

Agent Describes Alleged Cuban Spies' Tools, Methods

Miami Herald, The (FL) - Saturday, December 16, 2000

Author: GAIL EPSTEIN NIEVES, gepstein@herald.com

The notebooks, briefcase and even a wooden breakfast tray looked unremarkable during the apartment search of an accused Cuban spy. Then a co-defendant started cooperating and told the FBI to go back for a second look.

Voila! Built into each item was a slim "secret compartment" used to stash incriminating paperwork and photos, FBI Agent Jose Orihuela testified Friday at the conclusion of the first full week of the Cuban spy trial.

If the jurors were expecting high-tech spy toys, they were disappointed. Orihuela also testified that two defendants used eyeglasses and mustaches or colored contact lenses to change their appearance.

Orihuela did not say whether such techniques were tried and true tools of spying or reflections of a low-rent operation stuck in the 1950s.

But defense attorney Paul McKenna touched on the issue when, in opening statements, he told jurors about the apartment of his client, Gerardo Hernandez: "It wasn't what you might think, some James Bond pad. It was more like an Austin Powers pad."

Hernandez's apartment, at 18100 Atlantic Blvd. in North Miami Beach, was where FBI agents found the items during a Nov. 10, 1998, search. Hernandez is accused of conspiring to commit espionage and conspiring to murder four Brothers to the Rescue fliers who were shot down by Cuban MiGs over the Florida Straits.

Orihuela established that Hernandez had multiple sets of identification documents under different assumed names: Manuel Viramontez and Daniel Cabrera.

Spies typically have two identities, the agent testified. "Cover" identities carry a biographical history that agents can use in their everyday lives complete with relatives' names and business cards. "Escape" identities are used only to flee and are supported with documentation that can withstand close scrutiny.

Manuel Viramontez was the name Hernandez used in Miami. The Cabrera documents - including a U.S. passport, Social Security card, driver's license and birth certificate - were secreted inside a small notebook stashed in a closet, the agent said.

Hidden inside two other notebooks were fake identification documents for co-defendant Ruben Campa and another co-defendant believed to have fled to Cuba to avoid prosecution.

Agents also found papers titled "Places of Pass" reflecting addresses, times and secret signals - apparently for meetings in New York City to "pass" information to their Cuban intelligence contacts.

Assistant U.S. Attorney John Kastrenakas also showed jurors pictures of Hernandez and Campa posing in front of the Statue of Liberty and the Southernmost Point buoy

in Key West. The spy ring allegedly targeted Key West's Boca Chica Naval Air Station for observation.

The five defendants were arrested Sept. 12, 1998, and charged with acting as unregistered foreign agents. Three are accused of penetrating U.S. military installations to try to get defense secrets to Havana.

Edition: Final

Section: Local

Page: 4B

Record Number: 0012210313

Copyright (c) 2000 The Miami Herald