

The El Rukn Libyan Terrorist Conspiracy

by Bill Dyson (1967-1998)

On the surface, the idea that a hostile foreign nation would employ a street gang located in a city in the middle of the United States to perpetrate a terrorist attack on their behalf appears to border on the absurd. Yet, this was the perplexing issue that the Chicago FBI Field Office faced in 1986. Sketchy information was being developed that indicated that such a conspiracy was developing and needed to be rapidly addressed. As investigators studied the issue further, they realized that a conspiracy of this nature was really not all that fantastic. The Libyan government was very hostile to the United States; however, it lacked the military resources to attack U.S. forces. Terrorism was their most viable weapon; however, the groups they supported lacked the ability or desire to attack inside of the United States. The El Rukn organization in Chicago had been presented to the Libyans by an intermediary to be a Muslim group. The Libyans had no way of knowing that the El Rukns did not practice Islam in the manner in which they did. The El Rukns were often characterized as a street gang, but in actuality were a well-organized crime syndicate that could be tempted to take a variety of actions for financial reward. To the Libyans, the El Rukns represented a weapon that they could use against the United States. To the El Rukns, the Libyans were a source of possibly big money.

The Origin of the El Rukn Organization

Jeff Fort was born in 1947 in Mississippi, and moved to Chicago, IL as a child when his father was able to get a job at a steel mill. The Fort family resided in a mixed neighborhood on South Blackstone Avenue. Before he reached his teens, Fort had demonstrated his leadership ability by organizing a small gang of local black youths who battled with both white and black gangs who were in the area at that time. In the 1960s, Fort's little band of followers joined with another gang that was comprised of older blacks youths who were known to be tough. Together, the gangs called themselves the Blackstone Rangers. By the mid-1960s, Fort became the driving force of the younger Rangers while Eugene Hairston led the older members. Fort began calling Rangers an "organization" rather than a gang. Also, Fort and Hairston soon saw the value of curtailing conflicts with rival gangs, and called for a meeting which resulted in a truce and the creation of the Black P. Stone Nation run by a "Main 21" of

the leaders of the member gangs. The structure resembled a pyramid with the Black Stone Rangers at the top. Within a short time, Fort became the leader of the alliance after Hairston was sent to prison.

During the late 1960s, Fort was able to convince federal officials that his group wanted to help their community, and the Rangers were ultimately given around a million dollars to run a job training program. In the early 1970s, Fort and several other Blackstone members were convicted of mismanaging the government funds and Fort was sentenced to prison. Despite being incarcerated at Leavenworth Penitentiary in Kansas, Fort was able to continue his control of the Blackstone P. Stone Nation. While in prison, Fort was introduced to Islam; and after his release from prison in 1976, he brought the Blackstone P. Stone Nation into the religion. Fort renamed the group "El Rukn" from the Arabic word for "foundation." He also replaced the Main 21, installing new leaders to run the organization. The El Rukns became more of a criminal syndicate than a street gang, and were involved in a variety of crimes including narcotic distribution and acts of violence. In 1978, Fort organized a company that purchased the huge Oakland Square Theatre building at 3945-3959 South Drexel Boulevard in Chicago, which he made into the El Rukn headquarters. Inside, he created a mosque. The building came to be known as "The Fort." In 1983, Fort was convicted of narcotics violations and sentenced to 13 years in federal prison. Despite his incarceration, Fort continued to lead the El Rukns.

A Libyan — El Rukn Connection Is Uncovered

In 1985, the Organized Crime/Drug Enforcement Task Force of the Chicago Division of the FBI initiated court-authorized Title III coverage of the El Rukn headquarters at 3947 South Drexel Boulevard. Although the purpose of the coverage was to develop evidence of narcotic trafficking and other criminal violations, tidbits of information seemingly dealing with some form of international conspiracy also emerged. At the time, the Chicago FBI Division had one of the very few Joint Terrorist Task Forces (JTTF) in existence. The Chicago JTTF, developed in 1981 to address the Puerto Rican terrorist group, Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional Puertorriquena (FALN), had successfully taken down the Chicago FALN cell and its "bomb factories" in 1983. Since that time, the JTTF had continued its investigation of the FALN, and had expanded its range of investigative

focus to include other domestic terrorism groups as well as international terrorist organizations. Indeed in 1986, the Chicago JTTF was deeply involved in an investigation of individuals who were conspiring to overthrow a South American country. They were also investigating another FALN conspiracy. The Drug Task Force brought the information of the foreign conspiracy to the JTTF; and working together, the task forces were able to develop the bits and pieces of information to realize that the El Rukns were meeting with representatives of the then-hostile government of Libya led by Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi for the purpose of perpetrating a terrorist attack inside of the United States on behalf of the Libyans in exchange for financial reward.

Investigation into the El Rukn — Libyan Conspiracy

The JTTF quickly initiated court-authorized Title III coverage of its own on the El Rukns, targeting the Libyan conspiracy. Monitoring the El Rukns was to prove a challenge. The group leaders had established a code system. The system was such that the same word could have several meanings based upon the particular part of the code that was being used between the participants. To determine which segment of the code was being used, one person in the conversation would utter the phrase “in the science of” followed by a key word that would indicate which segment of the code was to be used. Fortunately, several of the task force members proved to have particular talents for linguistics, and were able to speak the coded language with some fluency. In fact, they spoke the El Rukn code better than many of the El Rukn members. Live monitoring of the Title III coverage on an around-the-clock basis proved to be quite a challenge; however, the results were worthwhile.

It quickly became apparent that Charles Knox was an important functionary, acting as an intermediary between the Libyans and the El Rukns. (Charles Knox is not related to Alan Knox, who was a general in the El Rukn organization, and who was to ultimately be a major player in the Libyan conspiracy.) Although Charles Knox associated with important El Rukns, he was not an El Rukn member. He was a college professor. He was a law school graduate; however, he was not a member of any Bar association. This was to prove to be of importance, because Knox claimed to be Jeff Fort’s attorney, and stated in writing that he was a member of the Illinois Bar when he visited Jeff Fort in the Bastrop Prison in Texas. On March 3, 1987, Knox was convicted of making false statements to prison officials in Bastrop, and ended up being sentenced to prison for three years. Charles Knox was a member of the black separatist group, the Republic of New Afrika, and had been a Black Panther Party leader. He had contacts with a number of Black activist groups.

Charles Knox had apparently led the Libyans to believe that the El Rukns were true followers of Islam. Indeed, when Reico B. Cranshaw, a general in the El Rukn organization, traveled to Libya to meet with officials, he was introduced

as holding the position of “Emir” with the El Rukns, because this title has a possible religious significance to Muslims. It is likely that the Libyans were not fully aware of the criminal activities of the El Rukns, which would appear to be in violation of Islam.

From the onset of the Title III coverage, it was obvious that Jeff Fort was in total control of the El Rukns and the Libyan operation, despite being incarcerated in the federal penitentiary in Bastrop, TX. A conversation involving Fort in March 1986, indicated that Charles Knox had been in Libya and met with a Libyan representative with respect to the conspiracy. It was also learned that leading El Rukn members Reico B. Cranshaw and Leon McAnderson had contact with Libyans. In conversations in April 1986, between Fort and leading El Rukn member Melvin Mays, Fort expressed concern that Cranshaw might have entered into an agreement to do something that the El Rukns were not trained to do. He was also concerned about how the El Rukns could obtain explosives. In May 1986, Charles Knox arranged for Cranshaw and McAnderson to meet with Libyans in Panama. The two men subsequently traveled to Panama. Upon their return, their luggage was searched by U.S. Customs Agents, and a business card from the Libyan People’s Bureau in Panama City was found. Fort then contacted Cranshaw and McAnderson and discussed the trip. During May 1986, information was developed that the El Rukns were attempting to obtain weapons and explosives.

The Weapons Transfer

When it became apparent that the El Rukns would be expected to procure the weapons that would be necessary for them to perpetrate an attack on behalf of the Libyans, and that Jeff Fort and the El Rukn leadership were interested in obtaining military-type weapons, the JTTF formulated an undercover operation. In June 1986, a JTTF undercover agent (UCA) met with leading El Rukn member Alan Knox under the guise of a narcotics transaction. During the meeting, the UCA mentioned having a friend who worked at a military base who had access to military equipment. Knox asked if the friend had access to disposable rocket launchers (referring to M-72 light anti-tank weapons — LAW rockets.) Several conversations took place in the weeks following this meeting during which Knox asked for night vision glasses and bullet-proof vests. Knox also stated that he wanted the delivery of any of the rockets and other items to take place in Chicago, and not in Kentucky wherein the “friend” of the UCA supposedly resided.

After some bickering about the exchange of the rockets for money and cocaine, Knox and Melvin Mays, whom the El Rukns considered to be something of a weapons expert, met with the UCA and his friend in a room at the Holiday Inn in Lansing, IL on July 31, 1986. Ultimately, Knox and Mays purchased one LAW rocket for \$1,850 in cash. The transaction was lengthy in that several telephone calls had to be made to Jeff Fort before the deal was completed. (The

rocket that the UCA sold to the El Rukns was in fact inert and could not fire. However, since it was a single use disposal weapon, it was felt that the El Rukns would not attempt to test it.) The JTTF had installed a tracking device inside of the rocket, and had ground units and aircraft to monitor the movement of the missile when Knox and Mays carried it to their vehicle. When the two men left the hotel room, they placed the gym bag containing the LAW rocket into a second vehicle driven by El Rukn member Roosevelt Hawkins, and instructed Hawkins to drive it back to Chicago while they followed his vehicle. Unfortunately, Hawkins' vehicle suffered mechanical failure, and Knox and Mays were forced to take the rocket back to Chicago in their own vehicle. On arriving, the men placed the rocket in the basement of an El Rukn-owned apartment building on South Kenwood Avenue in Chicago.

The Arrests of the Libyan Conspirators

During the first days of August 1986, Fort instructed Alan Knox to obtain hand grenades from the UCA. Knox subsequently told the UCA that he wanted to buy a dozen grenades. Meanwhile, the taskforce had the building where the LAW rocket was hidden under surveillance while probable cause for appropriate search warrants were being prepared.

On August 5, 1986, JTTF and drug taskforce officers served search warrants on the Kenwood apartment house and on the "The Fort" El Rukn Headquarters at 3947 South Drexel Boulevard. The LAW rocket was found under a staircase in a hallway of the apartment building. Also found under that staircase were over 20 firearms including automatic weapons and shotguns, ammunition clips and shrapnel hand grenades.

Alan Knox was arrested on August 5, 1986. Leon McAnderson, Reico Cranshaw and Roosevelt Hawkins were arrested following a 50-count federal indictment returned on April 1, 1987.

Melvin Mays Fugitive

Although Task Force officers sought to arrest Melvin Mays when they took Alan Knox into custody, they were not able to find Mays. Some believe that Mays was in "The Fort" at the time of the raid, and managed to escape through an old sewer tunnel. Some information was developed that Mays had fled the country through Canada. Charles Knox later stated in court that he met with Mays in Libya in September 1986. Mays was placed on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitive List and remained there until March 9, 1995 when the Chicago JTTF arrested him in a near south side Chicago apartment. His exact whereabouts during the period that he was a fugitive are largely unknown.

Judicial Proceedings Against the El Rukns

On November 24, 1987, five members of the El Rukn organization who were involved in the Libyan conspiracy; Jeff Fort, Leon McAnderson, Reico Cranshaw, Alan Knox and Roosevelt Hawkins, were convicted in federal court in Chicago on a variety of charges. Fort was found guilty of 49 counts in the 50-count indictment involving the conspiracy. The El Rukns attempted unsuccessfully in court to claim that their organization was a religious one that planned no violence. They claimed that they had met with Libyans only to raise money for a mosque.

On December 31, 1987, United States District Judge Charles Norgle sentenced the key El Rukn members involved in the Libyan conspiracy as follows:

Jeff Fort, then 40 years old, 80 years plus a fine of \$255,000 (Federal prosecutors had asked for a 260-year prison term).

Reico Cranshaw, then 56 years old, 63 years plus a fine of \$241,000.

Alan Knox, then 35 years old, 54 years plus a fine of \$229,000.

Leon McAnderson, then 37 years old, 51 years plus a fine of \$241,000.

Roosevelt Hawkins, then 24, 9 years to be followed by five years probation.

Epilogue

The El Rukn Libyan conspiracy investigation marked the first convictions of American citizens for conspiring to commit terrorist acts in their country on behalf of a foreign government in exchange for money. The terrorism case that arose from a narcotics investigation essentially resulted in the El Rukn organization being neutralized. Their top leadership was gone. The \$2.5 million that the Libyan government was supposedly going to give to the El Rukns was never delivered; and the attacks possibly on airliners that the El Rukns were to perpetrate for the Libyans never occurred. The narcotics investigation continued; and massive trials in 1991 resulted in a number El Rukns being convicted for drug and other violations. The city of Chicago razed "The Fort" headquarters of the El Rukns. Jeff Fort and several other ranking El Rukn leaders will likely die in prison. The criminal syndicate that once controlled parts of the south side of Chicago is no more in no small part because they conspired to engage in international terrorism.