

Intricate Letelier murder plot detailed

By HARRY F. ROSENTHAL

WASHINGTON (AP)—In a dispassionate voice, a federal prosecutor detailed for a jury yesterday what he presented as an intricate international plot that ended when a remote-controlled bomb killed a former Chilean diplomat and his aide on Washington's Embassy Row.

"On Sept. 21, 1976, at 9 a.m., Orlando Letelier left his home in suburban Bethesda, Md., to travel to his job with a young married couple," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Eugene Propper in presenting his case against two anti-Castro Cubans charged with Letelier's murder.

"A bomb which had been strapped under the floorboard of the car was set off. It tore off Orlando Letelier's leg above the knee," Propper said. "Orlando Letelier died at Sheraton Circle at that time ... Ronni Moffitt suffocated to death on her own blood."

Then the bearded young prosecutor spent the next hour arguing to the jury of seven women and five men that the plot to kill Letelier was hatched at the highest levels of the former Chilean secret police organization (DINA), and that it was carried out by an American DINA agent with the help of seven members of the Cuban Nationalist Movement.

"Ronni Moffitt just happened to be in the car when a member of the Cuban Nationalist Movement pressed the button, killing him (Letelier) and killing her," Propper said.

Prosecutor pins blame on Chilean police and Cuban exiles

Two members of that movement, Guillermo Novo Sampol and Alvin Ross Diaz, are on trial on five counts of conspiracy to murder a foreign official, and murder. Novo's brother, Ignacio Novo Sampol, is charged with lying to a grand jury and hiding his knowledge about the case.

Missing from the trial but also accused in the conspiracy are the former director and two other officials of the now-defunct DINA, who the U.S. charges ordered the murder. The Chilean government has not yet decided whether they will be tried.

Two other Cubans, Virgilio Paz Romero and Jose Dionisio Suarez Esquivel, are also accused of having helped carry out the murder, but they have not been found despite an international search.

Letelier was ambassador to the United States from 1971 through 1973, when Marxist Salvadore Allende was president. After the regime was toppled and Allende died, Letelier began speaking and writing against the successor government of Augusto Pinochet.

Letelier, 44, and Mrs. Moffitt, 25, worked at the Institute for Policy Studies and were on their way to their jobs.

Michael Moffitt, husband of Ronni, was riding in the back seat. "I heard a kind of hissing. It sounded like one quick hiss. Then there was a flash of light in front of the car," he testified. "The noise seemed deafening. There was a lot of heat. I smelled the most unbelievable stench I ever smelled in my life."

Moffitt, who was only slightly injured, said he got out of the car and saw his wife stumbling toward the curb. He said he then looked inside the wrecked vehicle and saw Letelier completely turned around in the driver's seat. "I looked down at his bare flesh. Half his body was blown away."

Earlier, prosecutor Propper told the jury: "You are not here to judge the present government." He then outlined what he said made Letelier an embarrassment to the Pinochet regime.

"He criticized the government of Chile for having a dictatorship that overthrew the elected government," Propper said. "He criticized the government of Chile for many things, but most specifically, he criticized the government of Chile for human rights violations, for torture ... It was very clear Orlando Letelier was getting a lot of attention. He became an enemy of the government of Chile."

Michael V. Townley, an American who has lived in Chile since he was an adolescent, has pleaded guilty to a single count of conspiracy to murder a foreign official and he is expected to be the government's most vital witness in the trial, which is expected to last six weeks.

Paul Goldberger, attorney for Guillermo Novo, said that Townley "was a contract agent of the CIA" and carried out the Letelier murder in that capacity.

"The horrible thought that the CIA would be responsible for a murder ... that would be hard for us to live with," Goldberger said in the opening argument for the defense. "but that's what happened in this case."

He called Townley a double agent, employed by the CIA but working for DINA.

Goldberger said the CIA spent millions to overthrow Allende and added that, "after the coup, the CIA did not wash its hands of Chile; they saw their role as helping control subversion from abroad ... people like Orlando Letelier."

He denied Propper's assertion that the Chilean government, DINA and the Cuban Nationalist Movement were accomplices in the murder.