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PROGRAM Jack Anderson Confidential STATION WJLA TV  
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SUBJECT American Mercenaries in Angola

JACK ANDERSON: The Central Intelligence Agency has been conducting secret subterranean wars around the world. The CIA has sponsored rebellions in such faraway places as Cuba and Cambodia, Laos and Iraq. One of the most secret operations was run in the remote African nation of Angola.

Gary Acker, an ex-Marine, signed on to fight communists in Angola six years ago. He was then 21 years old. He was captured by the communist forces before he saw any action. He was sentenced to 16 years in an Angolan prison.

Last month Acker was released as part of a prisoner exchange with the Soviets. He described his experience in an exclusive interview with my associate Indy Badwar.

GARY ACKER: The prison clothing, what they gave us -- one time they gave us what we called a monkey suit. It was a brown overall type thing, and this I refused to wear.

When I was released, I refused to wear the clothing that they provided, because during my time in prison, they didn't give me sufficient clothing. Two and a half years, I was barefoot. I had no shoes. I had a pair of shorts that rotted, literally rotted off me. The guards would laugh and say "a white mercenary." And when I asked for clothes, they refused to give me clothes.

So when my time came, I refused to wear their clothes.

INDY BADWAR: What about medical treatment? They had refused it to you once.

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-2-

ACKER: They refused it to me several times. I had malaria one time. And they refused to treat me, so -- that was in 1978. So I completely stopped asking for medical treatment, and I never accepted anything.

In prison there, it's just one day at a time. It's not the future, what I'll do in ten years, five years, or whatever. It's one day at a time. And you make it the best way you can.

BADWAR: What caused you to become a mercenary?

ACKER: That's difficult to answer, besides a little money, combat experience.

BADWAR: What did you know about Angola?

ACKER: Well, really, at that time, I knew very little. I didn't even know where Angola was. But I read articles. I read one or two articles in the newspaper, and I saw that the FNLA was Western-backed. So that was the one I got into, especially seeing the article about David Bufkin.

ANDERSON: The man Acker mentioned, David Bufkin, has signed an affidavit admitting he had recruited Acker for the CIA. Bufkin hired mercenaries by placing ads in the Sacramento Bee newspaper.

The CIA insists it had nothing to do with hiring mercenaries like Acker. But some former CIA agents tell a different story.

JOHN STOCKWELL: I was quite disillusioned with the CIA and integrity. You see, we had abandoned all my people in Vietnam. So I had seen us do this before.

ANDERSON: John Stockwell was the CIA's task force commander for Angola. He states Acker was hired to fight in Angola as part of a CIA operation, an operation that Henry Kissinger, when he was Secretary of State, officially disavowed.

HENRY KISSINGER: The CIA is not involved in the recruiting of these individuals.

STOCKWELL: In the Angolan operation, I testified for five days to the Senate Oversight Committee. I gave them chapter and verse. I gave them cable numbers and memo numbers and dates and details and told them exactly where in the building they could go to recover the files that would prove the truth. And in the end, they decided that they simply weren't willing to try to clash with Henry Kissinger over a matter of perjury.

-3-

ANDERSON: Gary Acker was a pawn in a great powers' game. He hasn't been the only one. The CIA has been plotting coups, staging rebellions and waging wars in secret. This has thrown us into an uncomfortable embrace with extremists who are morally objectionable, with dictators who oppose U. S. principles, even with terrorists, whom we claim to abhor.