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Spy story explodes on London street

By James Morrison
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LONDON — It may take John le Carre to unravel the mysterious shooting by a Cuban diplomat Monday afternoon on a street in London's once-fashionable West End.

Was it a botched recruiting effort by the CIA and British MIS? Or was it a nearly successful assassination set up by Cuban intelligence?

The facts are dramatic enough: The shooting occurred in daylight on a busy street in Bayswater (where le Carre hero George Smiley had his modest digs). At about 4:30 p.m., Carlos Medina Perez, commercial attache and third secretary of the Cuban Embassy, suddenly turned, whipped out a pistol and fired four or five shots at some people in business suits.

According to startled passers-by, the targets — three men and a woman — quickly fled. A witness said one of the men ran away holding a handkerchief to a bullet wound in the head.

The incident might have been written off as just another random bit of violence in crime-ridden London.

Except that the gunman was quickly identified as Mr. Medina. And when Cuban Ambassador Oscar Fernandez-Mell refused to cooperate with Scotland Yard's request that his underling's diplomatic immunity be waived, both the ambassador and the sharpshooting third secretary were expelled from Britain. They boarded a plane for Eastern Europe yesterday.

The Cuban Embassy released a statement charging that Mr. Medina was being tailed by a known Cuban defector and CIA operative who had been trying to "turn" him. "The traitor in a menacing way instructed Senior Medina Perez to defect," the statement said. "In reply to this, he took out the gun he was carrying, fired it and the group ran away."

The Cubans accused the British and Americans of a cover-up, saying the two diplomats were expelled to avoid a scandal for the CIA and MIS.

Despite strict official silence by both the Foreign Office and the U.S. Embassy, the British Broadcasting Corp. and Independent Television Network reported that Mr. Medina was indeed being followed by British secret agents when he opened fire.

The BBC reported that three men and a woman were part of a team of British agents tailing the Cuban diplomat. The two TV news programs identified the wounded man as a secret agent, presumably British.

The reports lent credence to Havana's claim that British and American counterespies were trying to get the Cuban diplomat to defect.

Then Scotland Yard confirmed that Mr. Medina was being followed, and that one of the men following him was slightly wounded in the head. But the police refused to identify him.

However, the Cuban Embassy identified the wounded man as Florentino Aspillaga Lombard, a career officer with the Cuban DGI intelligence service until he defected last year from the Cuban Embassy in Prague, Czechoslovakia. In Washington, a CIA spokesman declined to comment on the operation.

But an intelligence source said that Maj. Aspillaga was not seriously harmed in the incident.

"He's all right," said the source.

Maj. Aspillaga, in an interview with The Washington Times last spring, revealed that while in Cuban counterintelligence, he had succeeded in running a network of Cuban double agents thought to be working for the CIA. They were actually cooperating with the DGI, he said, feeding false information to the CIA for years.

Intelligence officials said that Maj. Aspillaga is one of the highest-ranking Cuban intelligence operatives ever to defect. He has supplied large amounts of information about Cuban secret operations, including Fidel Castro's support for Puerto Rican terrorist groups.

To those who know him, Maj. Aspillaga, 41, is known for his free-wheeling manner. A dark, handsome man with jet black hair, he has surprised U.S. officials with his fast-lane lifestyle in the United States — even though he has been under threat of assassination ever since his defection.

It is this standing death sentence, in fact, that leads some intelligence analysts to suspect that the Bayswater incident was actually a carefully laid Cuban trap set for Mr. Aspillaga.

It is unusual in the espionage trade for an intelligence agency to bring in an outsider on a sensitive operation such as recruiting a diplomat. But if Mr. Medina had indeed been approached by the British and/or the CIA, he might have pretended to be a potential turncoat — and asked to talk it over with Mr. Aspillaga.

The Cubans' goal, in this scenario, would be to get the defector within killing range. But the assassination setup went awry when Maj. Aspillaga showed up with too much protection. Whether Mr. Medina feared the tables had been turned and he was now the target, or whether he just did the best he could on the run, is anybody's guess. And neither side's intelligence agency is likely to clear up the mystery.

Meanwhile, Britain's Undersecretary of State, Timothy Eggar, said yesterday, "We are not going to allow diplomats to behave like this on the streets of London. If this does not get through to the rest of the diplomatic community, then we will take even tougher action."

• Staff writer Bill Gertz contributed to this report.

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