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CIA Conspired to Save a Terrorist

In the "wilderness of mirrors" that makes up the espionage game, the Central Intelligence Agency once conspired to save the life of the world's most notorious terrorist—Carlos the Jackal.

He picked up his animal nickname from the fictional assassin who almost nailed Charles deGaulle in Frederick Forsyth's novel, "The Day of the Jackal," but his real name was Ilitch Ramirez Sanchez. He was the eldest son of an expatriate millionaire Colombian lawyer in Venezuela.

This is his story as pieced together by my associate Dale Van Atta from top-secret CIA and State Department documents:

- 1966: At 17, already influenced by a younger brother who was a leader in the Venezuelan Communist Party, Carlos was trained in one of Fidel Castro's guerrilla camps. There he learned the terrorist's art from Gen. Viktor Simeonov of the Soviet KGB.

- 1969: Carlos was expelled from Lumumba University in Moscow where he had developed a fast friendship with a Palestinian commando named Mohammed Boudia.

- 1970: Carlos fought with Palestinian guerrillas in Jordan against King Hussein.

- 1971: Carlos was the hit of the Latin-American cocktail crowd in London, where he escorted his beautiful mother and charmed women with his guitar-playing talent. He was known as "El Gordo"—the fat one.

- 1972: Carlos helped organize the massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics, and the Japanese Red Army's indiscriminate machine-gun slaughter at the Tel Aviv airport.

- June 1973: An Israeli hit team assassinated Carlos' old Moscow friend Boudia, and Carlos took over Palestinian terrorist operations in Europe. Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi financed the extremist Palestinian group, called the Rejection Front.

- December 1973: Carlos shot Zionist department store tycoon Joseph Sieff in London, but failed to kill him.

- January 1974: Carlos bombed an Israeli bank in London.

- August 1974: Carlos planted three bombs in downtown Paris aimed at a Jewish newspaper and two French newspapers that supported Israel.

- September 1974: Carlos supervised the Japanese Red Army seizure of the French Embassy at The Hague, Netherlands, using grenades stolen from a U.S. Army depot in Germany by the Baader-Meinhof terrorist gang. Carlos tossed a grenade into Le Drugstore in Paris, killing two and wounding others, preparatory to the embassy takeover in Holland.

- Late 1974: Enter the CIA. Through its intelligence contacts, the agency learned that an assassination squad of the six-nation consortium of South American dictatorships, known as "Operation Condor," had been ordered to kill Carlos. The assignment was apparently in retaliation for Carlos' assassination of Col. Ramon Tralal, Uruguay's military attache in Paris; and for two other murders he was suspected of plotting—that of a Bolivian ambassador in Paris and a Chilean official in the Middle East.

According to a top-secret document based on CIA internal files, Carlos was spared when the CIA warned the French government of the proposed

execution, and the Condor nations were warned to call off the murder plot.

Why did the CIA save Carlos? Several sources in the agency suggested that it was a Mafia-like professional concern—that if Carlos were murdered, it would cause chaos in the murky world of international espionage.

One source thought it was at least possible that Carlos had been a CIA informant, and that the agency was simply protecting one of its own. This source did not, however, suggest that Carlos had ever been a paid killer for the CIA.

At any rate, Carlos was spared, thanks to the CIA's intervention, and lived to wreak his bloody handiwork for at least a few more months. He was captured by French police in June 1975, but managed to escape after killing an informant and two policemen; he masterminded the kidnaping of the OPEC oil ministers in December 1975, and was reportedly rewarded with a \$2 million bonus by his paymaster, Qaddafi; he helped engineer, in July 1976, the hijacking in Athens of an Air France plane which wound up at Entebbe Airport in Uganda, where the Israelis pulled off their daring rescue mission.

After that, Carlos the Jackal dropped from sight. Intelligence sources say he wound up in Iraq, and may have been exterminated in that nation's secret purge of Palestine terrorists. There is some speculation he is now in Libya, but the smart money in the intelligence community bets that Carlos is dead. Still, no one is sure.