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Luck of the Irish

Donovan Tells How He Does It

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MR. DONOVAN returned and said he...

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NEW YORK, April 1 (UPI) — James J. Donovan, the one-man freedom train for prisoners imprisoned in Cuba, has been losing two things recently — sleep and money.

The 46-year-old lawyer negotiated the release of Bay of Pigs prisoners and more recently of American skin divers. In an interview today about the physical and mental strain of negotiating with Fidel Castro...

"They work at night down there," he said. "One night I got three hours' sleep another time two hours and a third night none at all. Once Castro phoned me at 2 o'clock in the morning and announced we were going fishing at 6 o'clock. We did, too."

Lawyers estimate Mr. Donovan has lost \$100,000 in legal fees because of his work in rescuing prisoners in Cuba. He serves as counsel for the Cuban Families Committee without pay. No, that he is about to become a pauper because he is a member of a well-known firm that has 18 lawyers on its staff.

How does he establish contact with Castro and go about getting into Cuba?

"Well," he said "I'll tell you about one weekend. On Friday, March 15, I was in Federal court here. When I want to go to Cuba, I make a phone call to Havana to a person who is a sort of intermediary down there. I had put in a call and Friday afternoon I got word that clearance had come thru.

I only carry one bag containing tropical clothing and a few books. From the hotel I phoned a restricted area of the Miami airport and got in touch with Ben American, who provides a special plane for me to fly to Havana.

Seven men, well-dressed and wearing bright silk shirts met me at Havana. I later have to show a visa or a passport or anything. I guess my name is pretty well known by now. Three of the men got into a car with me and the other four drove to one of the four houses maintained by the Cuban Ministry of External Affairs. Everything was ready for me there and I put in a call for Castro.

"Sometimes I get to see Castro right away and sometimes there is a delay of hours. I started talking with him on Saturday and continued thru on Sunday, March 17.

"Saturday he took me for an auto ride and we kept negotiating. He is always very courteous and cordial and he gave me a good lunch of fruit, eggs, chicken, soup, red snapper, salad and coffee. Also an excellent cigar.

"By Sunday I could sense that the negotiations weren't getting very far, so I decided to try the luck of the Irish. I said to Castro, 'Look, do you know what day this is? This is Saint Patrick's Day and Saint Patrick is my patron saint. They are painting a green line down Fifth Avenue in New York and getting ready to have a parade.

"Do you know who one of the big heroes of South America is? Bernard O'Higgins is his name. It's bad luck to deny anything to an Irishman on Saint Patrick's Day, and what's more you have two American women in prison, one of them is named...

releasing the two women, Germaine Schamata and Martha O'Neal.

They came out at mid wearing their denim prison clothes and Mr. Donovan flew back to Miami with them on Sunday.

"Monday morning," Mr. Donovan said, "I was back in Federal court and the judge looked at me with surprise and asked, 'Well, where have you been and what's new?'"

What keeps driving him on missions that require a financial sacrifice? He talks about that for a while and then said:

"Well, you're at the Havana airport standing beside the steps as the prisoners get on the plane. There is fat on their faces and they are white with prison pallor.

"After the plane takes off, they begin to relax. Sometimes when they see the coast of Florida they smile. Those smiles are worth enough for me."