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TDY in Castro's prisons

STAT



OUR MEN IN HAVANA

Nathan Nielsen

It was hot in Havana on Wednesday evening, 14 September 1960. The three Agency technicians were sweating and stripped to their shorts as they worked in the apartment on the eighteenth floor of the Medical Building. David L. Christ, Thornton J. Anderson, Jr., and Walter E. Szuminski, of Technical Services Division, were installing listening devices. Their target:

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Over the purring of the drill, they heard hammering at the door. Was it their Far East Division case officer with more equipment?

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As Anderson recalls it: "I was in the bathroom plastering up. We had buried the power supplies and transmitters in the cavities beside the medicine cabinet. These are AC operated and that's where we had to pick up the power, and the mike wires were through the wall and down pinholes . . . Dave says, 'I better go see what they want.' Wally was over there drilling away and he says, 'Gee, I haven't heard from Dave; I better go look.' So he went, and I'm still plastering away and all of a sudden looked up and there's a guy with a .38 pointed at my eyes . . . And there are Wally and Dave spread-eagled against the wall, and the guy spoke English and he said do the same thing. . . ."

Cuban authorities had caught three Americans in a bugging operation at a time when US-Cuban relations were falling apart; when Fidel Castro was realigning Cuba from West to East; when counterrevolutionaries routinely were dragged to the wall and shot.

Thus, for Christ, Anderson, and Szuminski, began an ordeal that would extend for 949 days: arrest, hostile interrogation, the threat of death, trial, imprisonment, privation. Through all of it, they clung to their flimsy tourist cover. Their lives depended on it. They considered themselves to be in combat. And expendable: They not only survived, but prevailed; they mounted a major operation from within prison. After their release on 21 April 1963, they returned to an atmosphere of what for some 16 years appeared to be bureaucratic indifference. Eventually, in 1979, the Agency clarified the distinction between their roles as victims of a mismanaged operation and heroes of the aftermath, and honored each of them with the Distinguished Intelligence Cross, "for a voluntary act or acts of exceptional heroism involving the acceptance of existing dangers with conspicuous fortitude and exemplary courage."

This is an account of how they were thrust into harm's way, how close they came to summary execution, how they suffered, how they triumphed. It is also an account of what an Agency report described as "the operation which went wrong."

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Operation

The operation went wrong for several reasons, as detailed in a 27 October 1960 memorandum, "Compromise and Arrest of Agency Personnel in Havana, Cuba," from Chief, Operational Services to Deputy Director (Plans) Christ, Anderson, and Szuminski had been sent to Havana to install audio equipment in the [redacted]

[redacted] That could have been done with the support of [redacted], who had agreed to it. But [redacted] reversed his position. The technicians were then given another assignment: to modify and improve audio equipment that a team headed by Christ had installed a month before in [redacted] ... After it was obvious that the [redacted] operation was out," the Far East Division case officer had written in his report, "it was decided to utilize the services of the technicians, since they were in town (emphasis added), to finish [redacted] installation."

The critique took note of extenuating circumstances. "It is important to recognize that the political situation in Cuba which existed at the time of this operation called for rapid action. The officers of FE felt great urgency in improving and expanding their audio coverage of high priority targets in Cuba prior to the expected break in relations [redacted] was rated by FE as the number one Chinese Communist target in the Western Hemisphere. A break in relations between Cuba and the United States was sufficiently possible that the Havana Station had already started destroying files and strengthening stay-behind arrangements. The Audio Operations Branch of TSD was very short of technicians (two were on vacation) so the Chief of the Branch, Mr. Christ, decided to handle the assignment personally with the assistance of two officers from other components of TSD. On 8 September Hurricane Donna was approaching Florida and there was a good chance that air flights to Havana would be suspended. . . ."

But in the cold, harsh light of second-guessing six weeks after the event, reasons for haste do not count. Among the principal conclusions in the "Compromise and Arrest" memorandum:

"Plans for this sensitive operation did not include coordinated details on emergency plans and story to be used in event of arrest and interrogation. Nor is there any evidence that the men who were arrested had received careful instruction on certain general rules of conduct and deportment which might assist them under interrogation.

"The tourist cover used by the technicians was very light. The cover could not be expected to hold up if the Cubans conducted a thorough inquiry and intensive interrogation.

"Violations of operational security occurred in the travel and housing arrangements of the personnel on TDY in Havana. . . .

"Although officers of the FE Division went through the motions of coordinating with the WH Division they really did not provide WH with sufficient details to enable that division to discharge its responsibilities. . . ."

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"Control, supervision and support of this operation by Havana Station was inadequate.

"The failure to provide lookouts during the critical phase of the drilling was a serious lapse. . . .

"The operation which was blown certainly did not receive the careful analysis and thorough action that an activity of this sensitivity requires. The whole question of sending the three technicians to Havana was considered in the light of the installation in [redacted] and only incidental consideration was given to the more hazardous job in the [redacted]

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Also lodged in the memorandum was this ominous reference to the senior technician: "Mr. Christ was probably the most knowledgeable officer in the Agency of world-wide audio operations. It is not evident that proper consideration was given to the hazards to Agency interests of exposing Mr. Christ to arrest and hostile interrogation. Mr. Christ was in Cuba under tourist cover during August. He returned to the U.S. on 30 August and traveled again to Havana as a tourist on 8 September despite having advised a fellow officer in TSD that he believed he had been under surveillance during the first trip. His second trip to Cuba as a tourist at a time when few genuine tourists were traveling was questionable, particularly in light of the suspected surveillance. In deciding to participate personally in the installation Mr. Christ showed commendable professional enthusiasm but questionable judgment." Moreover, "The two technicians who accompanied Mr. Christ . . . did not receive a risk-of-capture briefing. . . ."

Interrogation

Caught in the act, with the audio equipment and evidence of its installation at hand in the apartment, the three Agency officers had only paper-thin tourist cover: driver's licenses, visas, credit cards, and their story. Christ had identification as Daniel L. Carswell, 42, electrical engineer, Eastchester, New York; Anderson as Eustace Dan-Brunt, 34, mechanical engineer, Baltimore; Szuminski as Edmund K. Taransky, 30, electrical engineer, New York City.

The difference between a hypothetical situation and their predicament became brutally clear to Anderson. As he put it: "I had never dreamed that if we got wrapped up, we'd be any more than deported. I didn't think I would come that close to getting shot." His career until then had been in engineering research and development. This was his first assignment to a field operation.

Szuminski recalls: "There was no doubt in my mind that if these guys figured out we were CIA, we were dead men." Early in September, on home leave from a tour in [redacted] and in Boston to see his parents, he had received a call from Elsie [redacted] that cute branch secretary. Something was up. Could he interrupt his home leave to come to Washington? He then learned of the need for another technician on the Havana operation, and volunteered to go.

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The Cubans kept the three Americans in the apartment all night after the arrest. "They didn't frisk us because we were in our shorts," Szuminski said.

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Arrested. From left, Anderson, Christ, Szuminski.

"We were taken to the rear bedroom and told to sit on the beds. There was always a guy sitting in the doorway, in the corridor. There was a long corridor with all the rooms coming off it. He could look to his left up the corridor, and look straight ahead and see us."

There was no interrogation the first night, while the Cubans waited to see who else might enter the apartment, but there was excitement. A Cuban shot himself in the hand. "Cubans are great for that," Szuminski said. "They play with guns, roll the cylinders. This guy was playing, and bam! Right in the hand."

Next morning, the Cubans moved the prisoners into the living room and took photographs of them and the equipment. (The photographs were to appear in the Cuban newspapers under headlines proclaiming the capture of American spies. Szuminski remembers the equipment was shown upside down. "They obviously didn't know which side was right.")

The Cubans then drove the Americans to G-2 headquarters for more photographs, fingerprinting, and initial questions about name, address, date and place of birth. "Just the booking took the whole day . . . About 5 o'clock here they come and ask for the watches, belt, and shoelaces, which gives you the clue that you're not leaving. They walk you through a little courtyard to the back and throw you into the holding cells." The Americans were separated, each in a cell jammed with Cuban prisoners. "You hear, 'What did you do?' 'Nothing.' Well, I didn't do anything either."

The interrogations were conducted in the middle of the night. Szuminski describes them: "One guy we called 'Bad Teeth' because he had some very large cavities in his front teeth. He spoke excellent English. Then there was the 'Football Player,' a big guy there to keep you under control. Usually a third person, a very young type, would wander in and out, almost like a disinterested third party."

"Bad Teeth" would ask, "What are you doing here? Why are you here? Come on, Mr. Taransky, tell us. Why, you work for the CIA, don't you?"

"Who, me?" Szuminski would reply. "No, I don't work for them." He, Anderson, and Christ stuck to their story: They were on vacation. A man from

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the American Embassy had asked them to help him with some electrical equipment. They decided they could help him out. CIA? FBI? No, nothing like that. (In Anderson's interrogations, the questions usually centered on an FBI connection.)

Tell all, or be shot, the interrogators warned them. Each prisoner, grilled separately, would be told: "Well, we know all about this. Your buddies have told us the whole story, so why don't you tell us the whole story?" The Cubans wanted to know if more people were involved, and if there was more to the plot than bugging [redacted]

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"There was a Texaco map I remember having in the apartment," Szuminski relates. "At the time there was a hurricane coming through the Caribbean. We were plotting the path of the hurricane with Xs on this map. They wanted to know, 'What's this map? All these Xs on here? What does that mean?'" Szuminski told them: "They're not ships. That's where the hurricane is coming." Diversions such as this, he believes, kept the interrogators from penetrating to the truth.

In the 29 days they were held at G-2, Christ, Anderson, and Szuminski each went through four or more middle-of-the-night interrogations. Szuminski characterizes his hour-long sessions with "Bad Teeth" as "really loose, not what you see in the movies." In addition to Szuminski's papers and cards identifying him as Taransky, "Bad Teeth" had in front of him a book, a guide to interrogation. "He used to play with the pages," Szuminski said. "He would skip through it, go over the last page and pick a question, and then he would ask it. He would hit the middle and pick a question and ask it. That was about the way he approached it. If he had started on page 1 and gone through it, we would have been dead meat."

Except for the night after their arrest, when they were kept in the bedroom together and could whisper, the three had no opportunity to concoct any more than the simple, absurd account of how they were tourists drawn into doing a favor for a man from the US Embassy. [redacted]

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Anderson detected an element of the hot and cold treatment in the interrogations. After spending all day in a steaming holding cell crowded with Cuban prisoners, he would be taken out for questioning. "I don't know how much malice aforethought there was in this 2 o'clock in the morning business," he said. "I sat in that room freezing my ass off. They are asking all these questions, and I said, 'Come on; let's turn this air conditioner off.' They didn't listen to you. They just kept on going."

The Cubans did not beat or pistol-whip their American prisoners. But there was often a guard playing with his gun. Szuminski recalls one occasion on which he complained to his interrogator when a particularly young guard was flipping the cylinder and pulling the trigger. "Tell him that men don't play

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with guns. It's only kids." The interrogator passed on the admonition in Spanish. "That kid shoved the gun back in his belt and sat there like he had been scolded by the schoolmaster," Szuminski said.

Anderson, asked how he faced the threat of death, replied: "You're really caught with your guard down because you're not prepared for this. You have to have a talk with yourself and make peace with yourself. That's what I did. In that particular cell where I was at night there was nothing to do. The noise level was awful and the stench and the heat were awful. The interrogations were going on and this guy had me pretty well convinced that they were going to shoot me if I didn't cooperate with him and tell them what they wanted to know." He remembered the case of a Marine colonel who had been captured in the Korean War and, under duress, had made a confession damaging to the United States. "And I kept thinking of my two sons. I just made up my mind that if I had to get shot that's where I was going to be and I wasn't going to do anything to disgrace my country. I didn't ever want to have any stigma passed on to my sons. I just became matter of fact about it—well, we'll see which way things go. I tried not to do anything stupid. But that's the way I felt. . . . I'm going to beat the sons of bitches and I'm never going to give in to them no matter what they do. Until they shoot me, I'm going to outlast them . . . We were like Marines crawling up the beach. We were in combat. We were expendable."

Anderson believes the Cubans, through surveillance prior to the arrest, had spotted Christ as the team leader. Anderson said that Christ, under interrogation, tried to blame the operation on the man from the US Embassy. "Dave was convinced [redacted] they couldn't do anything with him. Therefore he could put the whole thing on his [redacted] back. They'll take him to the States and never touch him. He (Christ) tried to shift it from us."

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Trial

Anderson kept a calendar, which by the end of the 949 days amounted to five sheets of paper. He recorded, in his own code, what happened. If a *requisa* (search) was imminent, he would stash the calendar away in the only safe place, his shorts. He brought the calendar out with him.

After the 29 days in G-2, the prisoners were packed into a bus and driven to LaCabana. "I had never heard of LaCabana, except people said, 'Oh, my God, don't get sent there' . . . These galeras were really old ammunition storage places. They were underground like an igloo except the front and back were open. Some had dirt floors. The one we were in had a cement floor. Dave got a bed up there from a guy that was shot the night before . . . They put Wally and me down by the shit house . . . God, the flies and the stink. We didn't get any sleep. . . ."

It was a transient population. People were getting shot. Anderson recalls: "You actually hear them getting shot . . . At 2 o'clock in the morning you hear them going off, and you see what eight M-1's do to a person . . . There was a moat around this monument which made it like a castle fortress . . . And they would stand them up there and shoot them. We were right around the corner

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and of course the sound is echoed right down this galera . . . They would bring in these young milicianos. They would all yell and hoot. Like the old days with hangings. And a couple of guys would resist, you know, and they would come and shoot you in the legs and break your bones and then lay you down on your knees and you couldn't get up, and then shoot you. They were doing that. . . ." Over the moat was a drawbridge. "We were taken across that to our trial, and I could look down there and see where they were shooting. Red meat was still there."

Christ, Anderson, and Szuminski spent 101 days in LaCabana.

Szuminski described the trial, conducted on a Saturday, 17 December 1960. "It was a military tribunal. They had representatives from, I guess, all the services that they had. There was a fellow there in a naval uniform. The chief of the tribunal had a beard. Our friends from G-2 showed up. Hugh Kessler, the American Consul, was there . . . I guess it was a legal sort of trial. The prosecutor got up and he went on and on . . . You went up and sat on a chair in front of the tribunal. They'd ask the questions in Spanish. They would translate. Then you would answer. He would translate back to them."

The trial lasted about four hours. It was a victory, of sorts, for the defendants. The prosecution demanded not death, but 30-year prison terms.

"After the trial," Szuminski continued, "they take you downstairs and there is a green couch and a coke machine . . . Kessler was elated. 'You guys are great. Man, you're famous.' He thought we did a great job. So he bought us all a coke. He said, 'Okay, we'll see you next visiting day.' That's the last time we saw him. It was right after that they broke diplomatic relations. . . ."

It was to be their last contact with a US official for more than two years. Although Christ, Anderson, and Szuminski had not yet been informed of it, they had been convicted of "activities against the security of the Cuban state." In two days the court handed down the sentence: 10 years in prison. (News of the sentence did not get into American newspapers until 1961. The cover names, Carswell, Dan-Brunt, and Taransky, were intact.) *

Christ, Anderson, and Szuminski were to begin the longest, most lonely chapter of their ordeal.

Prison

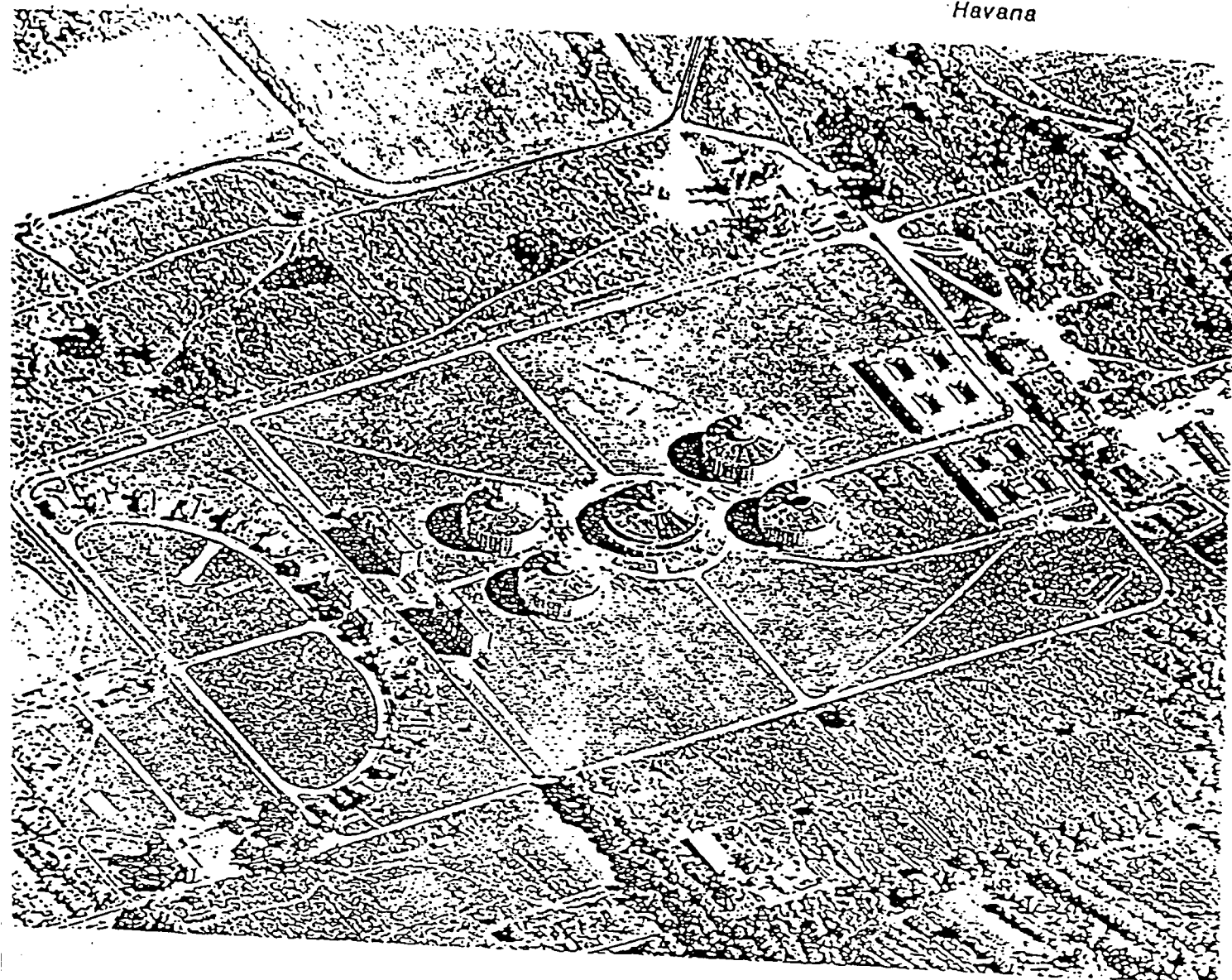
On 22 January 1961 they were flown to the Isle of Pines, where Fidel Castro kept 6,000 political prisoners in structures designed to contain 4,500. The four principal buildings were called circulars, five stories of cells surrounding a guard tower. What struck Szuminski first was the noise. "We got there in the afternoon. We were walked between circulars 1 and 2 and then around the mess hall to circular 4. When you walk between the buildings and hear the roar of the people, you don't know what you're getting into. Your first impression is, 'My God, when I get in there, they're going to tear me apart limb from limb.'"

* The name Dan-Brunt, however, was not intact in the newspapers. It appeared variously as Dan Brunet, Danbrunt, and Van-Brunt

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Isle of Pines prison compound in recent overhead photography.

Because they all sounded like crazies. They don't talk to each other; they yell. When a Cuban sees his buddy across the building, they yell at each other."

The Americans milled around a few moments. Szuminski relates: "Next thing I know some guy is tapping me on the shoulder, saying, 'Hey, are you an American? Come on, we're going upstairs.' He grabbed my stuff and said, 'Come with me.' He was a Cuban. He didn't want another Cuban moving in with him. They are dirty. They never wash. Get a nice clean American... We grabbed Andy and Dave and got them in the cell next to where we were. A cell was essentially bare. There was nothing in there."

Szuminski's description of their new home, circular 4: "Inside there were individual cells but no bars, so we were free to roam. The cells were about 6 feet wide by 12 feet deep. There was provision for two bunks in each cell, but most of them didn't have bunks. You could have from two to 15 in a cell. If you had a lot of friends and they didn't have a place to sleep, then a community

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bed. You could buy a bunk from somebody if you had the going price of 30 pesos. If a guy had a bunk and he was hungry, he'd sell you the bed because he could then go to the prison store and buy cigarettes and the extra goodies."

They learned how a prisoner became hungry enough to sell his bunk. Breakfast was half milk, half coffee, and a piece of bread. The noon meal was rice and beans, supper a dish of beans. Szuminski, a lean 160 pounds at the time of arrest, wore down to 125 pounds or less on the Isle of Pines. Anderson believes it may have been less. "You could see every bone in his body," he said. Anderson weighed 170 pounds in September 1960. At the low point on the Isle of Pines "I weighed myself and calculated from kilograms to pounds and I think I was down to about 110." Christ, too, lost weight.

Their lawyer had arranged with a family on the island to send food to them, and in the first month they received lettuce, tomatoes, bread with butter, and even an occasional steak. But that ended after the first month. "I guess the lawyer thought it was getting too expensive," Szuminski said. "He didn't know if he was going to get paid." As the months wore on, the food became worse. "Pretty thin," Szuminski said. "Watery soup. Damn little protein. Cabbage, macaroni, fish soup. The macaroni was terrible."

Christ, in a memorandum dated 7 July 1964 to the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence and the Director of Personnel, set down his recollections of prison life. Because he was seeking a special commendation for Anderson and Szuminski, he wrote about them rather than himself. His commendation said:

"The Isle of Pines Prison . . . was the one most dreaded by all Cubans. For months on end (Anderson and Szuminski) 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 . . . living in a strange country with different languages, thinking and personal habits, longing and concern for the loved ones at home, more than a year with no word of any kind from home, and then sporadic, closely censored mail—all these things and worse were the . . . 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.

"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, (medications), and personal possessions with the Cubans and other Americans. They

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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 the 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."

Christ, Anderson, and Szuminski found an abundance of disease, filth, bedbugs, lice, and rats in their environment with a shortage of medical care, sanitation, food, and water.* The water piped to the ground floor of the circular "had the smell of dead fish," Anderson said. "It was only good for showering or washing clothes." Drinking water was trucked in and dumped into a cistern. "We would go down with our little bucket and get our gallon or two of water, take it up to the cell, put it on the floor and put something over it to keep out the flies. And that's what you drank from. We never got dysentery because we were very particular. We did the dishes. The average Cuban when he would finish his rice and beans would throw the bowl on the floor and let it sit there until it hardened up and there was a crust all over it. Flies had been down in the crap room and were all over it. Then they wondered why they got dysentery."

Just getting a pail was an achievement. Christ acquired one by barter. They carried the brackish water up five flights in five-gallon cans to flush the toilets. "I think that's how I got my hernia," Anderson said.

Anderson laid some of the blame for the bad food in their environment on heredity. "The problem was the damn Spaniards came into Cuba and gave them the wrong diet for the climate. Rice and beans are the worst things you could eat in that climate," he said.

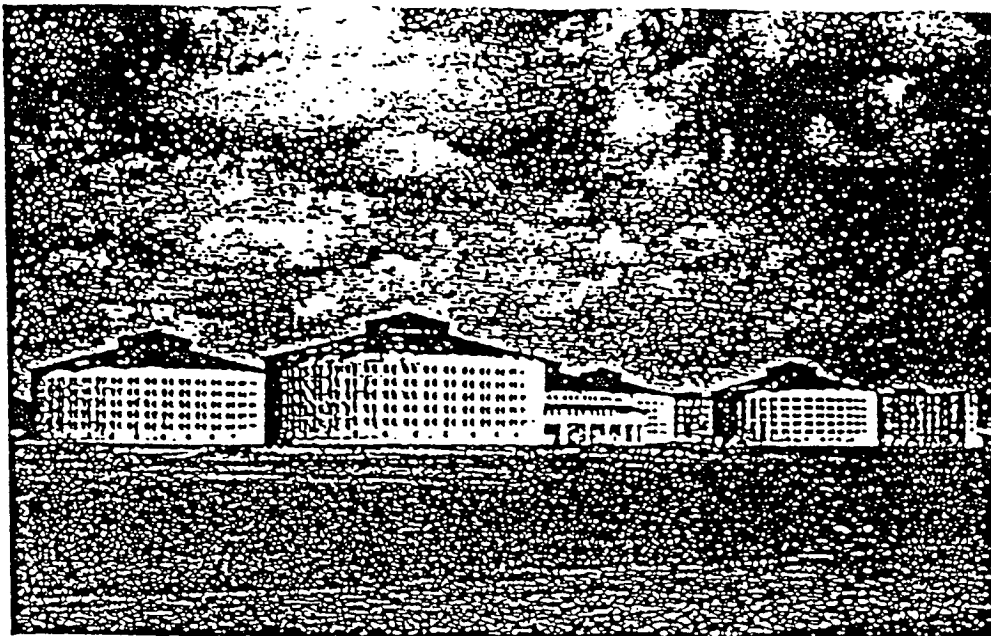
It was more than a struggle to keep their bodies functioning. They had to find ways to occupy their minds. From memory, they made a monopoly board. The game fascinated their Cuban cellmates. Anderson made a slide rule from a cigar box, working out the logarithms from an old engineering book that somehow had remained in the circular. "The slide rule served its purpose," he said. "It enabled me to do these little problems, and Dave was an engineer, too. I remember we got into descriptive geometry."

The American engineers made a radio. An ear piece had been smuggled in, and they scrounged up Russian transistors and pieces of tubing used for intravenous feeding. To make a battery, they acquired zinc from a pail, copper

* An indication of how Cubans assess prison conditions in their homeland came late in 1957 at federal detention centers in Louisiana and Georgia. Cuban detainees, fearing a return to Cuba, rioted and seized hostages.

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Ground view of circulars, 1954. Prison was converted to museum.

from a wire, copper sulfate from the sparse medical supplies. The radio worked like an overgrown crystal set. They could pick up broadcasts from a 50-thousand-watt New Orleans station.

They rarely spoke of religion. Christ was a Lutheran, Anderson an Episcopalian, Szuminski a lapsed Catholic. Anderson mused that if Szuminski should ever have an opportunity to get married, Elsie would be the girl for him. She would get him back to the church.

Christ and Szuminski had served in the Army, Anderson in the Marine Corps. Anderson looked upon the military training as a plus. "We were used to discipline and used to improvising if we had to." Many of their fellow inmates, political prisoners from the professional and wealthier layers of Cuban society, lacked that advantage. "A lot of these Cubans had been waited on by nannies all their lives," Anderson said. "They never picked up anything. They were used to having someone else do it. And if they didn't have someone to help them, I don't think they could survive. They had no preparation for life except to be waited on."

Depressed, disoriented, defeated, some of the Cubans resorted to suicide. "Usually they would jump off about the fifth floor and hit the concrete, and that was it," Anderson said. "They would carry them down to the hospital. The doctor explained that the liver and kidneys would break like a balloon."

The Americans prevented one suicide. "We were standing there on our little railing one day and Dave looks over and this guy is getting ready to jump. The Cubans all stepped back. They were afraid of him. Wally and I ran as fast and as hard as we could. And we grabbed him and pulled him back." The man was a Cuban journalist who had predicted Castro's downfall and consequently had been sentenced to 10 years. "He spoke with a Harvard accent," Anderson said. "US educated. Tall guy with bushy curly gray hair and a very

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distinguished beard, filthy as hell. I was almost afraid to put my hands on him. He was so filthy. He was so slimy. The first thing I did when I got back was to wash my hands."

One of the American soldier of fortune prisoners was in a similar condition of absolute filth, and had gone mad. Szuminski described the situation: "He would get into a fetal position and hide in a corner, which is what he was doing when we ran into him. And the Cubans would go in there and poke him with a stick. He would push them away and they would poke him some more. Finally he would growl. He would rant at them. They would run away. Then they would come back and poke at him again for amusement, like kids poking at a dog. Andy felt that we as Americans could not let this happen to a fellow American."

They befriended him, brought him to their own cell, cleaned him up, fed him, had one of the imprisoned Cuban psychiatrists talk to him, and determined that valium might help. Eventually, they obtained the drug for him.

As the months dragged by, a rare Red Cross package might get to them. They could tell from the way it was wrapped that it came from their friends in Technical Services Division. Perhaps it had been Elsie, the secretary Szuminski had an eye for. Whatever possessions they fashioned or acquired were at constant risk because of the dreaded *requisas*. From squealers amidst the prison population, the prison authorities would have learned of the existence of a radio, or weapons, or other contraband. A *requisa* was the way to find the stuff, and also a way to terrorize the prisoners.

"It's 7:30 o'clock in the morning," Szuminski related. "They ring the building with soldiers. 'Down the stairs!' they yell. 'Everyone down the stairs!' They get everyone lined up against the wall while the soldiers search the prison throwing all your stuff out. You're facing the wall. You're not allowed to look. The first guy to turn around is going to get it. And there you stand. They usually set up a couple of machine guns behind the prisoners. Snap! Clack, clack, click! They're loading the rifles, snapping the bolts, putting the heavy ammo in the machine guns. . . ."

One *requisa* lasted 15 hours, into darkness. The lights went out, and the jittery soldiers began snapping the gun bolts behind the prisoners. The Cubans, to a man, squatted; some of them, in fear, were defecating. Only Christ, Anderson, and Szuminski remained standing. "We felt that if we were going to get it in the back, we would at least take it standing up," Szuminski said. It impressed their fellow prisoners, who also were aware that the gringos had great technical expertise.

"The Invasion!"

Christ had been briefed on plans for an invasion of Cuba before he left Washington for Havana in September 1960, although he did not burden Anderson and Szuminski with this knowledge. Rumors of an imminent uprising were flying among Cuban prisoners in LaCabana during the winter of 1960-1961, and the rumors bounced around the Isle of Pines curculars through

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the spring. Szuminski remembers going to his bunk on a Sunday night in April 1961 thinking, "Tomorrow is Monday. Nothing ever happens on Monday."

He continued: "All of a sudden I woke up to the clatter of a .50-caliber machine gun. It was a machine gun emplacement up on this hill by the prison. It was shooting this way. . . . Right over the top of the circular a B-26 flew in straight. . . . The place went into an uproar. Guys were running around screaming, 'The invasion! The invasion!' My cellmate says, 'What you think, gringo?' 'Keep your head down,' I said. An American prisoner came running past. 'They're shooting a boat in the harbor!' he yells. 'Jesus, it is sinking!' So I decided to take a look. I went up to the sixth floor. There were very small windows up there, and you could see out to the ocean. There was a patrol boat out there. I caught the last sweep of the B-26. He just popped out of the clouds and made a pass. The patrol boat went down. The .50-caliber stopped shooting. The guards outside were panicked and running in all directions. They were hollering at the prisoners and shooting at the buildings. Then everything got super quiet . . . Of course, all meals were canceled . . . Next day it was pretty much the same thing. The guards were hollering to the prisoners to stay away from the windows. Anybody who gets close to the windows would get shot . . . And about the third day, the guys over in circular 3 were listening to Miami on their radio. The story started to get a little bit funny. And right away you know. Oh, there's something wrong here. . . ."

So much for the inside-prison view of the Bay of Pigs. For the prisoners, the consequence was to be far more dangerous. Castro had the circulars mined with explosives. Should there be an invasion or insurrection, those troublesome prisoners could be blown away.

Sabotage

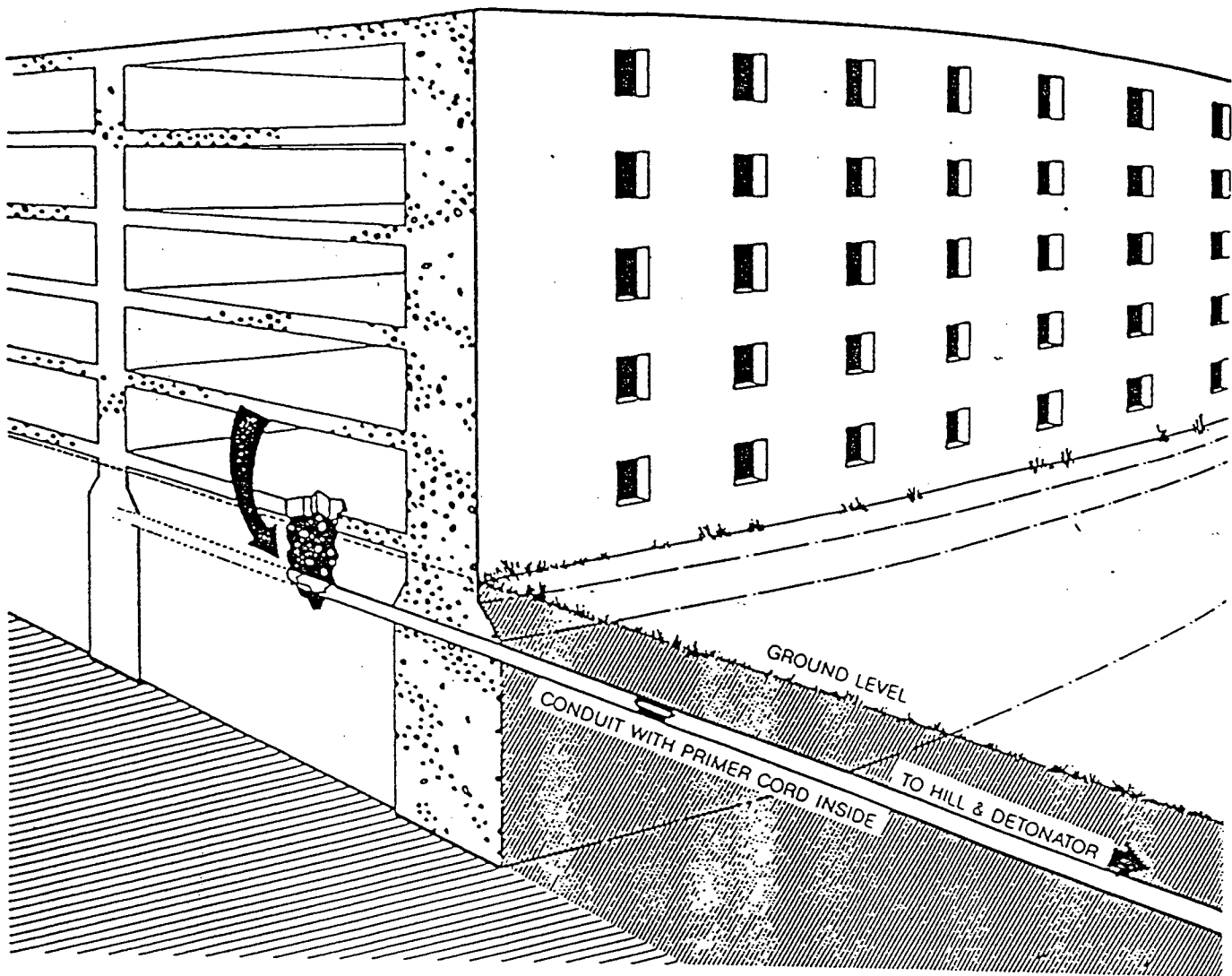
Christ's memorandum of commendation for Anderson and Szuminski (again, saying nothing of his own role) outlined the story: "Their greatest performance came in November 1961, while they were living in circular No. 4, when the Cuban army installed 6,000 lbs. of TNT in each building. They were approached 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 . . . 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. . . ."

The operation has been mentioned in books, such as *Against All Hope*, by Armando Valladares (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1956).

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Cutaway view showing conduit/primer cord running from circular to hill with guard post and detonator.

Szuminski gave this account of the mining: "They brought in air compressors, and they started cutting holes in the support pillars of the building. All the way around it . . . They'd work with a jack hammer. They'd start it at 9 o'clock in the morning and go until 5 o'clock in the afternoon. It took them about three weeks to get all the holes dug. And then one night lots of trucks pulled up to the circular. . . . They were plugging in the TNT, in boxes. . . . There is a guy inside the circular who is in charge of bringing packages in for the prisoners. About 10:30 or 11 o'clock at night this guy hollers up, 'Hey, Sanchez, you've got packages downstairs.' A little bit of humor. . . ."

The lines to the explosives were threaded through plastic tubing, buried and running from the circular outside beyond the perimeter fence. The sabotage of the primer cord and the electrical circuit would have to be done from inside the circular.

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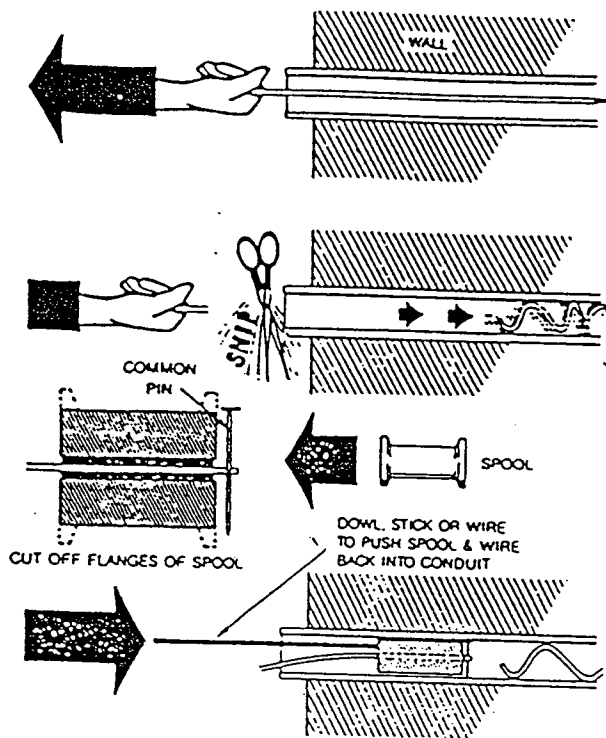
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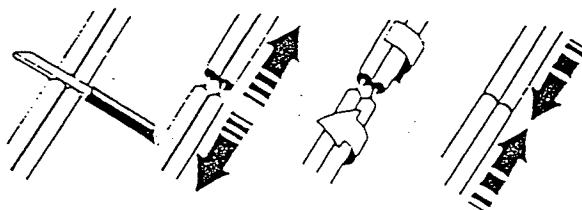
A very large Cuban ("built like the Michelin tire ad," as Szuminski put it) and a helper, swinging hammers, broke through the ground floor into the tunnel where the explosives were. A very small Cuban, a street-smart Havana youngster nicknamed "Americano," was slipped into the hole for reconnaissance. "So we sent 'Americano' down in the pit to see what he could find. Told him to bring back samples of everything he could find," Szuminski said. "The first thing was a primer cord and a sample of some of the blasting caps, a five-kilo block of TNT and some of the wire. Dave confirmed it was TNT. Andy looks at the primer cord. Good stuff. It was the real thing. So then we had to figure out how we would stop it. . . ."

Szuminski continued: "How do you stop primer cord from shooting? You put a gap in it . . . We had essentially zero to work with. We had no tools, no files, no saws, nothing like that. The only things we had were razor blades, knives, sewing kits." Using a spool from a sewing kit, they devised a way to put a gap in the primer cord without leaving tell-tale evidence that it had been tampered with. (See illustration.) To disarm the dual, electrical system, the trick was to slice through the insulation, twist the wires to short the connection, and let the insulation slip back in place.

Christ, Anderson, and Szuminski brought "Americano" into their quarters and trained him. He would have no light in the tunnel, so they had him lie on the floor with a blanket over his head and his hands outside. They taught him to attach a spool with pins to one end of a severed primer cord and shove the spool through the plastic tubing until the pins would catch and the cord could not be drawn back. They put him through the wire cut-and-twist exercise, drilling him until he was ready.



Method of severing primer cord.



Method of shorting wiring to explosives.

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"Americano" went down the hole and completed the mission. A guard, tugging at the primer cord, could not tell that it had been cut. The electrical circuit would pass a galvanometer test.

The operation could hardly have been kept secret. Within a week a visitor to the Isle of Pines ran up to the Americans and thanked them for stopping the TNT. Even so, they detected no evidence of an attempt to repair the sabotaged connections. Nor were they punished. The punishment would have been isolation in the pavillon, a place of no beds and no food other than slop thrown in once a day, where prisoners were kept naked for the swarming mosquitoes, where men went mad in 30 days.

To the prisoners, the mining of the circulars was more frightful than the missile crisis of October 1962, which for them meant alerts and blackouts, but a terror more distanced than TNT rigged to blow up under their feet. They were desperate enough to fashion weapons: grenades from the explosives "Americano" hauled out of the tunnel, a flame thrower from scraps of junk in the circular and from alcohol they distilled.

After 281 days in circular 4, the Agency officers were moved to circular 1.

Release

There had been an attempt to [redacted]

[redacted] they missed the clue. There had been fragmentary communication to the outside through their lawyer and through the Swiss, but little to give them hope.

On 16 March 1963 they had a visitor: James B. Donovan, the New York lawyer who a year earlier had arranged the exchange of U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers for Soviet spy William August Fisher (Colonel Rudolf Ivanovich Abel)* and the bartered release of the Cuban exiles captured at the Bay of Pigs. Donovan told Christ, Anderson, and Szuminski that they would be coming out in another prisoner exchange. (Anderson told Donovan that he would rather stay in prison than be part of any transaction that would embarrass the United States.)

They were coming out . . . David L. Christ, the senior officer who bore the anguish of having led his team into disaster, who had been uncomfortable from the start with the operation and the case officer assigned to it, who suffered unending anxiety because he was in hostile hands and knew too much, who yearned for his wife and six children . . . Thornton J. Anderson, Jr., the gung-ho Marine who insisted that his comrades adopt his own iron discipline, who saw their roles not as prisoners but as combatants, the innovator who believed in drilling the mind . . . Walter E. Szuminski, the cool one, who dropped off to sleep the night after their arrest, who put some of the confiscated audio equipment out of commission under the eyes of the Cubans and then said he didn't know how it worked, who ruined a staged filming session by barking into the microphone that he was appearing on camera because he had been told to do it or be shot. (The lights had gone out. The producer had walked away shaking his head.)

* (See "A Stone for Willy Fisher," *Studies in Intelligence*, Winter 1986, Volume 30, Number 4.)

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The Cubans moved them from circular 1 to the pavillon, not to the punishment cells but to the less uncomfortable quarters. The food improved, and they were let into the sunshine. They left the Isle of Pines on a ferry boat for the main island, and were placed again in LaCabana. With 18 other Americans whom Fidel Castro swapped for four of his followers imprisoned in New York, the three Agency officers were flown to the United States. The passengers included the mentally ill man they had taken under their wing.

During the flight Szuminski was told that his mother had died. Anderson said, "That was very sad, the biggest shock . . . I sat down and cried with him."

The soldier of fortune types were first off the plane and into the camera lights. Security officers hustled the CIA men out of camera range to a safe house. "They brought my wife and my mother in. They brought Dave's mother and wife and brother in," Anderson said, "and the next day they let the wives stay there. Then the next day they got the women out of the house and started with the shrinks and medics and whatnot . . . Then all of a sudden our coming back leaked . . . The security guy told me the White House leaked it. Kennedy. That we were CIA types." The cover they had struggled so desperately to maintain for 949 days in Cuban custody lasted three days after their return. The cover names held—Carswell, Dan-Brunt (with the usual misspellings), and Taransky.

The three were separated. Szuminski was sent to Boston to see his father. Christ and Anderson saw their children again. Anderson's youngest son did not know him. The older boy barely remembered him. Gail Anderson had moved the boys from their Northern Virginia home to Florida. Living her husband's cover, she had found it increasingly difficult as Christmases came and went to explain to the neighbors why he could never get home leave from his "overseas" assignment. In Florida, too, the woman who moved in with two small boys and no sign of a husband was encountering raised eyebrows. "You pay a price for cover," Anderson said.

Returning to the Agency's embrace, Christ, Anderson, and Szuminski went through extended debriefings, medical and psychological evaluations, counter-intelligence questioning, the polygraph. When it all came out clean, they returned to work. They had thought the Director of Central Intelligence might want to call them in for a "well done" and a pat on the head. They were taken, instead, to the Executive Director. Szuminski would have preferred seeing Elsie, but she was overseas.

David L. Christ went into the Directorate of Science and Technology to create and populate new divisions and complete a highly successful career. Upon his retirement in 1970, he was awarded the Intelligence Medal of Merit. (The Distinguished Intelligence Cross was presented to him, Anderson, and Szuminski in 1979, when his long-ignored memorandum of 1964 came to the attention of DCI Stansfeld Turner.) After retirement, he founded an electronics research and development firm. He died of cancer on 9 December 1985. He is buried in Arlington Cemetery.

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Havana

Thornton J. Anderson, Jr., and Walter E. Szuminski returned to Technical Services Division for additional operational adventures, such as having their light aircraft hit by ground fire as they flew over Laos in 1968. They came through that and other narrow scrapes unscathed, but for Anderson, during a tour in [redacted] in 1975, there was tragedy: his youngest son was killed in a train-car accident.

Anderson retired in 1979. He and Gail live in a splendid house with a swimming pool in [redacted] Florida. Szuminski retired in 1980, but takes on contract work with the Agency. He and his wife and two children live in [redacted] His wife, of course, is Elsie.

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