

Catch-As-Catch-Can Operations

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Improvisations on a scheme

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Once upon a time there was an American who had grown gray and venerable in the service of an international ideology. He served as theorist and right-hand advisor to the leader of that Movement in Highland, where the Movement was in opposition. Coincidentally, he had also served for some years as a contract agent of the Central Intelligence Agency.

I was a very inexperienced case officer but an old hand at moving about in Europe when I came to Highland to handle VUZYX,¹ as we shall call him, more than 20 years ago. He was based in the Highland capital, I in the commercial center, and to reduce the risk of his being noted in bad company, we met anywhere except in the capital.

There had been time, years before, to train VUZYX briefly domestically, and he was a joy to handle. Productive, careful, motivated — in his view, there was no great gap between the goals and ideals of the United States and those of the Movement, in which he sincerely believed. The gaps he found it difficult to bridge lay between his own view of the Movement, and those of its international leaders, who were prone to disregard his advice and his theories on occasion.

It came to pass, after he and I had been working together for about a

year, that all of the leaders of the Movement were summoned to Metropolia, the capital of Lowland, for an international conference to sit at the feet of their Greatest International Leader. About a week before the conference, VUZYX came to my base for our regular meeting and informed me that he had been chosen to attend with his leader, and then accompany him on a European tour which would last a good two weeks before he would be able to report again. Did CIA want any immediate coverage in Metropolia while he was there?

Overnight, before he left town again, I got a fast turndown from Headquarters, noting that after all they had plenty of assets in Lowland. So VUZYX and I arranged for a next meeting immediately after his return, and he went back to the capital.

The next day, of course, Headquarters changed its mind; VUZYX was, after all, just about our best penetration of the Movement and one of the few if not the only one who might be thoroughly objective about the views of the Great International Leader.

There *was* a minor problem or two:

- 1) VUZYX had no idea I was coming.
- 2) I had no idea where he would be staying in Metropolia.
- 3) I had no plausible cover for approaching him in Metropolia.

This was something we had not prearranged, and which was not set forth in any Standard Operating Procedure either of us had had in tradecraft training.

So the answer was improvisation.

I had his telephone number, rarely used because of the sensitivity of the operation; I, in fact, had never called him. But I called, identified *myself* by *his pseudonym*² in case he didn't recognize my voice, and informed him I now had the information on the life insurance he had asked me about; would he be available next week so I could call on him?

He played up beautifully; No, he would be accompanying his leader on a visit to Metropolia in midweek.

Ah, in the latter part of the week I might be in Metropolia myself; might I ask where he would be staying?

But of course, at the Hotel Splendide.

So far, so good; he now was alerted to the fact that I would try to meet him in Metropolia, and that Headquarters obviously had changed its mind. And I knew where he would be staying.

Now, Lowland was a friendly country, and its intelligence services cooperated with ours, but took a dim view of poaching. Inasmuch as Lowland and the United States differed somewhat in their evaluation of the Movement, it didn't seem advisable to cut them in on VUZYX. I had, however, spent a great deal of my former life in Lowland, and had many friends in Metropolia whom I might logically visit, ostensibly on a combined R&R and shopping tour. The Lowland authorities were probably aware that I was with CIA, but unless I made some egregious blunder, I should be able to contact VUZYX without arousing their suspicions.

And so, on the day the conference began, I too reached Metropolia, a day behind VUZYX, and called him at the Splendide. The leader himself (gulp!) answered the phone and passed it to VUZYX. (I later learned that they were in fact seated side by side on one of the beds with a batch of documents spread out around them, planning strategy for the conference.) Once again, Operation Improvise.

This time, still using VUZYX's pseudo, I was a salesman calling from Flinflan's (not notional) Bookstore; the books he wanted could not be obtained until the day of his departure, but we would be glad to send them to him at the airport if he would give us his flight number and departure time.

After that, I was free to shop and visit friends until departure time except for two chores: a) I booked passage on the same flight; and b) I went to Flinflan's in the course of my shopping, picked out a couple of books and had them wrapped up, and took them to a messenger service for delivery to VUZYX at the airport.

On departure day, I checked through the gate at the airport without difficulty into the waiting lounge, where VUZYX was already seated next to his leader, ostentatiously reading a *Saturday Evening Post*. I turned to

the newsstand, bought the same issue myself, let him see it under my arm, and headed for the men's room.

VUZYX followed me and without saying a word or exchanging a glance we took adjoining urinals. When the room was briefly clear of third parties, we exchanged our magazines, then walked back out separately at a respectable interval, sat down, and boarded the plane when the flight was called. I got off at the first stop and returned to Highland; VUZYX went on to Midland and other countries with his leader.

In his *Saturday Evening Post* I found a carbon of a complete account he had typed for his leader detailing the proceedings of the Movement's closed sessions, together with some worthwhile remarks and statements made by the various international leaders. I ultimately received indications from Headquarters that VUZYX's report was not only faster but more comprehensive than what we received through Lowland assets.

Critique: VUZYX and I had played the whole thing by ear. What mistakes did we make, and what risks did we encounter or overlook?

1) When VUZYX first told me he was going to Metropolia, I should have obtained all the details and set up contingency arrangements to pick up his report then and there, without waiting for Headquarters' "final" decision. Then it would have taken one simple signal of some kind, rather than the two dicey phone calls, to alert him to the airport contact.

2) Failing a contingency plan, the first risk lay in assuming that VUZYX could also fly by the seat of his pants and would understand and respond correctly to my improvisations. This is something one can rely on infallibly only in Leslie Charteris' *Saint* stories or *Mission Impossible*. Fortunately VUZYX turned out to be a first-class improviser.

3) I thought I had been as careful as possible about the Metropolia telephone call; I walked aimlessly around Metropolia for some time without spotting a tail; then I used one of those glass telephone booths where nobody can get within earshot without being seen. But I had no grounds for assuming that VUZYX would have had any opportunity during his trip to be in touch with Flinflan's Bookstore. That could have tripped him up if he had to explain the phone call.

4) When I myself went to Flinflan's, I picked out a couple of books I was interested in, not necessarily a couple that would interest VUZYX, and

they were books that came right off the shelf; no need for Flinflan to have hunted them down. After all, I was paying for the books myself. I should, of course, have picked some hard-to-find book that VUZYX would enjoy (and put it on the expense account).

In the end, however, it all worked, and the moral appears to be that you can improvise and get away with it as long as you (a) have a good partner, and (b) think three or four times about every possible pitfall and pratfall. VUZYX himself subsequently had the only sour evaluation when he brought me the books: " If you had to saddle me with these dumb books, couldn't you have picked smaller ones?"

Footnotes

1 If any country operations then or now used the digraph VU, I apologize; I don't mean it to point in any direction.

2 He never used his pseudo except in signing contracts, expense accounts, and similar Agency business. I didn't use mine, because he didn't know it, whereas the nom-de-guerre under which he knew me served me in several other operations and, if intercepted, might have aroused suspicion.

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