

**KENNEDY'S ASSASSINATION:  
THE KEY WEST CONNECTION**



● On Saturday, Tim Gratz and Mark Howell examine the role of the Key West customs agent who reportedly interviewed the leader of the militant exile group Alpha

66, who said he saw Lee Harvey Oswald with his CIA control officer in Dallas.

● On Sunday, a sighting of Oswald and Jack Ruby together at Key West Airport is investigated by the Senate Intelligence Committee.

# No Name Key mercenaries linked to JFK assassination

BY TIM GRATZ

Special to The Citizen

AND MARK HOWELL

Citizen Arts & Entertainment Editor

1A

When divorcee Sylvia Odio of Dallas saw the TV pictures of a handcuffed Lee Harvey Oswald on Nov. 22, 1963, a chill ran through her body.

She recalled the time in late September when three men had knocked on the door of her apartment at 1084 Magellan Circle.



Odio

Odio's father had once owned the largest trucking company in Cuba, and his trucks ran arms to Castro's revolutionaries. But Odio's father and mother harbored a man involved in a plot to kill Castro, and in October 1961 they were imprisoned by Castro. Several of the plotters were captured but the primary organizer of the plot, Antonio Veciana, escaped to Miami.

The leader of the group at Odio's door introduced himself as "Leopoldo" and identified his Cuban colleague as "Angel" and the American as "Leon Oswald."

He told Odio that they were using "war names" (aliases). He said they

were with JURE, an anti-Castro group with which her father was associated. He asked for her help in soliciting funds in Dallas. While Leopoldo spoke with Odio in Spanish, Leon Oswald did not understand Spanish.

See JFK, page 7A

## JFK

Continued from page 1A

7A

Odio was suspicious of the strangers and made no commitment.

A day or two later, Leopoldo telephoned Odio. He asked her what she thought of the "gringo." He told her the "gringo" had been a Marine and was an expert marksman but was "kind of loco." He quoted the American as saying that Cubans did not have any guts because they should have assassinated Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs.

When Lee Harvey Oswald appeared live on television in custody, Odio and her sister immediately recognized him as the American they had both seen at her apartment.

The FBI first interviewed Silvia Odio on Dec. 12, 1963. When the first drafts of the Warren Commission report were being written in mid-August, 1964, the "Odio incident" was still unresolved. The Warren Commission's chief counsel wrote to the FBI that it was a "matter of some importance" that the Odio incident be resolved.

On Sept. 26, 1964, the FBI interviewed a soldier of fortune named Loran Eugene Hall. The FBI reported to the Warren Commission that Hall stated he had been in Dallas in September 1963 trying to raise funds with two companions, William Seymour and Laurence Howard, and that they might have visited Odio. He also said that Seymour looked like Oswald.

The FBI told the Warren Commission it was not finished investigating the Odio incident. Four days later the Warren Commission published its final report anyway. It concluded that Oswald was not at Odio's apartment that September, that it was perhaps a case of mistaken identity based on Hall's statement to the FBI.

Less than two weeks after the publication of the Warren Commission report, the FBI located and interviewed Seymour and Howard. They each denied having visited Odio, leaving open the question of who Odio's visitors really were.

The FBI does criminal background checks on every person it interviews. The FBI should have known that Loran Hall and Seymour Howard were among 13 mercenaries arrested at their training base on No Name Key in the Florida Keys in early December 1962.

The arrests were supervised by Key West customs agent Cesar Diosdado. A large cache of arms was also seized. The FBI reported none of this to the Warren Commission. Perhaps because, for reasons still not clear, the charges were dropped and the weapons, reportedly to be used against Castro, were returned to the men from No Name Key.

It is not known whether the FBI ever asked Hall his where-

10/2



Special to The Citizen

**Gerry Patrick Hemming was the leader of the camp at No Name Key and one of the 13 mercenaries arrested in December 1963.**

abouts on Nov. 22, 1963. He was in Dallas and he may have had a rifle with him, at least according to statements by Gerry Patrick Hemming.

Hemming, still alive today, is a story unto himself.

He was the leader of the camp at No Name Key and one of the 13 mercenaries arrested in December. In a deposition before an attorney for the House Select Committee on Assassinations, he told an amazing story about the arrest and its aftermath.

According to Hemming's deposition, one of his group became closely associated with a Cuban exile named Vidal Santiago. Hemming said Santiago was using a CIA safe house, run by Edward Germaine from his private residence, next to the Radio America station in Marathon.

When Germaine's wife heard members of the group disparaging the CIA, the agency decided to notify Customs (i.e. Cesar Diosdado) that someone was using the safe house without the agency's permission. As a result of the CIA report to customs officer Diosdado, Hemming, Hall, Seymour and the rest of the group were arrested.

After their release, the group traveled to a hotel in Miami. They had tried to keep their location secret to avoid press coverage, so Hemming was sur-

prised when one of his group, Lawrence Howard, was seen with an interloper. According to his deposition to the House Assassinations Committee, Hemming had seen this person once before, several years previously, at the Cuban consulate in Monterey, Calif. The name of the person was Lee Harvey Oswald.

Hemming testified that the first time he met Oswald, he seemed to know a lot about Hemming's own background, which disturbed Hemming and made him suspicious of Oswald.

Like Oswald, Hemming was a Marine. After his discharge from the Marines he traveled to Cuba and joined Castro's forces from early 1959 to the summer of 1960. For a while, Hemming ran an air base for Castro's rebel air force. When he returned to the United States, he assumed control of a group named the Anti-Communist Legionnaires. The group was founded by Frank Sturgis, who later became infa-

mous as one of the Watergate burglars.

When Hemming took over the group, he took over from Sturgis as Interpen and he moved its base from the Everglades to No Name Key.

Hemming testified in depositions that he attended a meeting in May 1963 at the home of John Martino, accompanied by his Cuban friend Santiago. Also present at the meeting were Sam Giancana and Santos Trafficante, respective heads of the Chicago and Tampa Mafia.

Hemming stated that at this meeting, \$15,000 was given to Santiago to assist Santiago's plan to kill Castro. When Santiago participated in a raiding mission off the coast of Cuba in 1964, his boat failed and he was captured by the Cubans. He was executed on May 26, 1964.

Santiago, according to Hemming, had traveled to Dallas the week before the assassination and may have been in Dallas on Nov. 22. In 1995, the head of Castro's secu-

rity force told a group of assassination researchers, including a person interviewed by these reporters, that prior to his execution Santiago told his Cuban captors of his visit to Dallas.

Martino, at whose residence the meeting was held, was a close associate of Trafficante; they had been imprisoned together in Cuba. Martino once told a Newsday reporter that he had participated in the plan to kill Kennedy. After his death, Martino's wife and son told assassination writer Anthony Summers that Martino knew that Kennedy was to be shot in Dallas.

When New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison began his investigation of the Kennedy assassination in 1967, it was his initial belief that the assassination had been planned and practiced at the camp on No Name Key. To dissuade him of that theory, Hemming walked into Garrison's office and offered to assist Garrison in his investigation.

But Hemming never told Garrison, as he later told an interviewer, that in 1962 a New Orleans private investigator offered him money to kill Kennedy. Others have connected that private investigator to Lee Harvey Oswald.

Little wonder, then, that Gerry Hemming, former leader of the No Name mercenaries, once joked that he knew the Kennedy investigation was a cover-up when he was not immediately detained for questioning.

*Tim Gratz and Mark Howell have iron-clad alibis for where they were on Nov. 22, 1963. Saturday's story is "The Bishop and the Pawn," centered on a mysterious man called Bishop who controlled a militant anti-Castro group and allegedly was seen with Lee Harvey Oswald shortly before the assassination.*

P. 777

Key West Citizen  
21 NOV 2003

242