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SHOT DOWN OVER CUBA IN DECEMBER 1961.
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20 MAR 1963

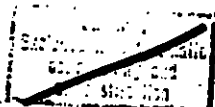
MEMORANDUM FOR: Stanley J. Grogan, Assistant to the Director

SUBJECT : Robert SWANNER and Robert THOMPSON, Pilots Allegedly Shot Down over Cuba in December, 1961

REFERENCES : A. Article by Al Wood in Orlando Sentinel, 12 March 1963
B. Article by Al Wood in Orlando Evening Star, 12 March 1963
C. Article by James Buchanan in Pompano Beach Sun-Sentinel, 12 March 1963

1. On 19 December 1961, this Agency became aware of some aspects of the incident described in referenced reports. According to our records, this was the third overflight of this kind attempted. On 21 October 1961, a leaflet drop was apparently made over Camaguey, Cuba by U. S. citizens. On 8-9 December 1961, authorities at Nassau intercepted and stopped a plane and U. S. citizens preparing to conduct a similar leaflet drop over Cuba. On the weekend of 15-17 December, another overflight was conducted by U. S. citizens and from this attempt, two pilots and a plane failed to return.

2. Investigation by U. S. authorities of the activities cited above has been hampered by a welter of conflicting stories from second and third hand sources, as well as by inconsistent statements from alleged participants. However, the following summary appears to be accurate. William JOHNSON has said that he, Robert SWANNER, and Frank FIORINI made the 21 October overflight. Alexander I. RORKE, a free-lance newsman and photographer who has long been on the fringes of Cuban exile activity, has claimed that he flew on this mission as an observer. On 8 December, Robert SWANNER was intercepted in Nassau in an aircraft chartered from Sunny South Aircraft, Inc., Fort



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Lauderdale. SWANNER was met in Nassau by JOHNSON, RORKE, and FIORINI. This group tried to get a permit to fly to Great Exuma Island, but the permit was denied; the plane impounded, and SWANNER fined \$500.00 for illegal entry inasmuch as he had no authorization to fly the plane outside the U. S. On 10 December, a search of Norman Cay produced nine packages of anti-Castro leaflets similar to the ones used in the 21 October operation. On 14 December, THOMPSON flew from Melbourne, Florida to Fort Lauderdale in an Apache aircraft, No. 2062P, belonging to his employer, J. David FINGER, and allegedly chartered by JOHNSON for an eventual flight to Nassau. In Fort Lauderdale, THOMPSON picked up JOHNSON. It is not clear whether SWANNER and FIORINI were picked up in Fort Lauderdale, Tampa, or West Palm Beach, but it is certain that at some point JOHNSON left the group and that FIORINI, SWANNER and THOMPSON flew to Andros Island. On the evening of 17 December, FINGER reported to the FAA at Melbourne that Apache No. 2062P, with THOMPSON as pilot, was missing. On 18 December, RORKE, FIORINI, and JOHNSON reportedly chartered a plane in Miami for a trip to Bimini and Cay Sal. RORKE allegedly identified himself as a CBS photographer looking for photographs of pink flamingos. The plane flew a criss-cross pattern over Cay Sal and returned to Miami International Airport. There has been no information concerning the whereabouts of THOMPSON, SWANNER and Apache No. 2062P until March 1963, when the story attributed to an unidentified Cuban farmer appeared in the referenced press items.

3. As to the question of CIA involvement in the activities of the men cited herein, JOHNSON, FIORINI, and RORKE have, at various times, claimed CIA sponsorship, although RORKE and FIORINI also intimated that they themselves were the sponsors. In fact, none of these men had any sponsorship by CIA whatsoever. Sergio ROJAS Santamarina, CASTRO's Ambassador to London from 1959 until June 1960, at which time ROJAS broke with CASTRO because of conviction of the latter's communist orientation, appears to have been the Cuban exile sponsoring the operations. Although this Agency supported ROJAS for certain operations of an entirely different nature, air operations or anything connected with them were not included. The policy which guided this

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Agency during the months in question permitted a great deal of latitude in dealing with Cuban exiles and, although little or no control over their activities was demanded, the authorization, funding, and conduct of air operations against Cuba by this Agency were specifically forbidden. It is quite likely that ROJAS, in his zeal to strike effective blows against the CASTRO regime, and despite this Agency's repeated expressions of disinterest in air operations, convinced at least RORKE and FIORINI that leaflet drops were sanctioned by CIA. About one week before the October overflight and about one week before the December incident, CIA began to receive reports of impending leaflet drops over Cuba. As noted above, after the 21 October operation, RORKE and FIORINI claimed that they had been involved. It was not until December that this Agency became aware of the full extent of the three overflights and the details of the involvement of THOMPSON, SWANNER, and JOHNSON. With the exception of ROJAS, none of the men mentioned herein have ever been employed by this Agency in any capacity.

4. In March 1962, Mr. Raymond J. DWYER, a Miami attorney representing FINGER in connection with possible litigation against the insurer of the Apache aircraft, approached this Agency for information inasmuch as there were widespread rumors of U. S. Government involvement in the incident. Mr. DWYER was informed that this Agency had no connection with the flight in question or with the individuals named by him - FINGER, JOHNSON, THOMPSON, SWANNER, and STURGIS (Frank Anthony STURGIS aka Frank FIORINI).

5. In June, 1962, this Agency received from the State Department a query from Senator Robert C. BYRD on behalf of Mrs. Blanche DeBOLT, Elkview, West Virginia, mother of Robert THOMPSON. Mrs. DeBOLT was seeking clarification of various rumors concerning THOMPSON's whereabouts. This Agency informed State that we had no information that would substantiate any of the rumors.

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6. This Agency has checked the transcripts of CASTRO's speeches from 14 through 31 December 1961. He made no reference to having shot down two aircraft which were dropping bombs and leaflets on Havana and Matanzas. As to other elements of the incident as reported in references, this Agency can furnish no information on the following:

A. Mrs. SWANNER's story of having driven SWANNER, JOHNSON, and FIORINI to Fort Lauderdale to load a boat with leaflets;

B. The \$500.00 checks reportedly given to Mrs. SWANNER and Mrs. THOMPSON by FIORINI;

C. Mrs. SWANNER's reported trip to Andros Island with her son and a friend of her husband;

D. The mysterious phone calls to Mrs. SWANNER, Mrs. THOMPSON, and others;

E. The role of Gene ASBURY and Norman GRATSKY or GRADSKY.

7. The John MARTINO mentioned in one of the referenced articles is probably John Vincent MARTINO who was sentenced by Cuban authorities in 1959 to thirteen years in prison on the charge of counter-revolutionary activities. MARTINO was released and returned to the U. S. in October 1962, not in December as reported. MARTINO was not and is not employed by this Agency in any capacity.

(Signed) Desmond FitzGerald

Desmond FitzGerald
Chief, Special Affairs Staff

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