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Former Agent for CIA, FBI Recalls Run-ins with Castro, Bank Robber

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By JACK KING

John T. Bonnet has made a career of being a "leg man" first for the FBI and later for the super-secret CIA. After 22 years of service for the two well-known federal agencies he is in business on his own as a "leg man."

Bonnet, a newcomer to McAllen has opened an office here as an "investigative consultant," the first operation of its type in the Valley.

"I'm no private eye, and I don't do the things you see in movies and read about in novels," Bonnet said. "I do leg work in investigative matters for lawyers, bankers and other businessmen."

The retired federal officer still has fond memories of his days with the FBI and CIA — like the time he bought a table from an antique shop in Havana from Fidel Castro, now dictator of Communist Cuba. Or the time he "was the right man in the right place" and was instrumental in capturing an escaped bank robber.

Prefers CIA

Bonnet spent five years with the FBI and 17 with the CIA. His preference from a personal viewpoint? "The CIA," he quickly answers. "The charter of the CIA is broader. An agent can use his own initiative and imagination more. The FBI, by its nature, is more restrictive. Prosecution in court is the end result. Gathering information that will help set U.S. policy is the end result of the CIA."

Bonnet said his days with the CIA have been nothing like those of super spy James Bond. "I served as attache with U.S. Embassies in several Latin American countries, and as a part of the embassy, I had to conform to the standards of the

He said he never got into any tight spots in his work, but admitting using false names on occasion to garner information. "You have to manage your affairs without getting into sticky situations," he noted. "If it becomes known you are a CIA agent, your effectiveness is destroyed."

Meets Castro

It was while with the CIA in Cuba in 1952 that Bonnet purchased the antique table from Castro. At that time Castro, who had been exiled to Mexico because of agitation against Batista, had returned to Havana under a general amnesty granted political exiles.

"I didn't even know who he was until I started to pay for the table and he told me his name. It rang a bell. I recalled that he was an agitator and had been exiled. He seemed affable and pleasant enough. In the end, after all, I was a customer of his," Bonnet said.

The ex-CIA agent said he learned during his stay in Cuba from 1951 to 1953 that the communist element was strong in the nation. "Batista had gotten into trouble" and for a time needed the help of communists. During this period they became thoroughly entrenched in the labor federation," he said.

Knew He Was Red

Castro did not seize control of Cuba until 1958. At the time of his switch to the red camp, the United States said that it had not known that he would affiliate with the communists.

"Not speaking for the CIA, I, for one, was pretty darn sure the guy was a communist," Bonnet said.

Bonnet's assessment of Latin America after his years of

undercover work in those nations is that the Latin culture is still many years away from being able to absorb democratic or republican forms of government.

"I believe Mexico has the solution for Latin America — a strong nationalistic form of government. It seems to be the only system that works," he explained.

CIA Making News

The CIA has recently been in the news because of its confirmed tie-in with the National Student Association. Bonnet said the news came as no surprise to him, but termed the disclosure unfortunate.

"The U.S. public must recognize that we need secret intelligence operations worldwide, and that these operations can not be effective if John Q. demands his right to be informed," he explained. "If the CIA is required to apologize for the job it was created to do, it is not only embarrassing but damaging to the effectiveness of its operations."

His run-in with the escaped bank robber in his days with the FBI came in New Orleans, La., almost by accident. The convicted bank robber had violated parole and stolen two cars — one of them a state highway patrol car. He forced the patrolman to drive him at gunpoint across the state line and later stole a 1940 model red car with New Jersey license tags.

Spots Car

"Another agent and I had been returning by street car from an athletic club at the time. Someone I knew and who I didn't want to talk to got aboard the street car. I turned

and looked out the window to avoid him and saw the stolen car parked by the curb," Bonnet said.

He and the agent got off the street car, checked the license plates, verified it as the stolen vehicle and called for help. Sixteen FBI agents, armed with everything from sawed-off shotguns to tommy-guns, converged on the scene.

"We waited until he came out of this house of ill-repute, then we closed in. He didn't make a move. If he had gone for his gun, we might have all started shooting and probably killed each other," Bonnet laughed.

The New Orleans papers in bold headlines played him up as "the eagle-eyed G-man."

Bonnet had a two-year break in his FBI career when he rejected a draft deferment and joined the navy during World War II. He served on the aircraft carrier USS Lexington II.

Native Of Washington

Bonnet, a native of the Washington, D. C. area and a member of the District of Columbia bar, retired from the CIA in June, 1965, and thanks to an ad in the Wall Street Journal chose McAllen as his new home.

"We had been looking for a place with a warm climate to settle down in, and we saw this advertisement for an orange grove and came to see it," he said. "We liked the area and bought the grove."

Another reason why the couple chose the Valley is because it is close to Mexico. "We're sympatico with the Latin people," he said.

The grove is north of Edinburg. Bonnet and his wife live at 1401 Primrose and have opened an office in the First National Bank building. Their