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Commando Helped Blow Lid Off Alleged Plot to Kill a President

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On a steamy summer Florida weekend, two former members of an elite U.S. combat unit meet with a foreign general and a Miami arms dealer. The topic: a plot to assassinate the president of a Central American country.

The commandos later tell the CIA and FBI about the scheme and one agrees to work undercover to expose it. The investigation includes secret videotapes of the suspects aboard a yacht and taped discussions of a multimillion-dollar drug deal to finance the assassination.

If that sounds like an outline for a new episode of "Miami Vice," it isn't. It is a prosecutor's version of how the U.S. government stopped an alleged attempt last year to kill the president of Honduras.

Arrests in the case made front page news when announced last November, but the role of the two commandos in cracking the case wasn't disclosed until later. Their story will unfold in a Miami courtroom later this month when two of the defendants, arms dealer Gerard Latchinian and businessman Manuel Binker, stand trial.

The soldiers are retired Army colonel Charlie A. Beckwith, commander of the ill-fated attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran in 1980, and one of his Delta Force comrades, retired major Charles D. Odorizzi.

One of the prosecutors in the case said Beckwith was "more John Wayne than John Wayne" and Odorizzi "deserves a medal" for his undercover work. In fact, the U.S. attorney in Miami gave Odorizzi an "outstanding law enforcement officer" medal last month.

The investigation resulted in the U.S. indictment of several men, including former Honduran army chief of staff, Gen. Jose Bueso-

Rosa, now the military attache in Chile, on charges of attempting to finance a political murder with a drug deal.

The State Department has said the case "again demonstrates the link between drug trafficking and international terrorism."

Latchinian's attorney, Laurel White Marc-Charles, contends in court papers that her client thought he was dealing with U.S. authorities because of Beckwith and Odorizzi's background in secret military operations. Beckwith testified that the claim was ludicrous. Marc-Charles also claims that Odorizzi, in his undercover role, entrapped the defendants by suggesting the assassination could be financed by a drug deal.

Beckwith declined in a telephone interview to discuss his role in detail and Odorizzi could not be reached for comment. But the transcript and exhibits from a pre-trial hearing in April contain details of their involvement that seem more suited to a screenplay than reality.

Beckwith, who is now in the private security business in Texas, testified that he accompanied Odorizzi to the meeting in Miami in July 1984 because he was "trying to get my oar down in Latin America to do a few things" and thought the discussion would center on a training mission in Honduras. Instead, he heard from the people he met that "they wanted to take someone out."

Beckwith said he wasn't certain at first what was meant so he and Odorizzi called another meeting the next day. There they were told point-blank that the idea was to kill Roberto Suazo Cordova, the president of Honduras. Suazo has held office since 1981, when he became the first democratically elected

president in his country in more than a decade.

Beckwith testified that when he heard specifics of the alleged murder plot, "I said, 'That is a hell of a job to have to do.' I said, 'I'd have to chew on this.' And I said it would require a survey. Someone would have to go down there and look it all over. This is a big task to do. And frankly, I was looking for a real nice soft way to get the hell out of there."

He and Odorizzi met once more with the alleged plotters and received \$3,000 for expenses, according to the indictment. "I don't work for nothing," Beckwith explained last week.

On the way back to Texas, he testified, "I remember that I said what I have got to do is, I can't mess around here and go to some pissant about this. I have got to go to someone high in the government and inform them." Beckwith said he didn't think assassinating the president of Honduras was "a prudent thing to do." And he said, "I didn't think this would be good for Reagan and this administration for that to occur."

The next day he called John McMahon, the deputy director of the CIA, whom Beckwith knew from his days with the Delta Force.

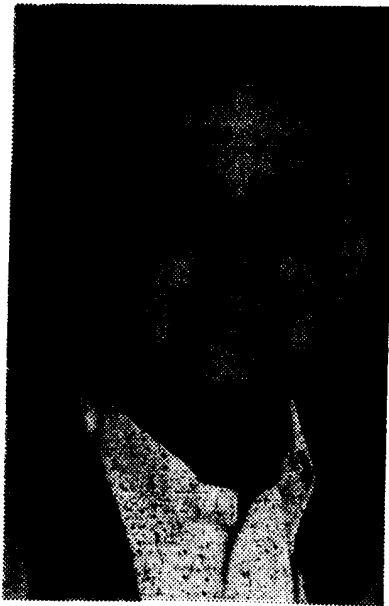
But McMahon was on vacation. A week later he tried again, only to be told McMahon couldn't see him until later in the week.

"I said, 'This is a hell of a way to run a railroad. I got something here I think is kind of sensitive, and I want to see him.'" The word came

back that McMahon was booked up at the time. Beckwith and Odorizzi flew to Washington anyway and on the plane the former Delta Force commander wrote a cryptic letter to the CIA's deputy director.

"Eight days ago in Miami, my partner and I were asked to devel-

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CHARLIE A. BECKWITH
... led '80 raid to free U.S. hostages

"... My partner and I were asked to develop ... necessary planning to execute a sensitive, critical task. I believe the task is a ... first step to overthrow the current regime with a specific Latin country."

—Col. Beckwith's note to CIA

op/undertake the necessary planning to execute a sensitive, critical task. I believe the task is a vital initial first step to overthrow the current regime with a specific Latin country If you or your staff have interest in the details of the activities reflected in the above paragraph, feel free to contact me."

The two men finally got to see some CIA officials, who seemed surprised by news of the alleged plot and said they would have to turn it over to the FBI.

"I didn't like that," Beckwith recalled at the hearing. "I like to keep things kind of small. I didn't think the FBI ought to get involved in it."

In transferring the case to the FBI, a CIA official wrote a memo saying that Beckwith and Odorizzi "were reluctant in the two meetings they had with HQs officers on 1 and 2 August to provide full details of their relationship with the plotters, particularly the background as to why they were brought in as confidants."

Odorizzi testified at the hearing that he was introduced to the alleged plotters by a business associate in Miami who knew he was looking for security work. Odorizzi said he had traveled to Honduras a few years earlier to try to sell his skills in counterterrorism tech-

niques. "At the time it seemed that that was the most marketable skill I had on leaving the Army," he said.

The retired major, who recently worked for the General Services Administration doing a security survey of government buildings, is expected to be a major prosecution witness at the trial.

For three months Odorizzi and an undercover FBI agent pretended they were helping to plan the assassination plot. They met several times with the alleged conspirators, discussing the need for explosives, submachine guns with silencers, night vision goggles and a jet plane for making their getaway.

One tape-recorded discussion last October shows that when arms dealer Latchinian had trouble coming up with the advance on the \$500,000 fee for the killing, Odorizzi suggested he would take something besides cash: "about 10 kilo." One of the alleged plotters, since turned government witness, then arranged to fly drugs into the country to finance the scheme.

One prosecutor said the case is not that unusual for Miami. "Half the people in the office are working on cases like this," he said. "I think it's the heat and humidity down here. It's conducive to hare-brained schemes."