

Santa Was A Lawyer Coming Home

(Continued from page 1)

when the call came that would change his life. Abel had been working out of Brooklyn and would be tried there. The Brooklyn Bar Association was on the phone, asking Jim Donovan to take on the unwelcome job of defending the Russian. Donovan could have said no, as more than one of his colleagues had done.

But only a short time before, the quarterly publication of his bar association had carried an article that had attracted wide attention. It was titled "The Moral Duty of Lawyers to Defend Unpopular Causes." And Jim Donovan was the author of that article.

So Donovan, a man of strong principles who did not lack courage, put his career on the line. He agreed to defend, to the best of his ability, an admitted enemy of our country--the Russian spy Rudolph Abel, a Colonel in the Soviet's KGB, and the head of Russian espionage in the United States.

The Abel case touches only indirectly the story we are telling here. But certain items need to be recalled. Donovan lost the Abel case--strictly speaking. But he saved his client's life.

Donovan's eloquent plea to the Federal judge ran like this: Our country also has its spies. Some day the Russians might capture a secret agent of ours, one we'd be glad to have back in exchange for Rudolph Abel. The judge readily saw the point. Abel was spared the death penalty, and was sentenced to 30 years in federal prison in Atlanta.

But Jim Donovan proved to be a good prophet. Some five years later, in February 1962, Rudolph Abel was exchanged for two Americans held behind the Iron Curtain. One was U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers. The other was a young college student named Frederic Pryor. Powers had been shot down on a secret photo-reconnaissance flight over Russian air-space. He survived the crash to end up in a Moscow military prison. Pryor, a college student touring East Germany, had been indiscreet in the use of his camera. He was picked up and held on a charge of espionage.

The first cautious feelers that a Powers-for-Abel exchange might work had come from behind the Iron Curtain and had been addressed to Jim Donovan. Who else? And in the end, with Washington's approval, but with no formal diplomatic status or protection, it was Donovan who would fly to Berlin, and there, after a week of top-secret talks with Soviet officials, consummate the prisoner exchange.

Checking in with American officials in Berlin, Donovan had called on President Kennedy's personal representative, General Lucius Clay. In the course of their talk, Donovan

reminded the General of where they had last met. That meeting had taken place at the Lake Placid camp of the late industrialist Carle C. Conway.

Jim Donovan returned from the Powers-Abel exchange to find himself a respected man in this country at the highest governmental levels. Almost immediately, a personal letter of thanks came from the President of the United States. Soon thereafter, Donovan would be invited to the White House to be formally cited by President John F. Kennedy.

Earlier chapters in Donovan's career complemented the legend now developing around him. He had seen wartime service as a Commander in U.S. Naval Intelligence. Later he had served as an assistant prosecutor at the War Criminal trials at Nuremberg, Germany.

Donovan had been back in this country only a few months when the ill-fated Cuban invasion took place. It was a moonless night early in April, 1961. A courageous but ill-equipped

The Committee could not have sent a more effective emissary. Human chemistry often defies explanation. But from their first meeting -- and there would be three meetings over as many months -- the American lawyer and the Dictator of Cuba hit it off. On that first trip Donovan had taken his teen-age son John along as testimony to his confidence in his host. The gesture was not lost on Castro. He responded by taking time out to teach young Donovan his favorite sport -- scuba diving. And in time, the two men had hammered out their agreement.

We left Jim Donovan waiting with growing impatience and concern at Havana's National Airport. But Donovan need not have worried. Fidel Castro would keep his word.

Two hours late by Donovan's timing, but right on schedule as things went in Cuba, the first convoy of Army buses bearing the prisoners reached the airport. The dazed and still unbelieving veterans of the Bay

his name in unison: "Donovan! Donovan!"

And then came something else. Need we say that it was also Christmas Eve in Homestead, Florida? And the throng of excited Cubans was well aware of the impending holy day, and all it implied. This quiet American had brought them a Christmas gift beyond price. Brought them the husbands, the fathers, the sons and nephews they feared they would never see again. Surely there could be no greater Santa Claus anywhere than this man. And soon they were telling Jim Donovan exactly that. The air base was ringing with cries of "Viva, Santa Claus! Viva Santa Claus!"

Jim Donovan had to be affected by it. And he was. But he was also becoming conscious of something else. He was a very tired man. Along with the crush of well-wishers, Donovan had had to cope with the press, the business of communications, the still cameramen, the TV cameramen, the reporters. Donovan gave them all the time they needed. He had a special feeling for the press. In his college days, he had served as campus reporter for one of the big New York dailies.

But soon, someone else at Homestead was sensing Donovan's tiredness. "Mr. Donovan," said the colonel in command "Any time you're ready to move out -- just say the word."

"Move out?" Donovan's surprise was clear. He had already reconciled himself to spending the night at the base. Come morning the Colonel would probably see that he got to Miami. After that... he didn't know.

But that wasn't the script the Air Force had in mind.

"Mr. Donovan," the Colonel said. "We were told by Washington that you had a date to spend Christmas at Lake Placid with your family. We've laid out a program to help you do just that."

And in the end, the Air Force did just that.

Soon after, Donovan was put aboard one of Homestead's newest and fastest light bombers. In no time at all they were landing their distinguished guest at New York's Idlewild airport. Donovan was still wearing the clothes he'd worn all week in Cuba. While his military escort waited, Donovan taxied across town to his home near Prospect Park. When he returned he was dressed for winter in the Adirondacks. The aircraft took off again. Next stop was the Air Force Base at Plattsburgh. Time out there for a quick breakfast with the officer in command.

Then, for Donovan, it was into that officer's own limousine, with his uniformed chauffeur at the wheel.

Fifty-odd miles, and maybe sixty-odd minutes later, James Britt Donovan was being greeted at the door of his cottage on the grounds of the Lake Placid Club.

"So what kept you, Santa Claus?" said his family in unison.

*This quiet American
had brought them
a Christmas gift without price.
Brought them the husbands,
the fathers, the sons
and nephews they feared they
would never see again.'*

band of Cuban expatriates, mostly from southern Florida, set out to retake their homeland from the hated dictator Castro. The attack centered in an area of Cuba's southern coastline known as the Bay of Pigs. The invaders scored an initial surprise and success. But in the end they were overwhelmed on the beachhead. Those who survived were hauled off to prison.

The controversy over the botched invasion was long and heated. A committee to seek the release of the prisoners came into being, and got nowhere. Castro was in no mood and in no hurry to talk. Then one day, the signals from Havana were more hopeful. The dictator would hear their story -- if they had a story worth listening to, and someone persuasive to tell it. The Committee did have a story. And soon, on the strong suggestion of the White House, they had someone to tell it, James Donovan.

of Pigs were transferred to the planes. More would follow them, and still more. All told, close to 1,100 military would be freed on that Christmas Eve, 1962. Later would come a small army of civilians that Donovan had also persuaded Castro to release. Finally, as Jim Donovan made sure, the last prisoner had boarded the last plane. Only then did the Brooklyn lawyer climb aboard that plane himself.

Well before landing at Homestead in America, Donovan had been filled in on the situation by the crew of the airliner. Even so, as he would tell this writer not long afterward, he was unprepared for the reception that he received.

"It was unbelievable," he recalled. Hardly had Donovan's feet touched the ground before he was being swarmed over by excited men, women and children. They hugged him, they kissed him. They chanted