

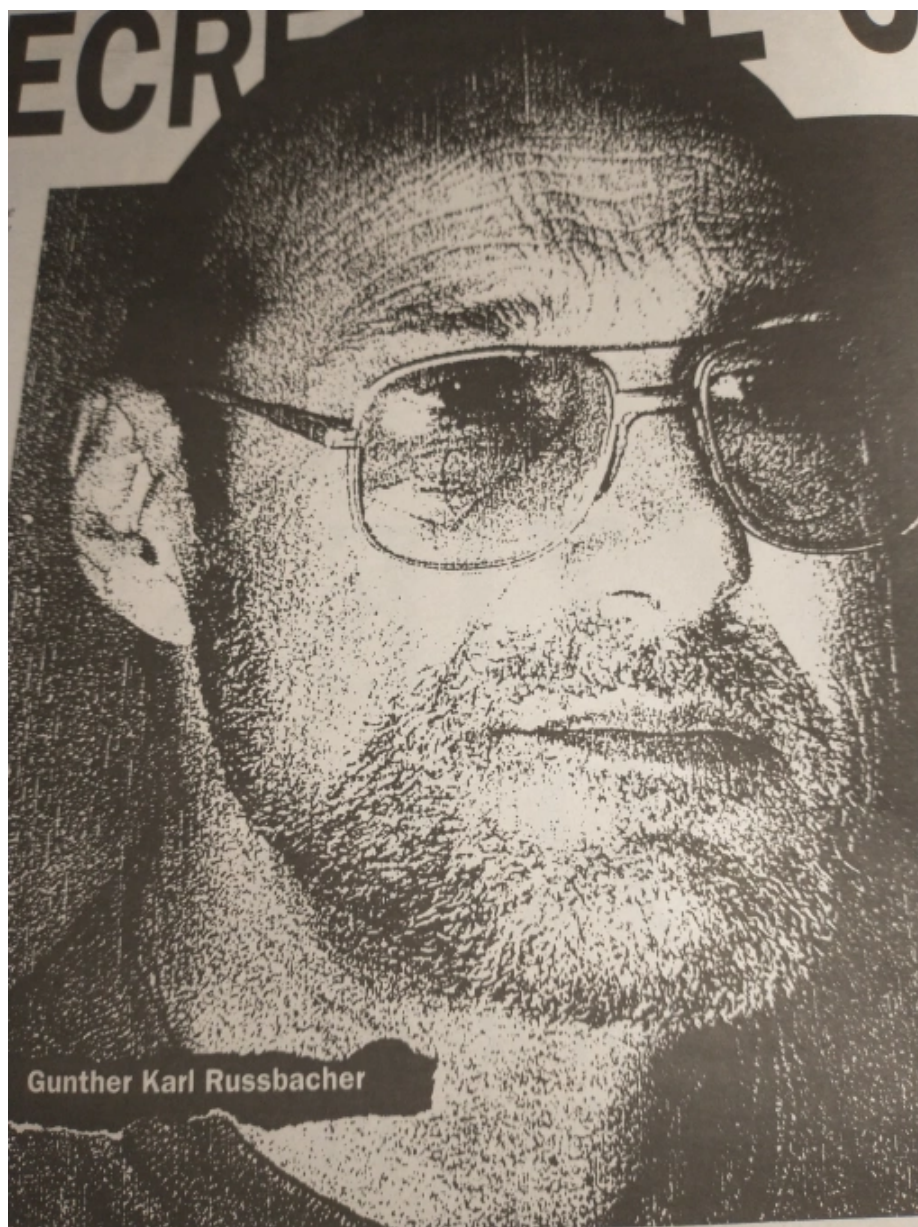
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Because there's something happening here and you don't know what it is.

Michael Riconosciuto

The Secret Life of Gunther Russbacher

The convicted felon claims he was a Navy captain, a CIA operative and George Bush's pilot in the infamous October Surprise Scandal



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by C.D. Stelzer

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. — North, south, east and west. The lines in Gunther Karl Russbacher's brow run in all directions. There appears to be a crease for every one of his 50 years. Deep undulating furrows that register emotional changes across a craggy facial landscape.

"I'm trying to catch my breath, I'm not quite with it yet," says Russbacher, after entering the Control Unit of the Missouri Correctional Facility here. He is carrying a foot-thick binder of court briefs, depositions, memos, diary entries, bills of lading, letters of credit and loading manifests. And while not gasping for air, the heavy paper load makes it easy to believe this man is under stress.

To reach inmate 184306, a visitor must be escorted through three check points and five clanging sets of iron bars. Gunther Karl Russbacher is a prisoner— and not just any ordinary prisoner. But beyond that, no one is sure who he really is. So far, those interested in finding out have included Texas billionaire Ross Perot, the United States Congress and Geraldo Rivera.

In the past, Russbacher has admittedly used aliases such as Emory Joseph Peden, Robert Andrew Walker and Robert Behler. He has also allegedly been known as “The Raven.” The last pseudonym could be classified a *nom de guerre*, because Russbacher claims to be a Navy captain — and not just any ordinary Navy captain.

Federal authorities arrested him in July 1990 for impersonating a military officer at Castle Air Force Base in Atwater, Calif. The charge led to Russbacher’s probation revocation in St. Charles Co., where he had a 1989 conviction for stealing through deceit. Russbacher pleaded guilty in that case to defrauding clients of the St. Louis-based National Brokerage Companies, which he headed. He received a 21-year sentence. In both of these instances, Russbacher now claims he was carrying out covert duties for the United States government.

By his own account, he is a CIA operative with knowledge of the agency’s involvement in financial fraud, drug trafficking, and illicit arms trading.

Russbacher established National Brokerage and other proprietary companies, including a failed savings and loan in Pennsylvania, at the behest of the CIA, he alleges. He further charges that his military and criminal records — ostensibly altered to infiltrate terrorists and narcotic rings — are now being used against him.

In addition, Russbacher claims his 1990 arrest followed a secret flight to inform Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev of the pending war with Iraq. This would be fantastic enough, but it’s not all. As an aviator attached to the Office of Naval Intelligence, Russbacher says he piloted a BAC-111 aircraft — with George Bush on board — to Paris in 1980. Perhaps more importantly, Russbacher claims to have shuttled Bush back to the United States a few hours later in an SR-71 spy plane — and he professes to have proof.

His knowledge of these events is the real reason he is in prison, Russbacher says. Bush’s French rendezvous purportedly finalized earlier negotiations between the Reagan-Bush campaign and Islamic revolutionaries. Those talks supposedly centered on delaying the release of 52 American hostages then being held by Iran until after the November presidential elections. In exchange for prolonging their captivity, the Iranians were allegedly promised arms and spare parts to supply their burgeoning war with Iraq. According to Russbacher, the Reaganites also forked over \$40 million up front to seal the deal.

The move was meant to assure a Republican victory over then-President Jimmy Carter and preempt any “October surprise,” or last-minute administration plan to gain the hostages release.

Russbacher is not the first nor most credible person to make these allegations. Reagan administration member Barbara Honegger published the initial October Surprise book in 1989. In 1990, Gary Sick, a National Security Council member in the Carter administration, renewed interest in the subject through a New York Times op-ed article. Sick followed it up last year with a volume of his own.

Although there seems to be substance to these claims, there is uncertainty as to Bush’s presence at the Paris meetings. Citing Secret Service logs and interviews, the House October Surprise Task Force, a congressional inquiry now under way, dismissed the possibility of president’s participation in an interim report issued June 30. In February, a lengthy analysis by writer Frank Snepp of the *Village Voice* similarly refuted the premise.

Another writer delving into related scandals didn’t get a chance to jump to any conclusions. Journalist Danny Casolaro was found dead in a Martinsburg, W. Va. motel room last August. The local coroner ruled it a suicide. But Casolaro’s investigation into the BCCI banking debacle and Inslaw computer software case has left doubt as to the actual cause of his death. Within this context, and given his alleged association with such shadowy figures as arms merchant Richard Brenneke and self-proclaimed CIA contract agent Michael Riconosciuto, Russbacher’s incredible story teeters on the verge of plausibility.

Inside the Control Unit of the Missouri Correctional Facility at Jefferson City, the air conditioning isn’t working in one of the two visiting rooms. The four by four closet-sized space is furnished with two metal folding chairs and divided in the middle by a narrow counter top. Windows and a concave mirror allow prison guards to keep watch. The cubbyhole is thick with humidity as Russbacher, dressed in a sky blue sweat suit, begins to divulge the trump that he believes will set him free, and, ultimately, lead to either President Bush’s impeachment or resignation.

"It's actually quite a simple thing," says Russbacher. "Every (SR) 71 flight— be it a training session or actual mission — is documented through a voice cockpit and video cockpit recorder," he explains. According to Russbacher, the plane's recording devices "document each and every facial expression, every movement of your hands and every turn of the instruments." After the video is transmitted in six-second bites to one of three satellites positioned at "keyhole 11, 12 or 13" a signature is superimposed at the bottom of the screen, which includes: the exact time, aircraft of origin and its location.

"It's beamed back down to the NSA (National Security Agency) station at Fort Meade, Md. There is no way to tamper with it. If you try to make a secondary copy from the original, bar codes jump up," says Russbacher."

This tape is in our possession," he adds. Once the tape is turned over to congressional investigators and authenticated, he has been promised a release from prison and immunity from prosecution, Russbacher claims. His supporters, those who purloined the recording, form a cadre of disgruntled covert operatives, according to Russbacher. The way he explains it, there is a war going on within the intelligence community that involves three groups. "Faction one is the pro-Bush or the loyal faction within the agency," says Russbacher. "Faction two (is) comprised mainly out of ONI (Office of Naval Intelligence) handlers." These are the good guys, according to Russbacher. "Faction two is loyal, basically, to the Constitution and to the concept of military law and order." Russbacher indicates the third bunch is in league with the second. "They're called rouge elephants. They're stationed overseas, they're stringers, they're cutouts, they're low-level agents." Be it an act or the bonafide portrayal, Russbacher's stance hasn't gone unreviewed.

Back in February — days after announcing an interest in the presidency — Ross Perot sent his top lawyer, David Bryant, and two pilots to interview the Missouri inmate. Perot also contacted Rep. Richard A. Gephardt in regard to Russbacher's treatment at the Fulton Correctional Facility. Gephardt's office in turn requested Missouri House Speaker Bob Griffin inquire about Russbacher's condition. Griffin then spoke to George Lombardi, a state prison official. This flurry of concern came after Perot's delegation was refused the right to interview Russbacher. At the time, Russbacher, who claims a heart condition, was being cloistered at the University Hospital in Columbia, Mo. News accounts have implied Russbacher feigned illness to dodge the investigators. Russbacher denies this, but says he still can't state what transpired out of fear for himself and his family.

When *The RFT* asked why he had been admitted, a hospital spokeswoman said the information was confidential. Since being moved to Jefferson City, Russbacher has been placed in protective custody. Because of the delay, Bryant and both pilots departed before speaking to Russbacher. To determine his familiarity with the SR-71, the remaining investigator, Bob Peck, asked a specific question about TEB, a jet fuel additive, according to Russbacher. The question came despite agreeing in advance not to discuss the aircraft, he says. With a prison official monitoring the interview, the self-professed spy plane pilot either couldn't answer the questioner was unwilling to do so under the circumstances.

Russbacher's reticence became one more reason for the press to label him a charlatan. Russbacher has no compunction about discussing the SR-71 now, however. "You know what TEB stands for?" he asks. "That's for tetra ethyl-borane, which is like the stuff you squirt into a car on a cold morning."

Such details and jargon add credibility to Russbacher's story. There is also the stubble of beard that contrasts with his bald pate, and a subtle comportment that projects a military air. The combination seems almost enough to transform "Capt." Russbacher's prison garb into a flight suit. More startling is his missing fingernails, the result, Russbacher claims, of having been tortured by the enemy after he crashed over Laos during the Vietnam War. Eyeglasses offer the finishing touch to his persona.

If this were a movie, Robert Duvall would be cast in the role. Indeed, Russbacher's alleged exploits have already piqued an interest within the entertainment industry. He is quick to cite Gorby Leon, of Columbia Picture's story department, as one of his contacts. He also granted Geraldo Rivera's "Now it Can be Told" a five-and-a-half hour interview recently. The segment never ran, and since then the TV show has been cancelled. True to character, Russbacher attributes its demise to forces more nefarious than low ratings. Likewise, members of the House October

Surprise Task Force aren't tuning in the "Gunther Russbacher Show," or so they would have it seem. Richard Lewis, a spokesman for the task force in Washington, D.C., cannot comment on specifics, but says all individuals who claim participation or knowledge of events surrounding the October Surprise are being interviewed.

However, as mentioned earlier, the task force has already refuted Russbacher's allegation that Bush attended the 1980 Paris meetings. To explain this premature judgment, Lewis notes that task force chairman, Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), "is intent upon not having this seen as a partisan investigation." Russbacher sees just that. "Hamilton entertained thoughts that he would become Mr. Clinton's running mate.

You will find that Mr. Hamilton will be more at ease now with the situation, ... and I think you will see a retraction quite soon," he says. "Lee Hamilton doesn't play little games like that," responds Lewis. The spokesman concedes Hamilton was "very wary" of accusations against Bush from the beginning. The committee chairman wanted to "show good faith" and give the perception of professionalism by refuting the allegations as soon as possible, Lewis says.

Presidents always seem to garner "good faith" from the pols and the press. Russbacher hasn't been nearly as fortunate. Mainstream media, if they refer to him at all, they often don't mention his name. The best reporting on the subject has been by small independent newspapers like the *Jefferson City News Tribune* and the *Napa(Calif.) Sentinel*. The *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, by contrast, calls Russbacher "the great pretender," but seems more fawning to Bush administration officials. In reporting a visit by U.S. ambassador Donald Gregg on June 8, the newspaper failed to mention that the former CIA official has been implicated in the October Surprise. And only in the photo caption is there word that Gregg conferred with Missouri Gov. John Ashcroft before speaking to the World Affairs Council. Interestingly, this was the first time Ashcroft attended such a seminar, according to a council spokeswoman.

In St. Charles, assistant prosecutor Phillip W. Groenweghe appears no more eager to talk about the Russbacher case. Repeated calls to his office went unreturned last week. Robert Fleming, a court-appointed public defender, provided the following background on his client. Russbacher acquired a record for passing bad checks in the Army as a teenager. Then in the 70s, he was placed on probation after being convicted on federal charges in Louisiana of carrying bearer bonds, while dressed in a Army major's uniform. Before now, Russbacher "doesn't seem to have served anytime in any penitentiary," says Fleming. This dovetails with his contention that he has been "sheepdipped," Fleming says. The espionage term describes a spy whose identity has been changed.

Fleming is challenging Russbacher's conviction on grounds that the statute of limitations had expired and that his client previously received inadequate legal counsel. National Brokerage Companies, the alleged CIA proprietary, was registered with the state in January 1986. The names connected to the company are Emory Joseph Peden, Russbacher's alias, and Peggy Russbacher, his former wife. A Florissant firm now using the title appears to be unrelated, Fleming says. Russbacher and his wife also incorporated other companies, according to Fleming, but investigators have been unable to find records of any National Brokerage spin-offs, which Russbacher asserts were part of the CIA operation. Russbacher says he ran the CIA proprietary at 7711 Bonhomme in Clayton and shared an office with the Connecticut Mutual Insurance Company.

There may even be a more secretive organization behind Russbacher's activities. As the interview concludes, he shows off a the wide gold band he wears on one finger. There are enigmatic symbols inscribed on the ring. "The pyramid is also the symbol for delta," Russbacher cryptically explains. Other symbols, shaped like asterisks, represent the eight points of the earth, he says. "I'm just telling you very few people wear this ring. My wife has one, I have one. All other married couples wear them. They're handmade. It signifies the ability to strike as a unit for the sake of humanity," says Russbacher.

"It's a very long story."

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