

Prince Of Aruba

Van Vorter

"I'm still confused," the detective said, lighting another cigarette to indicate his willingness to hammer away until he had the story straight. It was a game, Gordon was pretty sure, but then you could never tell. Better to keep alert and assume he'll break you in pieces if he chooses. With a nod toward the coffee pot to his assistant, the interrogator glanced at his watch and settled himself into a new position. "Let's go over it one more time."

The clock on the far wall proclaimed the time to be 5:17 but Gordon wasn't positive at this juncture whether that was AM or PM, or whether today was Thursday or Friday for that matter. Almost as desperately as he needed sleep, he needed to work this out to counter the acute sense of unreality assailing him in this timeless state. Perhaps recognizing this -- or more likely that he had stage-managed it by allowing his quarry short periods of sleep -- Van Vorter interrupted Gordon's reverie to start again at square-one before Gordon's dulled faculties could wrap themselves around the clues.

"Where was your point of departure, Mr. Gordon?"

"Nassau," he replied, working hard to project a level of ease he found increasingly difficult to maintain as his distended bladder worked closer to its bursting point. "It was my refueling stop between Dayton and Curacao," he added in anticipation of Van Vorter's follow-on question of the two previous sessions.

"So you say, Mr. Gordon," he smiled lightly then leaned back and blew a smoke ring toward the brilliant white light directly over his head. The light from the naked fixture seemed brighter and more piercing than ever. "And what was your departure time?"

"Sixteen-thirty-four," he said, counting on certainty and precision to lend credibility to the answer. Van Vorter riffled through his notes. "Sixteen-thirty-one was what you said last time. Which is it?" Gordon almost took the bait and argue that he had been consistent from the first, but he thought better of it at the last minute. Shrugging slightly he allowed that he might have said another time by mistake but that 16:34 was correct because he had reported the time to both Nassau Departure Control and Caicos Radio in subsequent position reports. Even though Van Vorter's face remained passive, Gordon suspected he had scored points on that one.

"You say you filed a flight plan?" Without waiting for an answer, he followed up with, "Why don't we have it?"

"How should I know," Gordon said wearily, nettled by the consistency of the cat-and-mouse game. This time, however, Van Vorter broke the rhythm and paused expectantly rather than going on to the next question.

Gordon took the opportunity to investigate his bruised wrist until the detective accepted the impasse and went on.

"Why did you run out of fuel?"

"I really don't know," Gordon answered seriously. "My tanks were full when I took off. I'm positive because I got up on the ladder and checked." The assistant -- almost certainly a pilot brought in to assess his answers -- displayed a "sure-you-did" smirk all but confirming his assessment. "In fact I was checking to make sure that they hadn't filled me with avgas instead of jet fuel. It's a habit of mine." The smirk dimmed a little as Gordon engaged him in a stare-down which ended abruptly when Van Vorter turned to see what was going on.

"It was just after I passed through the Windward Passage between Cuba and Haiti that I noticed the fuel gauges sitting below where I thought they should be, but ... well you know Beechcraft fuel gauges ... "

"No I don't," Van Vorter snapped. "Why don't you tell me about them."

"It's not so much that they're accurate or inaccurate," Gordon explained while watching the assistant for reaction. "It just that sometimes they have a mind of their own. One minute they'll be spot-on and the next they'll waffle off in some weird direction or other." Dufus nodded slightly in assent.

"Why didn't you land at Caicos or go back to Nassau?"

"I thought it was a gauge problem ... though I considered going back to Nassau," He admitted. Then more positively though he was only guessing, "Caicos doesn't have jet fuel."

"OK, what happened then?"

"Then the gauges kept going down and I began to get nervous so I started changing altitudes trying to find better winds. I finally settled on 9,500 feet as the best compromise of ground speed and fuel use."

"Keep going."

"At about a hundred mile out I decided I wasn't going to make it to Curacao and decided to head for here instead." Now came the sticky part again. "At 85 miles my navigation gear locked on and showed me the wind had taken me pretty far West of track. It was here that I really got worried because I was 40 miles farther away than I thought. The rest you know." Gordon looked up indicating he was finished.

"So you're saying you sprang a fuel leak somewhere along the way and flamed out two miles from the runway after a 1,000 mile flight." He leaned far forward in his seat and stared fixedly at Gordon. "Is that right?"

"I can't think of another logical possibility, can you?" And turning to the aide, he elaborated the proposition. "With turbines it's not a matter of running the engines rich or screwing up the fuel management. You set the torque and make sure the wing tanks are transferring evenly into the main feed tank. When the engines quit, they both quit at once, not one and after a while the other as might happen with a fuel line blockage. This was zip-fuel city."

"What was your purpose in coming to Aruba," Van Vorter shifted the thrust of the interrogation once again, hoping to throw Gordon off-balance.

"As I told you," Gordon fought to regain his equilibrium. "My destination was Curacao. I diverted here because I was low on fuel."

"Yes," Van Vorter paused to light another cigarette. "So you said. What was your business in Curacao, then?"

"I was to meet a man name Perez ... Fernando Perez. That's all I know."

"You flew 2,000 miles just to meet a man and that's all you know?"

"Sure. Why not. That's what I was paid to do. My employer told me, 'fly to Willemstad where you will be met by a man named Mr. Perez. Do as he instructs you.'"

"And what if what Mr. Perez wants you to do is illegal?"

"I wouldn't do it. My employer knows that."

"And who is your employer, Mr. Gordon." Van Vorter pounced on the new thread to increase the pressure.

"J.B Donovan Construction of Alexandria, Virginia," Gordon answered without reservation having practiced it a thousand times before as part of his basic cover story. "I get my assignments from Mr. Donovan himself."

This admission worried Gordon a little because as far as he knew, J.B. Donovan Construction was a name on a mailbox and a phone in a boiler room. His real contact was Dave Mancini, an old Marine Corps friend, and he doubted there was a real J.B. Donovan to go along with the bogus company.

"But you aren't Mr. Donovan's regular pilot, are you?" The screws were turning tighter. "You work for a California company. Why do they use you?"

"I like to keep my hand in at flying. I have a desk job these days and I start to go stir-crazy after a while, so I stuck an ad in Trade-A-Plane offering my services as a standby pilot." For a change, this was all true. "Nothing happened for about two months," he reminisced, delighting in the discomfort such ramblings subjected his inquisitor to. "Then one day I got a call from a company named Aviation Coverage in Portland. They manage corporate fleets which means they oversee the operation and maintenance of a lot of different planes." He looked at Van Vorter so see if he wanted him to continue.

"Go on."

"They explained that pilots go on vacation or get sick from time to time, just like anyone else, so there was always a need for spare flight crew members." Actually Mancini had said, 'Look, turkey. This is kind of flying can get interesting in a hurry and the pay's good, but you'll have to come up with a good cover story for your friends and at work.' Gordon was barely able to hide a smile at the thought of the absurdity of that conversation. Of course, Mancini had known just how to bait the hook. "One of my first assignments was with J.B. Donovan, and though I've flown with lots of other corporations over the past three years, I've flown for him the most ... a dozen times or so."

"And always under such ... how shall I say it ... questionable circumstances?" The question, delivered barely above a whisper was laced with irony. "I mean, didn't you find this assignment strange?"

"It was different from the others, but strange? I'm not sure that's how it struck me." 'You don't know how strange this whole thing is,' Gordon thought, wishing now that he had never gotten himself into this kind of flying in the first place. "Interesting ... challenging. That's what I felt ... though at this point, a lot of the sizzle has gone out of it," he said with a rueful smile. But the attempt at levity backfired.

"Sizzle? Is that what you think this is?" Van Vorter suddenly stood up and lunged forward across the table to where he towered over Gordon from less than a foot away. Yet he was careful not to come between him and the overhead light. "What kinds of fool do you take me for, Mr. Gordon? If that's what your name really is." He was breathing menacingly through his nose.

"Is your name really Gordon? Or are you making that up too? Come on, pirate or smuggler, or muderer ... or whatever you are. What's the truth?"

For the first time since the interrogation began -- how many hours or days before was it? -- he let his anguish show. He was frustrated because the one thing he most wanted to know -- who Gordon really was -- was denied him ... was in the hands of his adversary. It might be days before he got the results of the fingerprint

identification back from Washington. It infuriated him how the Yanquis played games with him when he knew they could get the answer back in minutes, not days. And sometimes even with their help there was not enough information to to mount an effective interrogation. If he had Gordon's passport or drivers license, or anything substantive in the way of identification, he could ask help from Aruba's parent, The Netherlands, and often they would come up with information that allowed him to tighten the screws during questioning. But all of Gordon's papers and wallet were somewhere at the bottom of the ocean along with the trousers he had scuttled during his brief time in the water. The difference between getting at the truth and having to put up with bullshit was often a matter of hours not days. It depended on the suspect of course, but always it was a race against time. The longer Gordon had to solidify his story without Van Vorter's being able to pick at it armed with superior knowledge, the less likely he was to crack. It was galling to be at the mercy of his adversary this way. The only hope was to keep Gordon off-balance and confused until he had hard information to go on. "Or maybe he's telling the truth," he considered for an instant before dismissing the idea as absurd.

"I ... know ... you're ... lying," he spoke the words one-at-a-time with his face less than a foot from Gordon's. "You think you're pretty smart ditching the plane, but it won't do you any good. It's being pulled up right now, and by this evening we'll know a lot more about you and what you're doing here." He watched Gordon's eyes carefully, searching for signs of reaction. Seeing none, he smiled tightly, stretched to full height, and spun abruptly on his heel to leave. At the door he paused to instruct his assistant to "Take him to the detention quarters."

"Thank God I got rid of my clothes," Gordon sighed inwardly. "I wonder what he'd think if he knew I ditched them to hide the fact I had no ID with me at all."