Argo'... A cosmic conflagration ... story by Teresa Harris." (Teresa Harris was the alias we selected for our story consultant; it would be used by one of the six awaiting our arrival in Tehran.)

### Calling the Iranian Consulate

On my last day in California, I made our first business call from our studio offices to the Iranian Consulate in San Francisco, using my alias. I said I required a visa and instructions on procedures for obtaining permission to scout a shooting location in Tehran. My party of eight would be



made up of six Canadians, a European, and a Latin American.

The Latin American would be an OTS authentication officer, "Julio," who was posted in Europe. His languages were Spanish, French, and Arabic, and he had considerable exfiltration experience. We had selected

OTS-produced documentation for his cover legend as an associate producer representing our production company's ostensible South American backers. I would travel on an OTS-produced European passport.

The call to the Iranian Consulate was a washout. Officials there suggested

that we apply at the nearest Iranian Consulate in our area. This was not surprising because many Iranian diplomats were carried over from the Shah's regime, and most were unsure of their current status and their visa-granting authorities.

I departed on the "red-eye special" that night with all the trappings of a Hollywood type, including matchbooks from the Brown Derby Restaurant, where Studio Six Productions held a farewell dinner for me.

### Final Technical Preparations

Back in Washington, the various efforts being mounted against Iran were still going full tilt. Our operations plan for the rescue of the six was being implemented at the working levels of OTS and NE Division, but it had not yet been coordinated with or approved by policymakers.

My immediate task was to participate in the final technical preparations for our three cover options. I had collected several exemplars of supporting documentation for our production party that were to be reproduced by the OTS graphics specialists to pad the wallets of our party. The script had to be altered and a presentation portfolio prepared for our production manager.

Joe Missouri, the document specialist who had accompanied me on the initial trip to Ottawa, had remained behind at that time to negotiate for ancillary documentation to support the Canadian part of the legend. This had required special authorization from senior levels of the Canadian Government, which Missouri managed to obtain. This was

quite an accomplishment for a young officer.

By this time, Joe had returned to Washington and taken charge of the Argo portfolio. Joe had always been an artist at the typewriter. He took the roles of various members of the production party and fleshed them out in the form of resumes. This clever ploy provided briefing papers for each subject that could be carried in the open in the production manager's portfolio. When completed, this portfolio had everything needed to sell even the most sophisticated investment banker on our movie.

A week after my return from California, the US and Canadian document and disguise packages were ready for the Canadian pouch. The OTS team in Ottawa had also been working on the Canadian documents, applying the finishing touches to the passports. We had 12 Canadian passports and 12 US passports, a redundant capability for both nationalities. The redundant documents were designed for final issuance by the Canadians in Tehran in case Julio or I failed to get in or did not show up at the Canadian Embassy after we arrived. Julio and I would complete the second set of passports in Tehran, giving us last-minute on-site flexibility.

A highly detailed set of instructions on the use of the documents and on the final briefing of the subjects had also been prepared for easy reference by non-experts. Airline tickets were enclosed showing around-the-world itineraries. Joe and I had found lapel pins and baggage stickers with a Canadian maple leaf design; these too were part of the kit.

A review of the US documents package on the night before we left for Ottawa to load the Canadian pouch revealed a possibly embarrassing problem. The Canadians were succeeding in getting backstopped Canadian documents. CIA's ability to obtain similar backstopped alias documents was too slow, and we had not been able to obtain internal CIA permission to acquire these for our subjects. The US document packages were going to be terribly outclassed by the Canadians. In fact, the only reason for sending US alias documents was to appease one of the policymaking levels participating in the operations planning. The plan was still not finally approved or coordinated in our own government.

If our Canadian counterparts took inventory of the documents when we loaded the pouch, we would look silly. This bothered us. As soon as we arrived at the US Embassy in Ottawa the next morning, we made the rounds there collecting business cards and other wallet stuffers to fill out our package.

As it turned out, the loading of the "bag" did not include a close examination of our respective document packages, so we avoided embarrassment. The subjects themselves would have the final vote when presented with the choice of two passports, three cover stories, and the option of moving out individually or together. Because my OTS colleague and I ultimately would make the presentation of the choices in Tehran, we could greatly influence the decision.

The Canadian pouch or bag turned out to be the size of a pillowcase, barely big enough for our exfiltration kit of documents and disguise

materials. The Canadian couriers apparently had a much easier time than the typical US State Department courier, who usually accompanies several mailbag-sized pouches. The Canadian courier is only allowed one bag, and he keeps it with him at all times. Some of our extra disguise materials had to be left out of the bag to Tehran.

During this last trip to Ottawa, it became clear that the Canadians were losing patience with the Americans. We still had not obtained our government's final decision on our operations plan. They had made all sorts of concessions without hesitation. What was taking us so long to move? They insisted that final approval of all plans be accomplished as soon as possible. I promised to send that word back immediately.

### **Green Light**

Back at the Embassy, I prepared a long cable outlining every detail of the operation as I envisioned it. This was precisely the kind of summary we would send in before launching an exfiltration from a foreign location. It was slightly irregular for me to send this from Ottawa as the plan that the Canadians and I wanted to be approved.

I caught hell for that cable when I returned to Washington, but then was told it was a fine piece of work. The plan received final approval within two days, and our materials were en route to Tehran.



## Press Probes

A disturbing bit of information known to most of us involved in this operation had come to light weeks before. Certain members of the news media had figured out that the fuzzy information being provided to the press by our State Department spokesman in Washington regarding the exact number and identities of the hostages being held in the Embassy compound was a smoke-screen designed to hide the fact that six diplomats were still at large in Tehran.

The Canadians were aware that the Washington correspondent of Montreal's *La Presse* had already called on the Canadian Ambassador in Washington to voice his suspicions. The Ambassador asked him to sit on the information until after the exfiltration, promising him an exclusive on the story from the Canadian Government.

Ambassador Taylor's wife, meanwhile, had received a cryptic phone call at their residence in Tehran. The caller did not identify himself, and he asked for one of the six by name. Two of the six were staying with the Taylors, and the call was for one of them, Joseph Stafford. The other four were staying in the residence of the Canadian Deputy Chief of Mission, John Sheardown. The Canadians saw their situation in Tehran becoming tenuous. They began making discreet arrangements to close down their Embassy before it too was overrun.

## Moving to Europe

The next phase of the operation took place in Europe. The OTS shop there had been debriefing travelers, collecting data, and obtaining exemplars of the Iranian visas and entry cachets required for our up-to-date intelligence on Iranian document controls. Julio was gearing up his alias document package. My alias documentation was also being prepared there.

Julio and I planned to link up in Europe for our final launch into Tehran, tentatively set for 23 and 24 January. We intended to apply for Iranian visas separately in European cities. In case neither of us was successful, I had already arranged a fallback position. One of the CIA officers in Europe had an OTS-issued alias passport he used for operational meetings. Early in our data collection phase, we had instructed him to obtain an Iranian visa in this passport so we would have an exemplar. He got the visa. If necessary, I planned to borrow his alias and have a similar alias passport issued to me with a duplicate of his legally obtained visa.

## Visa Applications

On Monday 21 January, Julio left for Geneva, Switzerland, on his alias passport to apply for an Iranian visa. I left Washington on the same day for Europe. I was traveling on my true-name US official documents, but I was hand-carrying the Studio Six portfolio and certain collateral materials to fill out our documents packages.

I arrived in Europe on the morning of 22 January, and Julio returned from his trip that afternoon with his Iranian visa. I still had to obtain a visa in my alias passport. I planned to drive to Bonn the next day and to apply there. I hoped the Iranians there would issue it in a few hours, as they had for Julio in Geneva.

We received a Flash message from Ottawa that afternoon. Our exfiltration kits had arrived in Tehran, but Ambassador Taylor and one of his aides had reviewed the materials and discovered a mistake! The handwritten Farsi fill-in on the Iranian visas showed a date of issue sometime in the future. The Farsi linguist assisting our team in Ottawa had misinterpreted the Farsi calendar.

We fired a message back through Ottawa assuring Taylor this was no problem. The OTS officers could easily alter the mistake when they arrived in Tehran. The fallacy in this was that the mistake was in the set of passports prepared for use by Taylor if we did not arrive for some reason. If this was the case, a follow-up message would be prepared with carefully worded instructions for Taylor on how to correct the mistake.

On Wednesday 23 January, one of the OTS officers and I went to Bonn. I had my alias documentation and the Studio Six portfolio. I had altered my appearance slightly with a simple disguise. I was also wearing a green turtleneck sweater, which I would continue to wear through the run of the operation.

As we approached the Iranian Embassy in Bonn, I noted that the Embassy of my ostensible country of origin was nearby. If the Iranians

chose to do so, it would be perfectly proper for them to send me to my own Embassy for a letter of introduction before the visa was granted. I was dropped off down the block from the Iranian Embassy, and I walked back to the entrance to the consular section.

A half-dozen visa applicants were sitting in the reception area filling out applications. A handful of young Iranian "Revolutionary Guards" in civilian clothes were standing around scrutinizing everyone. It was then that I realized I had left the portfolio in the car when I was dropped off, but I had my alias passport and other personal identity documents. I filled out the forms and went to the clerk's window to give them to the consular official.

In response to the official's polite questions, I said, in my best accent, that the purpose of my visit to Tehran was to meet with business associates at the Sheraton Hotel in Tehran; they were flying in from Hong Kong today and were expecting me. I also said that I did not obtain a visa in my own country because I was in Germany on business when I received the telex about the meeting in Tehran. I received my visa in about 15 minutes.

### **Presidential OK**

Our plan for entry into Iran was for me to leave that evening (23 January), and to arrive at Mehrabad Airport the next day at 5 a.m. Julio would follow the same itinerary 24 hours later. If anything happened to one of us en route, the other might still get through.

As soon as I got back from Bonn, I sent a Flash message to Washington and Ottawa that I was ready. I received approval to launch within the hour. Thirty minutes later, however, I received another message from Washington directing me to delay my departure because the President wanted to give final approval and was being briefed at that moment.

After 30 minutes, I received the presidential OK in a terse message which said, "President has just approved the Finding. You may proceed on your mission to Tehran. Good luck." In terms of approvals, this case was the ultimate cliffhanger.

### **Entering Tehran**

Julio and I had an especially worthwhile chance meeting just before I left for the airport that evening. We had an opportunity to meet with another Agency officer who had been traveling in and out of Tehran in support of the hostage rescue operation. He would ultimately be responsible for creating the inside support mechanism. He had been in the "business" since serving with OSS and parachuting into Europe during World War II. He clearly was a master of the game, and gave us some useful insights about the situation at Mehrabad and in Tehran. This strengthened our confidence and gave us a better idea about how to behave.

Julio and I both arrived in Mehrabad at 5 a.m. on Friday 25 January. (I was a day late because of delays caused by bad weather.) Immigration controls were straightforward, and the disembarkation/embarkation form was still being used. The difference I noted this time from my previous experience with Mehrabad

immigration authorities was that the officer was a professional in uniform instead of an untrained civilian irregular. The immigration officers had gone into hiding at the beginning of the revolution. It appeared that they had now come back to work.

At entry, unlike my last visit, customs and security personnel were not overly concerned about foreigners. Because of Iran's balance-of-payment problems, they were especially interested in Iranian citizens leaving with valuables like fine Persian rugs or gold. The economic situation had become worse in the last few months, and we could expect the exit controls to be tighter.

We took a taxi to the Sheraton Hotel and checked in. Our next step was to go to the Swissair office downtown to reconfirm eight airline reservations for Monday morning to Zurich. In an exfiltration operation, it is important to reconfirm your space on the airplane for the day you are supposed to leave. Because it is difficult to bring the subjects to the point where they have the courage to walk into the airport, if they then have to backtrack because their flight did not arrive or had mechanical problems, or their reservations were lost, it would be doubly hard for them to get up their nerve next time. We chose Swissair because of its record of efficient and reliable service.

The Swissair office was not open yet. From my earlier trip to Tehran, I knew that the US Embassy was a few blocks down the street and that the Canadian Embassy also was supposed to be nearby.

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held inside, including CIA officers. The high walls were decorated with propaganda banners and posters celebrating the revolution. Although we knew our colleagues would experience some rough going during their captivity, we also knew there was nothing we could do to help at the time. We had to keep our attention on the task at hand.

### Canadian Embassy

Julio and I began looking for the Canadian Embassy. Although our map showed it to be located directly across a narrow side street from the US Embassy, the building we found was the Swedish Embassy.

There was an Iranian guard at the entrance who did not understand our questions and was perplexed by our street map. Just then, a young Iranian came along. He spoke to the guard, apparently asking him who were these confused-looking Westerners. He then spoke to Julio in German. The fellow was polite and helpful. He wrote down an address in Farsi, hailed a taxi for us, and gave the address to the taxi driver, who took us a considerable way across town to the Canadian Embassy.

Ambassador Taylor, who had been expecting us to arrive sometime that morning, was waiting upstairs in his outer office. We did not immediately recognize him as the Ambassador. He was a tall, lean, rather young, pleasant individual dressed in Western jeans and a plaid shirt and wearing cowboy boots. He wore “mod” glasses and had a full salt-and-pepper Afro-style haircut. This improbable-looking diplomat greeted us warmly.

Ken introduced us to his secretary, Laverna, a small, elderly lady who was pleasant and cheerful. During a short meeting in Ken’s office, he explained that most members of his staff already had quietly departed Tehran. There would be only five Canadians left after his family departed that afternoon. The remaining five, including himself, would depart on Monday 28 January for London shortly after the Swissair flight we hoped to board at 7:30 a.m. with the houseguests. Early on Monday, he planned to inform the Foreign Ministry by diplomatic letter that the Canadian Embassy would be closed temporarily.

We described briefly the things we needed to accomplish over the next few days, starting with a meeting with the houseguests so we could brief them on the plan and assess their ability to carry it off. We all agreed the meeting would occur at 5 p.m. at the suburban residence of John Sheardown, the Embassy’s second officer, where four of the six houseguests had been hiding since November.

At this initial meeting with Ken, we learned that at least two more ambassadors in the local diplomatic corps and some of their staff also were

involved in hiding and caring for the six. Ken and these other ambassadors were also visiting regularly with Bruce Laingen, the American chargé, who was under “house protection” in the Foreign Ministry. Laingen, another Embassy staff officer, and the Embassy security officer were to spend the entire crisis living in the rooms of the Foreign Ministry, where they had gone to protest the demonstrations at the gates of the US Embassy just as it was about to be overrun. Laingen was free to depart Iran any time, but he refused to abandon his colleagues.

We asked and received Ken’s permission to send a message to Washington through Ottawa, confirming our arrival in Iran and informing everyone concerned that we planned to meet with the six that evening. We were also introduced to Roger Lucy, who was house-sitting with the four Americans staying at Sheardown’s house. Roger spoke Farsi fluently; it was he who discovered our mistake on the visas.

Claude Gauthier was another member of Ken’s staff. He was a burly French Canadian responsible for the Embassy’s physical security. Claude earned the nickname of “Sledge” during these final days because he was destroying classified communications equipment with a 12-pound sledgehammer. Everyone at the Embassy was friendly and informal; they seemed amused by our business.

When it was time to go to meet the six, Julio and I left with Claude. Ken had left earlier to see his wife off at Mehrabad and to pick up the Staffords, the two houseguests who were staying with him. We all arrived at the Sheardown house at about the same time. The house was

on the outskirts of town in a well-to-do neighborhood. It was palatial, with a high wall surrounding it.

### Meeting the Six

The six houseguests rushed to meet us as we entered the house. They appeared in good spirits and were happy to see us. We spent the first few minutes getting acquainted. The six were two young married couples, Joseph and Kathleen Stafford and Mark and Cora Lijek, and two single men, Bob Anders and Lee Schatz. Anders, about 50, had been head of the consular section, and the two couples had worked for him. Schatz was a tall young man who was the agriculture attaché. Those from the Consulate had escaped out the back door to the street when the militants had been breaking in the front door. Schatz had had an office in a building across the street from the Embassy, and he had gone directly to the Swedish Embassy, where he hid for a week. The Swedish flag was his blanket.

I told them about the three cover stories that we were offering for their consideration. I also explained what had to be accomplished during the next two days and how we would proceed through the airport on Monday. There was considerable discussion about the mechanics of the controls and how we would respond if questioned about our presence in Tehran. Only one exhibited anxiety about the risks involved.

Finally, I instructed the six to go into the dining room to discuss among themselves whether they wanted to go to the airport in a group or individually and which cover story they

preferred. I waited about 15 minutes and then walked in on them. They were debating the questions, and I distracted them by doing a bit of sleight-of-hand with two sugar cubes. I had used this trick many times to illustrate how to set up a deception operation and to overcome apparent obstacles. It helped to persuade reluctant subjects that they were involved with professionals in the art of deception. The six decided to go as a group, using the Studio Six cover.

The six showed us around the house, where four of them had passed nearly three months in a fair amount of comfort. The huge, well-furnished house had a kitchen with enough equipment for a modern restaurant. The Americans had spent a good bit of their time planning and cooking gourmet dinners for themselves and the few outsiders they saw. They also had become masters at the game of Scrabble.

As we were being shown around, one of the other ambassadors and his attaché, Richard, arrived. They had visited the houseguests more than once. They wanted to meet the CIA officers who had come to oversee the escape of the six people they had come to know well. Both these men were to prove helpful to us.

When it was time for Julio and me to go back to our hotel, Claude dropped us down the block from the hotel. He would pick us up the next morning to take us to the Canadian Embassy. On Saturday, we had to put the finishing touches on the Canadian passports and send our final plan of action to Ottawa and Washington for approval.

### The Last Arrangements

The next two days passed swiftly. We spent most of Saturday filling in the passports with the appropriate entries, including the Iranian visas issued in Canada. The visa exemplar had been collected only recently for us by a Canadian friend in Ottawa. It was a better fit for the ostensible travel itinerary of the Studio Six team. Their cover legend and airline tickets showed them arriving in Tehran from Hong Kong at approximately the same hour that Julio and I had arrived from Zurich. Their flight had actually arrived on that day and time, and passengers disembarking would have been processed by the same immigration officers who had processed us. Consequently, the Iranian entry cachets stamped in our passports served as prime exemplars for those we entered in the passports of the six.

The worst thing that can happen when making false passport entries is to forge the signature of an immigration officer on an ostensible arrival cachet and then discover that this same individual is about to stamp you out of the country. He would know that he was not at work the day your passport says you arrived. You have to know how all these systems work.

The attaché, Richard, was dispatched to the airport to pick up a stack of the disembarkation/embarkation forms from an airline contact. Julio would complete the Farsi notations on enough of these, and each of the six would write in his or her false biographic information and sign in the new aliases. Again, the forms we had received and filled in on arrival were our models.

We spread out our forgery materials on a table in Ken Taylor's office. He spent most of his day making last-minute arrangements to close the Embassy, sitting nearby and listening to our banter about some fine point of making false documents, or consulting with us on some detail of the arrangements for the exfiltration. Claude was wielding his sledgehammer somewhere in the building and burning and shredding classified paper.

On Sunday morning, I completed a long cable outlining the operations plan, and the message was transmitted to Ottawa. One of the details in the plan explained that:

*... the six Canadians from Studio Six had called on the local Canadian Ambassador hoping that they could arrange for an appointment with the Ministry of National Guidance to present their proposal to use the local market for 10 days of shooting "Argo". ... The Canadian Ambassador has advised them to seek a location elsewhere if possible, but has offered one of the Embassy's vacant residences as guest quarters. ... They heeded his advice, and after looking around a few days, have decided to leave Iran. ...*

This provided details that paralleled the true facts. It also gave us the option of bringing the six to the airport on Monday in an Embassy vehicle with an Embassy driver, thereby solving the problem of finding reliable transportation to the airport. Laverna then could also reconfirm the airline reservations, which would be a normal service performed for Canadian guests of the Embassy.

### Amateur Actors

Everything was in good order by Sunday night 27 January, when we reconvened at the Sheardown house. The six houseguests were impressed with their documentation packages, and we were impressed with the transformation of their appearances and personalities. On Friday night, we had given each of them their cover legend as prepared by Joe Missouri in the Studio Six portfolio. We also had provided them with disguise materials and props that would help fill out their roles.

They had scrounged clothes from one another and restyled their images to look more "Hollywood." Each of them was having great fun playing their part and hamming it up. The most dramatic change was made by the rather distinguished and conservative Bob Anders. Now, his snow-white hair was a "mod" blow dry. He was wearing tight trousers with no pockets and a blue silk shirt unbuttoned down the front with his chest hair cradling a gold chain and medalion. With his topcoat resting across his shoulders like a cape, he strolled around the room with the flair of a Hollywood dandy.

The mental attitudes of the six were positive. We began briefing them on the details of their ostensible prior travel and arrival in Iran. They soon seemed to have grasped these details fairly well. We warned them that there was to be a hostile interrogation staged after dinner to test their ability to answer the questions under stress. Roger Lucy volunteered to be the interrogator.

Ken Taylor soon arrived with an answer from Ottawa to our cable. Apparently, the policymakers in

Ottawa and Washington were pleased with our proposed plan of action. He said the last line of their cable was, "See you later, exfiltrator."

Shortly, two senior friendly-country ambassadors arrived—the same two who were mentioned above as having been actively involved in efforts to hide and help the six Americans. The six served a sumptuous seven-course dinner with fine wine, champagne, coffee, and liqueurs. I told them about Jerome and the Argo knock-knock joke. Everyone took up the Argo cry. I also told everyone that they would be tempted to sell the story to some publisher after the operation was over. I admonished them not to yield to temptation, because Julio and I needed to stay in business to help others in the future. They apparently took this advice seriously.

After dinner, Roger appeared in military fatigues, complete with hat, sunglasses, jackboots, and swagger stick. The interrogations began. The interrogations impressed some of the more overconfident members of the group with the importance of remembering the details of their cover stories and gave them a taste of what could be in store for them at the airport.

During the interrogations, one of the ambassadors asked me to step into another room. He told me that, during one of the visits the three ambassadors had made to the Foreign Ministry to meet with Bruce Laingen and his aides, the US Embassy security officer had pulled him aside to confide that he was planning his own escape. He had already made one trip outside the building, and he asked for a glass cutter. The ambassador asked my advice

about the glass cutter and if he should also give him a gun. I said "yes" to the glass cutter but "no" to the gun. I thanked him for this information, and told him we would be back in touch on these topics if more information was required.

Before we left at midnight, we made final arrangements for getting to the airport. I would go 30 minutes ahead of the others with Richard, who would pick me up at the hotel at 3 a.m. We would confirm that all was normal at the airport and that Swissair was en route from Zurich. I would clear customs and check in at the airline counter, where I would wait so the others could see me as they entered the airport as a signal that all was in order. Julio would accompany them to the airport in the Embassy van and lead the way through customs.

### Day of Departure

I was awakened in my dark hotel room the next morning by the telephone ringing next to my bed. It was Richard calling from the lobby. It was 3 a.m., and I should have been up at 2:15. My watch alarm had gone off, and I must have slept through it. I rushed to shower and dress, arriving in the lobby about 15 minutes later.

Mehrabad is like many Middle Eastern or South Asian airports. Although of fairly modern construction, the people who pass through as travelers or hang around to greet or see travelers off make an orderly transit impossible. This was another reason for choosing the 7:30 a.m. Swissair flight. If we arrived at the

airport at 5 a.m., the chances were the airport would be less chaotic. Also, the officials manning the controls might still be sleepy, and most of the Revolutionary Guards would still be in their beds. This was the case that Monday morning, 28 January 1980.

### As Smooth as Silk

Richard and I proceeded through the customs check to the Swissair counter. There were few other travelers, and the airport employees were still groggy. The Swissair clerk confirmed that the flight would arrive at 5 a.m. I stood at my prearranged spot to wait for the rest of our party. Richard went to find the manager of another airline, who was a useful friend to have at the airport. He had already provided the blank embarkation forms. We would have had to collect these ourselves on the way in and had, in fact, picked up several extras, but the manager had given us plenty to cover any mistakes when filling them out. It is rare to have an inside contact at an airport for an exfiltration.

Soon the others arrived, and Julio led the way through customs. The six had had difficulty putting together a decent collection of luggage and clothing. They appeared to be traveling a bit light for Hollywood types on an around-the-world trip. They seemed bright and eager, however, and they had plastered their luggage with the Canadian maple leaf stickers we had found in Ottawa.

After they had cleared customs and checked in at the airline counter, we all proceeded to the immigration/

emigration checkpoint. Lee Schatz was so eager that he had gotten way ahead of us and was already clearing the checkpoint, with no apparent difficulty. The others began presenting their documents and the yellow embarkation forms. I waited for each to clear in case one got into trouble. I would get involved quickly as the production manager responsible for the well-being of his pre-production crew. I was armed with the Argo portfolio and would overwhelm anyone standing in the way with Hollywood talk. The Iranian official at the checkpoint could not have cared less. He stamped each of us out and collected the yellow forms. One yellow form floated off his counter and was some distance away on the floor. When no one was looking, I picked it up and stuck it among my papers. It was the form we had forged for Bob Anders.

We were in the departure lounge, and we still had to go through the final security check before we arrived at the waiting area by our gate. The six were wandering around in the gift shops like ordinary tourists. A few fatigued-clad Revolutionary Guards were scrutinizing everyone.

Richard appeared with the airline manager. They had been watching us clear the checkpoint. I shook hands with the manager, and he asked me why we had not booked his airline; he would have arranged for red-carpet treatment. I told him to stand by because we might still need his flight if Swissair had any problem. I noticed the two elderly ladies from the Canadian Embassy starting to arrive in the departure lounge for their flight. Ken Taylor and the men of the Embassy would leave later in the day after we had departed.

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**We were all a bit on edge. The roving guards continued their random interrogations of other travelers.**

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### Last-Minute Delay

The Swissair flight was called for the first time, and we proceeded through the security check into the small glassed-in room by our gate. We were just a short bus ride from the aircraft. Then the PA system announced that the Swissair flight was delayed for departure because of mechanical problems! I reassured our party and walked back through the security checkpoint to find Richard and his friend.

The departure lounge was filling up. Several flights were arriving. I wondered whether I should switch to one of these if Swissair was to be delayed too long.

I found Richard and his friend. They had already spoken to Swissair and learned the mechanical problem was minor. We would not be delayed too long, perhaps an hour. We discussed the options of switching flights, but we decided that that would be too complicated and that it would call unnecessary attention to us. I returned to our gate and reported this to the others.

We were all a bit on edge. The roving guards continued their random interrogations of other travelers. We made small talk and tried not to attract any attention.

After a tense hour, the Swissair flight was called. Everyone was suddenly anxious and excited about the prospect of pulling it off.

### Success

The bus trip was brief and as we started up the ramp to board the air-

plane, Bob Anders punched me in the arm and said, "You arranged for everything, didn't you?" He was pointing at the name lettered across the nose of the airplane. The name of our airplane was "Argau," a region in Switzerland. We took it a sign that everything would be all right. We waited until the plane took off and had cleared Iranian airspace before we could give the thumbs up and order Bloody Marys.

By lunchtime, Julio and I were sitting in the Zurich airport restaurant waiting for our connecting flight to Germany. Some of the six dropped down and kissed the tarmac of the Zurich runway after they came down the ramp. The other passengers viewed this as rather strange behavior.

US State Department representatives met us at the other side of Swiss immigration and customs. The six were whisked away in a van to a mountain lodge; Julio and I were left standing in the parking lot. I had loaned one of them my topcoat because it was chilly. It was US Government property; Julio and I had bought European-style clothing, topcoats, and shoes for our trip to Tehran. I never retrieved the topcoat, and later was admonished by our Budget and Fiscal people when I did my accounting. Just another typical TDY. All part of the job.

### Publicity

A few days later, the story hit the streets in Montreal. I was still in Germany when the story came over the Armed Forces radio station. I arrived in New York two days later, and at the airport I picked up a copy of *The New York Post* with the headline, "Canada to the Rescue!"

When I boarded the flight in Germany, I was carrying a large tin of Iranian caviar that the Staffords had bought for me in the departure lounge in Mehrabad. I asked the stewardess if she would keep it cold for me. She said, "No, it is either Russian or Iranian, and we don't like either!" The Soviets had invaded Afghanistan in December, and President Carter had withdrawn from the Moscow Olympics.

Chapter 21 of the Pelletier book, *The Canadian Capers*, covered the impact of our success in Canada and the United States.

*To the Embassy staff's heroism was added a typically Canadian touch of modesty. It was important, said Ken Taylor in an interview later, for the Americans to say thank you. . . . They did more than that. They went wild. It was the first good news after three months of national trauma. . . . The maple leaf [Canadian flag] was flown in Oklahoma City, in Livonia, Michigan, and in a hundred other American towns and cities. Billboards sprang up throughout the American countryside with giant letters that spelled Thank You, Canada. A major US bank bought a full-page ad in The New York Times to commemorate the Canadian deed.*

Jerome took out an ad in his local Burbank paper which said, "Thanks, Canada, we needed that...."

Ken Taylor became an instant hero. He was described as "the Scarlet Pimpernel of diplomacy." He returned to Ottawa, covered in glory. Subsequently, he was involved in a whirlwind tour of appearances, some with the six. He was made an Officer of the Order of Canada, received a Congressional Medal from the United States, and was awarded several honorary degrees. He lived his cover all the way.

An ironic coda: by the time Studio Six folded several weeks after the rescue, we had received 26 scripts, including some potential moneymakers. One was from Steven Spielberg.

### **Meeting the President**

On 12 March 1980, I accompanied the Director of Central Intelligence, Admiral Turner, to his morning meeting with President Carter and National Security Adviser Brzezinski. I was to have two and one-half minutes of the Admiral's meeting with the President. At first, the President seemed confused about what I had done. He apparently thought I was the "old hand" we had met the night before I went to Iran, who was still in Tehran at that point working on preparations for the military rescue operation.

I showed the President some of the cover materials used in the operation and told him the Argo/Argau story. Because of some indecision about whether the White House photographer should take my picture shaking



President Jimmy Carter expresses his appreciation to author for his key role in the exfiltration operation.

hands with the President (I was then under cover), I had a total of nine minutes in the Oval Office. Later that day, I was promoted by the director of OTS. In May, Julio and I each received CIA's Intelligence Star award.

### **Reunion and Recognition**

Later in May I invited the six to my farm for the weekend. Jerome flew in from Burbank to join us in a secret reunion. The next week, the six and Ken Taylor were honored guests at a game in Yankee Stadium, where they were cheered by 30,000 fans.

In September 1997, after I was selected as one of the CIA50 Trailblazers, Agency representatives asked me if I would agree to be interviewed by CBS Evening News about the rescue of the six. I agreed, and the public finally learned the true story of the hostage rescue operation.

### **NOTES**

1. Originally, 66 US Embassy staffers were taken hostage on 4 November 1979. Two weeks later, most minority-group members and women were released, reducing the number to 53. Another hostage with multiple sclerosis was freed and flown home in mid-1980. The total then remained at 52 until all were released in January 1981.



## A Close Call in Africa

*Richard L. Holm*

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**Richard L. Holm** served in the Directorate of Operations.

In September 1964, I reported to CIA Headquarters following a two-year tour as a Directorate of Operations (DO) officer involved in paramilitary work in Laos and Thailand. I was assigned to a country desk in the DO's Africa Division, and I signed up for part-time French language training in preparation for my next assignment. Through my language training, I came into contact with one of the division's most senior officers, who had served in Leopoldville in the Republic of the Congo. We talked a lot about the rebellion going on in the Congo and the fact that our senior officer in Stanleyville and his two communications officers were prisoners of the Simba rebels.

### **Background: Political Turmoil**

After it gained independence from Belgium in 1960, the Congo became the scene of intense political intrigue that led quickly to rebellion and conflict. Given its abundant resources and its "strategic location," the United States and the USSR and their camps had been watching carefully as the Congo tried to set its course as an independent nation. Both tried to influence events to strengthen their interests, but neither side seemed to realize that there was a dynamic to this particular tribal conflict that resisted influence from outside sources.

The Simbas, a ragtag bunch of illiterate dissidents, certainly were not Communists, but they posed a threat to the pro-Western government in Leopoldville led by Moise Tshombe. Thus, they gained the support of the Soviet Union, China, and their client states, thereby



The author and a Hmong resistance fighter in Laos in mid-1962. Photo courtesy of the author.

prompting determination from the United States and its allies to provide all support possible to Tshombe and his government. It was just that simple, and it was a scenario played out elsewhere in the world repeatedly during the first decades of the Cold War.

### **A New Assignment**

One morning in mid-October, I was called to the division chief's office. After noting that US policymakers were extremely concerned about the threat the Simbas posed to the central government, he disclosed that US planes would be transporting Belgian paratroopers to Stanleyville in the next month to liberate

CONGO (LEOPOLDVILLE), LATE 1964 TO EARLY 1965



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the city and to free the Simbas' hostages.

After that, the Agency would need someone on the ground in Stanleyville to provide intelligence. The division chief surprised me by saying that, probably in December, he wanted me to take on that assignment on a temporary basis. I accepted and began preparing by reading relevant operational files as well as a couple of books about tribal conflicts in Central Africa. I also continued my French language training.

### **Getting Started**

At dawn on 24 November 1964, the Belgian paratroop operation Red Dragon was launched, and the entire city of Stanleyville was liberated in a few hours with minimal losses. The three CIA officers were unharmed. Dave, the senior officer, soon returned to Headquarters, where he helped prepare me for the job ahead. As it turned out, he persuaded the powers that be to let him accompany me to help get me off to a running start. On 26 December, we left for Brussels, where we would consult briefly with CIA officers.

Our next stop was Leopoldville, and we immediately began making arrangements for a flight to Stanleyville. At that point, Headquarters switched signals and advised that Dave would not be permitted to return to Stanleyville. He did not like this directive, but there was nothing he could do.

When I arrived in Stanleyville, I found a deserted city. Virtually every European had been evacuated, and almost none had returned. The vast majority was still in Leopoldville or in Europe. Moreover, many of the Congolese population,

especially the rich and the educated, had fled to the bush during the Simba occupation and were not yet convinced it was safe to return. The population, normally estimated at 150,000, was nowhere near that now.

As the Simba threat receded, I began trying to recontact some of our agents, but with no success. I moved back and forth between Leopoldville and Stanleyville during January 1965. In early February, Headquarters relented and allowed Dave to make one visit to Stanleyville with me, in the hope that this would help facilitate recontacting agents.

We discovered, however, that it was too soon to expect to meet with either our former agents or with many of Dave's other contacts in Stanleyville. Time after time, we came up empty trying to locate someone; usually, the agent's house or apartment was unoccupied. Sometimes, someone was there, but not the individual we sought. Our northeastern Congo network was still a shambles. Our goal remained to collect whatever intelligence we could from our agents about the presence, activities, and supply lines of the Simba units.

After the trip to Stanleyville in early February, we discussed the possibility of expanding my area of operations. Specifically, I proposed a short visit to Bunia, on the Congo's eastern border with Uganda. We had a couple of agents who were originally from Bunia and still had family there. One had been one of our best assets. When fear drove them from Stanleyville, I reasoned, perhaps they had retreated to either Bunia or Uganda. And perhaps I could make contact with them in Bunia. In addition, I might be able to collect information from people in the area to satisfy some of the requirements levied

on us by the policymakers. Dave concurred, and Headquarters approved my proposal. I left Leopoldville for Bunia circa 12 February 1965.

### **Arriving in Bunia**

Bunia lies on a high plateau in the far northeastern portion of the Congo. (The Congo was known as Zaire from 1971 to 1997.) Bunia is near the border with Uganda, about an hour's drive over rough terrain, from Lake Albert. It had been liberated by a mercenary column on 30 November 1964, six days after the Belgian paratroopers liberated Stanleyville. When I arrived, most large towns in the northeast were in government hands and safe, but an unknown number of armed Simbas roaming the countryside often wreaked havoc. The mercenaries hired by Tshombe's government simply did not have the manpower or resources to chase down the Simba units. The northeast Congo was in great turmoil.

Bunia's airport is a few kilometers southeast of the town. The C-46 in which I had arrived unloaded some supplies for our small group of men stationed in Bunia, which included a couple of Cuban pilots, two mechanics, a radio operator, and a logistics officer.

The town was largely deserted and seemed likely to remain so until the northeast had been completely cleansed of Simba presence and influence. Our group worked, ate, and slept in the only local hotel. We all felt the strangeness of being in a ghost town.

The Simbas were out there, but we knew nothing about their real strength or intentions. Indeed, that was one of the priorities of my visit—to find out where they were and what they were going to do.

## Close Call in Africa

The two T-28 aircraft, which were staged from Bunia, would have been reason enough for the Simbas to be hostile, but so far nothing had happened. There were neither mercenary nor Congolese Army elements in Bunia, but some were nearby. Although we had some handguns and a few Uzi automatics, if a Simba group had attacked us, things would have been difficult.

Meanwhile, I still hoped to re-establish contact with a couple of agents who possibly were in Bunia. I had what passed for addresses—house numbers on ill-defined streets—and I set about trying to check them out.

Within a day or two, I was able to recontact one agent, who had fled Stanleyville as the Simba forces arrived. He was planning to return to Stanleyville within the week, and we arranged to meet there later in the month. I was reassured to hear him say that the area around Bunia was safe and that Simba control in general was falling apart. Based on my debriefing of him, I wrote three reports the next morning and sent them to Leopoldville.

### An Aerial Survey

A few days later, my communications officer drove me out to the airport. The chief of the air unit had agreed that this would be a good time for me to get a look at the terrain, road network, and level of activity visible from the air in the area north of Bunia along the border with Sudan. We suspected some arms and ammo for the Simbas were being infiltrated via that border. The two T-28s made daily flights out of Bunia looking for "military targets"—almost anything that moved on the roads. That day, they had been scheduled to cover the area I was interested in.



T-28s in Bunia. Photo courtesy of the author.

The T-28 has two seats, one behind the other, under the same canopy. It has a range of about 300 miles—150 out and 150 back. Because the northeast quarter of the Congo is the size of France, their range was insufficient to cover all of that region from Bunia. But they were able to cover areas north, west, and south of Bunia. They did not fly in Uganda.

I had done a lot of this type of flying in Laos, and was confident that I would get a good idea of what, if anything, was going on along the Sudanese border. Security was an issue, but as far as we knew the Simbas did not have weaponry that would bring down a plane. That was not the case in Laos, where we had lost aircraft to ground fire.

The Cubans, Juan Peron and Juan Tunon, were young but experienced, and both were good pilots. I went over maps with them and explained which areas I wanted to cover, if possible. My tasking was second priority; military targets, if we found any, would come first.

I was to fly on the T-28 piloted by Juan Peron, sitting behind him.

Peron had learned to fly light planes while in his teens, and he became a cropduster for a small rice-growing company in Cuba. In March 1960, about a year after Castro overthrew Batista, Peron was sent to Miami to pick up a new plane. Foreseeing what Castro's rule would mean for Cuba, Peron's father instructed him to stay in the United States, and Peron did so. In 1963, he accepted employment with an air proprietary company organized by the Agency and was sent to the Congo after receiving training in the World War II-vintage T-6 fighter. After arriving in the Congo in November 1963, he trained in the T-28 and the C-46.

As planned, we headed north along the Sudanese border. After about half an hour, Peron spotted three trucks near a junction of two unpaved roads. They had evidently heard the planes and were pulling in under some trees. Peron decided to attack and destroy the trucks.

“  
**My eyelids were  
 singed shut, and I  
 could not open them.  
 I could hear and smell  
 fire, and I knew I had  
 to get out of the plane.**  
 ”

He also spotted what he thought was a power plant—to be destroyed as well. It was right at the intersection, and the trucks were about 100 yards from it. It was not clear to me that these were military targets, but it did not matter. We circled around and started a strafing run with machineguns, our only weaponry.

We made two more runs; I could not tell if we had hit anything. After we leveled off and resumed cruising, it was clear immediately that the weather had changed. Heavy clouds and rain were moving toward us. Juan said we should return to Bunia.

### Approaching Disaster

At that time, flying in the middle of Africa presented many challenges. Weather forecasting help was almost nonexistent. You knew there was a storm coming when you saw one. Navigational aids were few and far between.

We managed to skirt the storm, but Peron told me that we had been knocked off course. We flew on. Neither pilot saw anything familiar, and soon Peron said, “We have to go down. We don’t know where we are, and fuel is getting low. I’d rather take it in while I can choose a clearing. And it will be dark soon.” Juan Tunon decided to stay up a while longer, however, and the two pilots wished each other luck.

Juan Peron picked out a clearing. He made his last turn, and we started losing altitude. “You have a weapon?” he asked, as we glided in just short of stalling out. I felt the Walther 9mm in my pocket and responded, “Yes, and I’ll keep it with me.” His question highlighted the fact that we were going down in what was likely to be Simba-controlled territory. I was confident that we would land and

lose ourselves in the bush and make our way to safety, however long it might take. I worried that I did not have an escape-and-evasion kit with a radio. Juan opened the canopy and there was a rush of air. To get a better look at the clearing, I reached up and raised the sunvisor on my flight helmet.

We were going too fast, but there was nothing Juan could do. Our first touch caused us to bounce. We touched again and started skidding along the rough clearing. Juan saw flames under the left wing. I was hunched over, seatbelt and harness as tight as they would go, bracing myself for the end of our slide. The slide, probably several hundred yards, seemed to last a long time. Suddenly, we came to an abrupt stop.

The impact caused me to lurch forward and then back, and my head jerked up. At the same instant, a splash of flaming aviation fuel was thrown across the rear cockpit from the left wing. I caught it in the face, left front mostly, left shoulder, and both hands as well as a bit on the tops of both legs. The splash missed the front cockpit and Juan was unhurt. Not immediately realizing what had happened to me and eager to get out of the T-28 now burning on its left side, Juan leaped out of the cockpit, jumped off the wing, and ran.

I was stunned and in considerable pain. My eyelids had been singed shut, and I could not open them. I could hear and smell fire, and knew I had to get out of the plane. I heard Juan shouting at me

to get out. My seat harness remained snugly fastened. My hands hurt a lot, and I could not use either one. Somehow, I managed to push open the release with one of my elbows and, with a lot of effort, I started to climb out—hindered severely by the fact that I really could not use my hands and I still had the parachute hanging behind me.

The fire was a great motivator. I half climbed, half stumbled out of the cockpit, and I fell off the wing on the right rear side. Instinctively, I had moved away from the fire. Juan helped me move away from the burning plane as it exploded.

### In Dire Straits

We needed to get as far away from the plane as possible before dark in case any Simbas came to check things out. I could barely walk, however, and I was extremely weak. Juan could not carry me very far. We stopped, and I tried to think. Bad burns meant infection, dehydration, and swelling. I was wearing contact lenses, and I asked Juan to help remove them because my hands would not work. Impossible. I could not get my eyes open. They would have to stay shut until we could find help.

It started raining. After staggering for only 30 minutes or so, we stopped under some trees next to a small stream. It rained most of the night, and we just sat there. Fearing an adverse impact on my circulation, Juan made me move about periodically. The pain got worse, and I passed out for short intervals. We neither saw nor heard any sign of patrols moving in the area. We had absolutely no idea where we were.

When daylight finally came, I could at least discern that much. Juan used his

## Close Call in Africa

knife to cut charred skin hanging from several of my fingers. There were already bugs on some of my burns. We decided that Juan should leave me by the stream (so I could drink water regularly) and try to find help. We both knew that our chances were far greater if Juan, moving on his own, could find help and then get back to me. By the time he left, I was in great pain, which took me in and out of consciousness. He took my Walther with him.

In ever-increasing circles, Juan started to explore the area around the crash site, looking for anything that would help us start to locate ourselves. Sometime around midday, Juan saw some natives and tried to approach them, but they fled. Juan walked in the direction they had gone and came upon a cluster of about 15 huts. For the northeastern Congo, that qualified as a village. There were people there, mostly women and children. No one spoke French, English, or Spanish, and Juan was having trouble making himself understood. The women were wary.

Suddenly, a group of unarmed men appeared and came toward Juan cautiously. Juan addressed them in English, and he was relieved to receive a response, also in English. Juan learned that the village chief, named Faustino, had been educated by British missionaries, who taught him English. These people were Azande, a tribal group scattered across central Africa in the Congo, the Sudan, and the Central African Republic. They had no real use for governments or borders. They knew little and probably cared less about Tshombe and his government. The Simbas, however, had killed Faustino's brother, who was a paramount leader of the Azande tribe, and Faustino hated the rebels. What a stroke of good luck for us.



Faustino. Photo courtesy of the author.

Juan explained our situation, and Faustino agreed to help us get to safety. According to Faustino, the nearest government post was Paulis, more than 280 kilometers away.

While waiting for Juan, I can remember stumbling into and out of the stream several times. I had to drink lots of water, and lying in the stream gave some relief from the bees that seemed to be all over me. Juan says he was shocked when they found me. I was lying about 20 meters from the stream. "You were covered with bees, and you looked like a monster," Juan said. In pain and barely conscious, I did not realize at first that he had come back. It had been almost 24 hours since we crash-landed. The villagers and Juan fashioned a crude stretcher from tree limbs and began the walk back to the village—a painful journey for me.



Cuban pilot Juan Tunon. Photo courtesy of the author.

## The Other T-28

A villager had reported another plane down nearby, and Juan Peron and Faustino had checked out the site on the way to get me. Juan Tunon was nowhere to be found. The plane had not burned, and Juan Peron was able to retrieve some maps. Without knowing our present location, however, the maps were not of much use. Tunon had taken his weapon.

Based on its location and the condition of the plane, and the fact that there had been no fire, Juan believed that Tunon stalled out on his final approach. Without air speed the T-28 dropped like a rock. The trees, some over 100 feet tall, served to cushion the plane's drop.

Tunon was never seen again. Months later, missionary reports confirmed that he had been captured, killed, and eaten by the Simbas, who believed that if you eat the flesh and vital organs of your enemy you gain strength. Tunon had had jungle warfare and escape and

evasion training before coming to the Congo; many thought he would have had a good chance of getting out.

### **In a Friendly Village**

We had crashed in the late afternoon on 17 February. Juan made contact with Faustino's village on the 18th, and it was late afternoon on that day when I was carried into the village. The trip there had been awful. Each movement of the crude stretcher caused me pain as whatever scabbing had taken place broke open again.

When we got to the village, it was obvious that I would need help. The village had no doctor and no medicines. The village men had a meeting, and Faustino proposed the plan that was ultimately adopted. While they would help, they had to protect themselves as well. Accordingly, I would be hidden in the bush outside the village, and someone from the village would stay with me at all times. Faustino and two others would guide Juan to Paulis to seek help and return for me. I seem to remember trying to make clear that if the villagers helped us, my government would help and protect them.

I was carried into the bush away from the village and taken to a crude hut that would protect me from rain. A small fire seemed to keep out bugs. No one wanted a Simba patrol to discover me anywhere near the village. All would suffer if that happened.

Someone came to care for my burns. I remember being washed with warm water and someone cleaning my burns with a knife. The bees were gone, but smaller worm-like bugs had gotten into

my burns just after the crash while I lay on the ground awaiting Juan's return. Except for my hands, they were easily dealt with. Whoever it was systematically dug out every bug he could see. The effort had predictable results on the extensor tendons of my fingers. Many were cut and no longer function. (I am not complaining. I still have fingers that work, and I can still play tennis, so I will always be grateful to that individual.)

When my wounds had been thoroughly cleaned, someone applied a grease or salve-like substance onto all of my burns. It turned bluish black, hardened, and became a sort of protective coating over my burns. Essentially, it prevented both infection and dehydration—the greatest dangers for someone who has suffered severe burns. There is little question that this treatment saved my life. I was determined to hang on until Juan got to Paulis and returned with help. But I was to be tested—severely and soon.

### **Seeking Help**

Juan, Faustino, and two other men, Balde and Christie, took off the morning of 19 February. Juan left my parachute with the villagers and told them to spread it out on the ground when a helicopter came for me. Juan knew nothing about the area, so he deferred to Faustino's judgment. Faustino was intelligent and resourceful and, in the end, we would both owe our lives to him.

During the trip, some of which was on bicycles, the sharp-eyed Balde went ahead. He was responsible for spotting any danger, avoiding it, and warning the others. He periodically left "safety" signals on the trail or road. Christie

followed behind, making sure that nothing could come on them from the rear. Juan and Faustino rode tandem or walked in the middle. Juan had given Faustino my Walther 9mm, while Juan carried a .45 automatic. Neither Balde nor Christie was armed. When the situation required a decision, Faustino made it.

In Bunia, meanwhile, the chief of the air unit, "Big Bill" Wyrozemski, sounded the alert when we did not return on the 17th. Early on 18 February, planes were out looking for us. Juan remembers seeing search planes on 18 and 19 February and a couple of times after that. Without a survival kit and a radio, however, he could not make any contact or signal his position. He did have a flare, but, each time he heard the planes overhead, his group was traveling in heavily wooded areas that precluded any attempt to send up the flare.

Bill knew the areas we had hoped to survey, but he knew nothing about the storm that had blown us off course. The search continued for several days. Needle in a haystack. Hope dimmed.

As far as Juan could determine, the crash site and the village were 15 or 20 miles from the Sudanese border. Each day, Juan and company moved for as long as they could. Twice, they were able to use canoes to cover substantial distances with minimal physical effort. Bicycles loaded on the back, they floated or paddled easily for hours at a time. Juan said he felt more vulnerable on the rivers because they would have little warning of possible danger.

A few times, they rode through huge, deserted plantations where it was easy to find food and water without much fear



Cuban pilot Juan Peron (on left) and "Big Bill" Wyrozemski. Photo courtesy of the author.

for their safety. The few remaining natives hated and feared the Simbas and were willing to help. They usually slept in the bush, although there were a few times they found empty huts that they were able to use. The Simbas were inactive at night or in the rain, when they thought their "magic" would not work.

Contacts with local villagers along their way were limited almost exclusively to other Azande. Faustino would speak with elders or chiefs, and food was provided and safe areas for sleeping were pointed out.

Only a few times did Balde warn them of traffic, which they then avoided by hiding in the bush alongside the road or trail. Juan felt that they had been covering 35 to 40 kilometers each day. They had not yet seen any sign of the Simbas. By the end of the fifth day, Juan began to believe they would make it to Paulis.

### **Making Contact**

Late in the afternoon on 24 February, Juan's group came upon an outpost manned by Belgians and mercenaries, about 20 miles east of Paulis. As soon as the men at the outpost understood who the four visitors were, they became excited. By then, hope of our survival was faint. They knew about our crash and would certainly help, but they could do nothing until morning.

The next morning Juan, Faustino, and their two companions made a one-hour truck ride into Paulis. They went directly to the airfield, where there was a small contingent similar to the one at Bunia. Several planes were positioned at Paulis, and the support crews and pilots were living there. There were also a couple of Agency air operations officers there who had direct radio communications with Leopoldville. They immedi-

ately began firing questions at Juan about my condition and whereabouts, and Juan explained everything that had happened. He praised Faustino, Balde, and Christie, who were standing off to one side.

One of the air officers went over to personally thank all three. We will be helping you as well, he told them. Juan emphasized that my condition was poor and urged that a helicopter take off at once to return to the village to pick me up.

The only helicopters at Paulis were Belgian, so there was a flurry of cables back and forth to Leopoldville to get permission to use them. The Belgian air command quickly gave approval. Washington was informed that I was alive but badly hurt.

### **To the Rescue**

Within two hours, preparations for the chopper rescue mission were under way. Faustino, Balde, and Christie would fly in the helicopter, and Juan would fly in the back of an accompanying T-28. The original plan also had Juan in the chopper, but the Cuban pilots persuaded him to fly in a T-28; none of them had any confidence in the Belgians' flying "banana." Juan's description of my condition so concerned the air ops chief in Paulis that he requested a C-130 be sent immediately from Leopoldville to be standing by when I was brought into Paulis. With all preparations made and approvals from Leopoldville in hand, the two aircraft took off just before noon on the 25th—eight days after we had crashed.

Heading east and north, the two aircraft flew for 45 minutes with Juan and





Belgian rescue helicopter. Photo courtesy of the author.

any sort of consciousness were diminishing. Days passed in a fog. I did not know about the arrival and crash of the Belgian helicopter.

The Belgian air command immediately authorized a second flight to pick up their pilots and me early on the 26th. A C-130 had arrived from Leopoldville with a doctor. It would be standing by. With the location of the village now known and with an experienced and unhurt Belgian pilot on the ground, all were confident that the next effort would succeed, and it did. The second helicopter, also with armed personnel aboard and accompanied by a T-28 fighter, landed at the village to pick up the crew of the first chopper and me. Whatever it was that the village "doctor" had put on my burns had hardened enough to form a coating over my burns. That was good, although no one there at the time realized it. The bluish-black color looked ominous.

I was put into the chopper, and we left for Paulis, where I was immediately transferred from the helicopter into the C-130 for the long flight to Leopoldville and a hospital.

### A Debt of Gratitude

I fear that the rushed departure and concern for my precarious state precluded adequate thanks to Faustino and the villagers for what they had done. Despite what I owe them, I have never had the chance to meet with or thank those who did so much to save my life. The Agency, however, arranged to air-drop a planeload of medicines, tools, and clothing for the village. It was well received and understood to be, as intended, a gesture of our thanks for what they did for me.

Faustino straining to pick up some landmark that would put them on course. They flew over small towns that they had passed while riding their bicycles and knew they were headed in the right direction. Faustino finally saw a village, an intersection of two roads, a river bridge, and familiar sights, even from the air, that led him to their village. Overhead, Juan was cheering and shouting into his headset. They could see a parachute being spread out on the ground, but the clearing looked small and the chopper pilot was hesitant. There was no way to signal the villagers to change it and nothing that much better in sight. The pilot decided to land.

Moments later, Juan was shocked as he watched the helicopter crash on landing. One of the rotor blades had struck a heavy tree limb and the craft rolled over. No one was hurt, but the chopper was badly damaged. The pilot used his emergency radio to communicate with the T-28 flying overhead. He reported the accident and asked that a second chopper be sent in to pick us all up. All

were frustrated and disappointed. Juan and the pilot of his T-28 headed back to Paulis.

Meanwhile, my condition had been steadily deteriorating. I had only fleeting moments of consciousness, and each seemed more painful than the last. I had learned the Swahili word for water, *mai*, and that was all I could think of. Certainly, I was given water so that proves someone was there. I could not eat, and what I did manage to get down came up almost immediately. I had strange, even bizarre, delusions. I imagined myself on a giant rollercoaster careening up and down its track. Going down was awful because there were intense flames, and the pain would be excruciating until the rollercoaster came back out of the flames and up again. A tall, menacing African stood by the tracks and jabbed at me with his spear each time I passed. This would go on and on and on.

I was fighting to save my life, although I did not know it at the time. Periods of

I learned later that Faustino gained much prestige from his adventure. He returned several times to Paulis, where he was given weapons and ammunition for the defense of his village. He soon joined a group of Spanish mercenaries operating in the area of the village and received training, a weapon, and a uniform. Juan has a picture of Faustino in his uniform, and he looks like a fighter whom one would want to avoid.<sup>1</sup>

There was one tragic postscript to the rescue effort. Several months after the February crash, "Big Bill" was transferred to Albertville on the Congo's eastern border. Shortly after his arrival, he was concerned about a possible rebel force moving toward Albertville from the west, and Bill got approval from Leopoldville to make a short reconnaissance of the area. He had been instructed not to go alone, but no one else was readily available. Returning to Albertville, he was killed when his Land Rover was hit head on by a Congolese Army truck speeding on the wrong side of the narrow road. Juan piloted the transport plane that brought Bill's body back to Leopoldville.<sup>2</sup>

### **High-Level Support**

When news reached Headquarters of my rescue and arrival at Paulis, Dick Helms, then the Deputy Director for Plans (DDP, now the DO), went straight to DCI John McCone and told him that the only hope of saving my life would be to get me to the National Burn Center in San Antonio, Texas. McCone called Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who immediately authorized the use of a US Air Force 707 jetliner for this mission. It would carry a "burn team" composed of a doctor, nurses, and corpsmen to care for me.

**“  
I had burns covering  
35 percent of my  
body, and my weight  
had dropped from  
165 pounds to 98.  
The initial odds on  
my survival were  
about 30-70 percent ...  
Gradually the odds  
began to shift in my  
favor.**

Meanwhile, doctors at Louvainium Hospital in Leopoldville were taking stock of my condition. An American doctor took one look, saw no hope, and left the room. He reported his conclusion to a senior Embassy officer who was standing outside my room. A second doctor approached. He was an older Belgian doctor with much experience in the Congo. He realized that after 11 days in the bush without care I needed immediate treatment. He put IVs into both my ankles and then "flooded" me with antibiotics and nutrients. It was a jolt I sorely needed, and it helped prepare me for the long flight to the National Burn Center.

Less than 24 hours later, the Air Force 707 arrived to take me to Texas. The team took all my vital signs and carefully assessed my condition. We were crossing the Atlantic headed for the northeast tip of Brazil for refueling. About mid-way across, according to the pilot who related this to my father, my condition and vital signs improved slightly. No one knew why. I believe it was the result of all that the Belgian doctor had pumped into me during my short stay in Leopoldville. He is another individual to whom I would like one day to say "thanks." The changes caused the prog-

nosis for me to shift from "really lousy" to "he might just make it." The doctor reported the changes to the pilot, who decided to fly straight through to Texas, and we arrived in San Antonio late on a Saturday evening.

### **The Very Best Care**

As soon as I arrived, I was examined by a young Army plastic surgeon assigned to the US Army's Surgical Research Unit (SRU). The SRU was the heart of the National Burn Center at Brooke Army Hospital. The center was considered the best burn treatment facility in the United States, if not the whole world.

I had burns covering about 35 percent of my body, and my weight had dropped from 165 pounds to 98 pounds. The initial odds on my survival were 30-70, and I was sent straight to intensive care.

Gradually, the odds began to shift in my favor. Early on, the doctors decided that my left eye had to be removed, and it eventually was. (The cornea of my other eye had been scarred, but a subsequent corneal transplant would enable me to regain my vision.) Once my charred skin had been removed, I was ready for the first in a long series of skin transplants.

The hospital played host to a steady stream of visiting doctors and other medical personnel interested in learning about the treatments used there. Many of the visitors came from abroad. An Ethiopian doctor observed that the black substance used on my burns look like an age-old tribal remedy used in rural areas of Africa. He had heard that one of its ingredients was boiled snake. Several months later, two Air Force doctors were sent to Africa to investigate

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**The Agency gave at least one person per week roundtrip air tickets to San Antonio to visit me.**

**That gave me a welcome link to reality.**

”

the substance. They evidently found that it did include snake oil, plus tree bark and herbs. Some of the herbs could not be identified.

### Visitors—and a Transfer

During the more than two months I spent at Brooke, I had numerous visitors in addition to members of my family. The Agency gave at least one person per week roundtrip air tickets to San Antonio to visit me. That gave me a welcome link to reality. One of my Agency visitors was Dave, who brought me up to date on events in the Congo. By the spring of 1965, the Simba rebellion was all but crushed.

My time at the burn center served to stabilize my condition and to accomplish the initial skin grafts. My next stop would be Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, DC.

When I arrived at Walter Reed, I was surprised to learn that I had been put in a private room in the VIP ward normally reserved for senior military officers. This was to be the start of what, in medical terms, is called the reconstruction period.

### The Long Road

Walter Reed has state-of-the-art care in virtually every field of medicine. My doctor, a young lieutenant colonel, reputedly was the best plastic surgeon at the hospital. He was particularly adept at hand surgery, one of my greatest needs. We were to become close friends.

My biggest frustration was time itself. I wanted to complete my recovery as

soon as possible. My general goal was to make some progress each day so that I would be that much closer to going back to work.

With that goal in mind, after my first operation I began physical therapy. My prescribed routine included pushing and pulling on my fingers and working on straightening my bent left elbow. The sessions lasted an hour. For my elbow, it took six months and one operation to give me the almost 100-percent flexibility I have today. The therapists carefully explained what they were doing and why. During my time with them, I learned a lot about my hands. Despite their best effort, however, my manual dexterity remains limited, and I lost my jump shot.

### Waiting To See Again

One reason Walter Reed had been selected for me was the strength and reputation of its eye clinic. My doctor was one of the nation's leading surgeons for corneal transplants. Recognizing the importance of the operation, however, the Agency had insisted that it be performed by the best surgeon in the United States. That was Dr. Harry King, and he lived in Washington; he operated on my eye.

During the year while I waited for my eye to recover to the point where it could undergo surgery, I was visited by a steady stream of family members, friends, and Agency colleagues. Many of them would read to me from newspapers and magazines. In December 1965, Dick Helms—who had moved up to be the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence—visited me. He asked about my condition and what I wanted to do when I could go back to work. Many other senior Agency officials also visited me. One encouraged me to sign on with China Operations in the Far East Division. When I decided to do so, he quickly made arrangements for a Chinese instructor to visit me twice a week to start teaching me Mandarin Chinese.

Following my transplant surgery, it took several months until my vision reached the 20/40 level. I would not make it back to 20/20, but my vision was pretty normal. There were some drawbacks, however. One was that now I could see how I looked. There was nothing I or the doctors could do about that, so I decided I would not worry about it.

### All's Well That Ends Well

In the spring of 1967, after a recovery period of 28 months, I was able to report to China Operations. The division chief welcomed me back by taking me to lunch with the DCI and several of the Agency's senior officers.

One final observation. The Congo episode and its aftermath served to reinforce my belief that the CIA in general, and the DO—my own directorate—in particular, is made up of bright, sensitive, and wonderful people. I was lucky to be a part of it.

## NOTES

1. Juan Peron rested for a while in Leopoldville and then resumed flying until the operation was terminated several months later. Many thought he would hang it up after his narrow escape, but Juan never considered stopping. With a zest for flying, over the next three decades he flew for companies in the Canary Islands, Puerto Rico, Aruba, and Miami.
2. Bill Wyrozemski was a Polish Army officer when World War II began, and he soon realized that defeat was imminent. Determined not to end up in a German concentration camp, he shed his uniform and made his way to Istanbul. Once there, he signed onto a ship headed to England, where he reported to the Polish Embassy in London. Fiercely loyal to Poland, he wanted to fight against the Germans. Bill claimed he had been a pilot in the Polish Air Force. (He apparently had flown a small plane in younger days.) He joined other Poles and flew a Spitfire in the Battle of Britain. After the war, Bill made his way to the United States and gained employment with CIA, where he was involved with the U-2 program. After 18 years as a contract officer in Agency air operations, Bill's eyesight weakened and he could no longer fly. There was a need for air ops officers on the ground in the Congo, however, and soon he was in Africa.