

Ward 387 2624

7 July 1964

MEMORANDUM FOR: Deputy Director of Central Intelligence
Director of Personnel

SUBJECT: Special Commendation - Thornton J.
Anderson, Jr., Walter Szuminski

1. I wish to submit the highest possible commendation for the magnificent performance and conduct of Mr. Anderson and Mr. Szuminski in the course of the [REDACTED] operation. The CIA and the U.S. Government can be supremely proud of their dedication, courage and resourcefulness in what I believe to be one of the most unusual and trying tests ever faced by CIA operators.

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2. Background:

a. These men, with myself, were captured on [REDACTED] in Havana in September 1960 and were held in Cuban prisons until released in April 1963 - a period of two years and seven months.

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b. I, as the supervisor responsible for initially enlisting them in this operation, and for them during this period, feel compelled to present this evaluation of their performance. I did not prepare one in the past for two reasons: first, I assumed it would be done by the CI Staff/DDP as a result of their extensive interrogation; secondly, I felt that my preparation of it might be construed as a self-serving device. I have never read the CI report, but I understand it only analyzed the reasons for the operational failure, and determined whether or not the

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participants had been doubled or had in any fashion become security risks. As a result they were found to be secure and returned to duty status. The record will not be complete without this, my personal assessment.

c. This is a joint commendation prepared on behalf of both men, since it is difficult to apportion credit. Each acted and contributed completely to a team effort; each aided and inspired the actions and morale of the others.

3. Thornton J. Anderson, Jr.

In September 1960, Anderson, 34 years of age, married and father of two children, had been in CIA for eight years. He is a BSK graduate, Princeton, 1948. He carried a Marine Reserve commission as a Captain. His Agency service continuously involved research and development with the [redacted] TSD/DDP. He had always been a competent, aggressive worker in the R&D field, particularly with respect to meeting operational requirements. He had always wanted a chance to participate in field operations to better know his field. He accepted with alacrity the opportunity to take part in this, his first one.

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4. Walter E. Szuminski

At this time, Szuminski was 30 years of age, and single. His parents lived in Boston, Mass. He had been in CIA for ten years, seven of which were spent in the Office of Communications - most of it overseas. He had served in the U.S. Army as an enlisted man. For three years he had been assigned PCS [redacted] as an [redacted] TSD. In early September 1960 he was on his way home on leave to Boston [redacted] he stopped by the office in Washington. Without hesitation, he went along on this operation. He did not get home for almost three more years, and never did see his mother again. She died while he was in prison.

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5. This then was a team composed of members who in the normal course of events, and according their basic responsibilities, would not have participated in

the operation. Nevertheless, each accepted it willingly, with his eyes open to the hazards involved, and proceeded to Havana. Each applied himself completely and competently in the hopes of attaining another successful operation.

6. When catastrophe struck on 15 September 1960, and they were seized by Cuban Intelligence (G-2), they did not panic. With courage and composure they communicated under the direct eyes of the guards. There were few opportunities to do even this, since they were kept isolated one from another in separate cells. Nevertheless, they were able to exchange enough information, and with good judgment and great luck take a light cover and develop it into a cover story which was to hold up through one month of interrogation, the trial, and two and one-half years of prison life. They were thus able to protect the Agency and the vast amount of sensitive information possessed by the group collectively.

7. During the interrogation, they maintained their composure and cover despite intimidation and threats of violence and death. They answered questions cleverly, and clammed-up completely at the point where further information would have been damaging. Although G-2 initially believed that they were CIA or FBI personnel, they incredibly, but obviously, sold the cover story. Although they lost 25 to 30 lbs. during this ordeal due to the heat, bad food, and nervous strain, they did not waiver.

8. They were then transferred to the Cabana prison, where they cooperated completely with myself, the American Consul, Mr. Kessler, and our lawyer, Mr. Colomar, in preparing our defense for the trial. (It was at this time that I forwarded a verbal commendation on these men through Mr. Kessler to Headquarters.) It was at this time, particularly, that they, with pessimistic realism, prepared themselves for any eventuality of time or circumstance. They resolved that they would conduct themselves always, and conscientiously endeavor in all ways possible, to reflect credit on the United States and its Government. They formed many friendships with the Cuban prisoners and their families. As Americans, in a unique position

to sustain the morale of the Cubans, they were leaned on heavily, and gave of themselves selflessly. I'll never forget the November 1960 elections; they went to bed on election night as staunch Republicans and got up the next morning extolling the virtues of their new president - a Democrat. This demonstration of democracy in action was impressive, particularly to the Cuban students. This is a simple thing undoubtedly, but indicative of their orientation and dedication. During this time they were aware that their cover could collapse at any moment, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] and that perhaps these snatches were being saved to be delivered at the forthcoming military tribunal. The three month period prior to the trial was an anxious one.

9. The trial was a big test. The men began with one slight relief, a penalty of 30 years imprisonment was asked rather than the death penalty. During the cross-examination, they conducted themselves superbly. They acted with poise and pride. They answered questions calmly, and cleverly. Mr. Kessler characterized their responses in the following manner, "whenever they were asked a question, they responded with a John Charles Daly kind of answer." The trial although a complete farce, was completely successful from our standpoint. They went through a series of heavy discouragements at this time - they were not deported, they faced a military tribunal rather than a civil court, there was a one month delay prior to sentencing, (during which time the U.S. broke diplomatic relations with Cuba and Mario Nordio was deported) they were sentenced to 10 years, and then they were transferred to the Isle of Pines prison. They took all this in stride, without bitterness, or loss of spirit.

10. The Isle of Pines Prison, their home for the next two years and three months was the one most dreaded by all Cubans. For months on end they felt no sunlight, only the dank filthiness inside the circulars. Food was incredibly bad. No facilities for occupying the mind were provided or permitted except occasional communist literature. Long months of prison bars, living in a strange country with different languages, thinking and personal habits, longing and concern for the loved ones at home, more

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than a year with no word of any kind from home, and then sporadic, closely-censored mail - all these things and worse were the ordinary routine. Added to this were unusually violent and trying pressures - threats and intimidations because they were Americans, frequent bloody riots, emotional breakdown and suicides. Then there were the "requisas" or searches, the attempted escapes, the turbulent period of the April 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion and the October 1962 confrontation. Frequently the guards sent shots ricocheting through the building. For an entire year they lived in circulars mined with 6,000 lbs. of TNT; the severe lightning storms during these nights did not encourage sleep. For at least a year they were on the death list of one of the anti-American groups. There was practically no time during which they could really expect to get out of this situation alive.

11. In retrospect, it is truly remarkable the manner in which they retained morale and complete emotional stability. They always maintained high standards of personal cleanliness and decency - their cells and personal effects were always the cleanest in the circular. They shared their food, drugs and personal possessions with the Cubans and other Americans. They encouraged and stabilized the "soldier of fortune" type Americans, some of whom were considering entering the communist rehabilitation program. They adopted the mentally-ill American who on occasion became criminally insane. They circulated through the prison community making friends and giving encouragement. They were always leaned on for moral support when the news was bad. They interpreted and explained the news in support of President Kennedy and the United States Government. They studied Spanish and taught English. They gave lectures on the Constitution, capitalism, our legal and law enforcement system, elections and other aspects of American democratic life. They spoke on such subjects as the U.S. development of nuclear electric power and conversion of salt water for improving the underdeveloped areas of the world. In essence, they forgot their own problems by concerning themselves with those of others.

12. Their greatest performance came in November 1961, while they were living in circular No. 4, when

the Cuban army installed 6,000 lbs. of TNT in each building. They were approached by a Cuban group who had found a small access hole down into the tunnel where the explosives were being installed. They were asked to take charge of the operation. They knew they should protect their cover and not draw attention to themselves; they also knew that every one of the 1,100 prisoners in that circular would be aware of their participation within a few days. After little consideration, they decided that the lives of the 1,100 men had to be protected, and that they, as Americans, had a special responsibility in the matter. The details of the specific operation would fill a book, but it is sufficient to note here that they successfully sabotaged the TNT installation and participated in planning the suicide break-out operation which would be required in the event of an invasion, and the discovery of the sabotage. When they were moved to circular No. 1, they consulted with the Cubans to protect that circular also. As expected, the entire prison population rapidly became aware of their contribution. With 5,000 Cubans aware of their activity, many of them entering the communist rehabilitation program, they expected to be pulled in for another trial - and this one would have been fatal.

13. There were many other incidents and occasions when they took moral stands and demonstrated courage; they never let up. The following comments point up their strength of character,

a. Never once in all that time did either of them recriminate against me for leading them into this situation.

b. Never did either blame anyone or anything for their fate; they felt that they had been performing their duty and this was the risk they had taken.

c. They blamed neither CIA or the U.S. Government for not trying to get them out. They felt they were expendable and that it just did not make sense to risk additional lives to save theirs - particularly after a year had passed and the sensitive information which they possessed had become obsolete. Yes, they actually said and believed these things.

d. Neither one permitted himself a single day of severe depression in all that time. Each one had prepared himself to spend the full ten years in prison, if necessary.

e. They thought and lived their cover every hour of every day. There were many basic things concerning their family lives, even about the operation itself, that they did not discuss among themselves for the two and one-half years of living together - for fear of being accidentally overheard.

f. The Cubans and many of the other Americans spoke of this experience as a "living hell"; they suffered great physical and mental torture, there were many who went insane, some committed suicide. Yet these two found the pressures easy to withstand.

g. Since their return from prison both men have conducted themselves with dignity and reserve, making no undue claims on their organizations or the Agency - nor will they. Both are showing outstanding performance since being reassigned to duty.

14. Anderson proved to be the gung-ho marine when the excitement started. He moved aggressively in the TNT sabotage operation. He sold Uncle Sam with a religious fervor at every opportunity. His intelligence and inexhaustible fund of knowledge made for many interesting hours. He was a highly moral person who set high moral standards for all about him - particularly the other Americans. Upon his return to duty he was assigned to the [REDACTED] his performance is rated as outstanding.

15. Szuminski was a man of quiet courage. He participated without reservation in the TNT operation. He was the pessimistic realist who helped keep everyone else in balance. He had a wonderful sense of humor which helped ease the strains which come from constant close quarters. His personal standards were high and unrelenting - for himself and others. Since his return he has been working with the [REDACTED]

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TSD where he has performed with exceptional proficiency. He was recently recommended for promotion.

16. In retrospect, it is not the least bit surprising that each walked out of prison on April 1963 proudly, with no mental or emotional aberration, completely prepared to take up life where they had left off. I am certain they are stronger, better men for their experience, because they played it that way.

17. I sincerely believe these two men to be the highest types this Agency can hope to employ. They proved it before, during and since this operation. I have been proud to know and serve with them.

18. I recommend that the essentials of this commendation be read to their families and become a permanent part of their personnel records. I further recommend that the Agency consider a special award appropriate to their high level of performance.

DAVID L. CHRIST