

Scientology Flagship Shrouded in Mystery

Vessel Was Focus of Mutual Suspicion Between Church, Government

BY ROBERT GILLETTE

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On June 25, 1971, a young Colorado woman named Susan Meister died in an apparent suicide aboard the Apollo, the 3,280-ton flagship of the Church of Scientology and for nearly a decade the personal yacht of the church's founder, L. Ron Hubbard.

In mid-July that year, according to State Department correspondence obtained by The Times, Miss Meister's father traveled from Colorado to the Moroccan port of Safi, 125 miles south of Casablanca, where the Apollo was then moored, to inquire into his daughter's death. Meister is said to have questioned the explanation of the death proffered by the ship's officers, and indicated that he might seek an investigation of the Apollo.

In turn—according to a Nov. 11, 1971, letter from Assistant Secretary

of State David M. Abshire to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—the Apollo's port captain threatened in the presence of the American vice consul from Casablanca, William J. Galbraith, that "he had enough material, including compromising photographs of Miss Meister, to smear Mr. Meister first."

According to the Abshire letter, "Mr. Hubbard was apparently aboard the Apollo at the time of Mr. Meister's visit but declined to see him." Meister was said to have left Morocco the day before the threat was made.

No such smear occurred, and according to a church acquaintance of Miss Meister's who has since renounced Scientology, any such threat would almost certainly have been an empty one. "There was no way that girl could have been involved in anything compromising. She was very quiet, very nice," said the acquaint-

ance, who asked not to be identified.

The State Department letter also says that the same officer who allegedly threatened to "smear" Miss Meister told Galbraith—whom the officer had invited down from Casablanca—that "his organization, backed by money and friends in high places, 'would cause a nosy vice consul severe problems'" and that in Safi, where the ship was well liked, "Accidents could easily happen to people."

The Apollo's two senior officers then filed a formal complaint with the U.S. government, alleging that Vice Consul Galbraith had threatened them by saying that he could "get the ship sunk . . . by the CIA" or have it sabotaged "by getting a couple of bottles of Coca-Cola into the (engine) oil, or, even better, commercial diamond dust."

Galbraith said these allegations,

contained in a notarized statement, were a "complete fabrication."

The incident at Safi appears to have marked a low point in a relationship between the Church of Scientology and American diplomatic outposts abroad that was generally characterized by mutual suspicion.

The church, for its part, suspected U.S. diplomats and intelligence operatives of fomenting trouble for it around the world. Government officials in turn expressed bewilderment at the sometimes eccentric behavior of the Apollo crew and wondered, in correspondence and cables to Washington, whether the ship might be a cover for illicit activities ranging from drug running to white slavery.

The 320-foot ship was purchased in the mid-1960s and sold about 14 months ago, according to church spokesmen. Built in 1937, it had once

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OBJECTION—Church of Scientology members marching here Aug. 17 to protest the indictment of church officials in Washington.

Times photo by Bill Varie

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served as a freighter and a ferry. Under the command of "Commodore" Hubbard, as he ranked himself aboard the ship, it became the headquarters and training vessel of his "Sea Org," an elite management corps in the church.

But over the years—as the Apollo plied a generally triangular course from ports in Spain and Portugal, south to Morocco, west to Madeira and back to the Iberian coast—the crew appears to have done its utmost to obscure its relationship with Scientology.

Sailing under Panamanian registry, the ship's owner was listed as the Operation and Transport Corp., Ltd., a Panamanian company. OTC, the crew consistently told skeptical press and local officialdom at its ports of call, was a secular business management training firm whose clients could not be divulged.

Adding to the aura of mystery, the ship transmitted coded radio messages to New York and points unknown and established land bases in Casablanca and Tangier, cities steeped in intrigue.

The Apollo appears to have done little to dispel the air of mystery about it.

In September, 1969, soon after the OTC established a land base at Tangier, the American consulate at Casablanca cabled an account of a visit aboard the ship, noting that "all concerned have been completely perplexed by the vagueness of the replies" to such questions as why the ship was operated and what its crew was training to do.

An Apollo brochure was said to explain that some 109 trainees aboard were learning "the art and the culture of navigation, the theory of which, when applied, demonstrates a very useful practice at sea."

Although the Apollo was registered in Panama and owned by a Panamanian company, the Panamanian consul general had no better luck in eliciting information. He found, the U.S. cable said, that the Apollo was "in a very bad state of repair" and believed that "the lives of his crew had been in jeopardy while the vessel was at sea."

"The Panamanian consul general has tried unsuccessfully to meet Commodore Hubbard, who has taken a suite at the El Mansour Hotel and has instructed the hotel personnel to refuse all telephone calls."

"It is possible that Commodore Hubbard and his wife are philanthropists of some kind and/or eccentrics, but if one does not accept this as an explanation, there has to be some other 'gimmick' involved in this operation. What this gimmick might be is unknown here, although people in Casablanca have speculated variously from smuggling to drug traffic to a far-out religious cult."

At times the Apollo and OTC appear to have deliberately teased the curiosity of diplomatic officials.

From Tangier in February of 1971, American Consul General Howard D. Jones wrote to the U.S. legal attache in Madrid of a puzzling social encounter with someone from the OTC.

"I recently met at a social function a young, American lady associated with this new enterprise," Jones wrote. "She introduced herself to an American standing with me in this way: 'I am Meredith Thomas, I am here with a Pan-

amanian corporation, and that is all I can tell you.'"

"The air of mystery on the good ship Apollo . . . may not mask any illegal activity; still, I thought it worthwhile to check," Jones said.

Fourteen months later, the U.S. consulate at Tangier dispatched a lengthy cable to Washington reflecting a mixture of bemusement and bewilderment at the semi-clandestine activities of Scientology in Morocco.

The April 26, 1972, cable from Tangier said:

"Little is known of the operations of (the) Operation and Transport Company here, and its officers are elusive about what it does. However, we presume that the Scientologists aboard the Apollo and in Tangier do whatever it is that Scientologists do elsewhere.

"There have been rumors in town that the Apollo is involved in drug or white slave traffic. However, we doubt these reports . . .

"The stories about white slave traffic undoubtedly stem from the fact that included among the crew of the Apollo are a large number of strikingly beautiful young ladies. However, we are skeptical that a vessel that stands out like a sore thumb, in which considerable interest is bound to be generated, and with a crew numbering in the hundreds, would be a reasonable vehicle for smuggling or white slaving."

On an extended cruise through the Caribbean in the summer of 1975, rumors of illicit or clandestine activity followed the Apollo from island to island like seagulls behind a fishing smack.

In September, 1975, the American Embassy in Trinidad cabled in a local news roundup to Washington that the "controversial yacht Apollo seems to have worn out its welcome in Trinidad."

Stories in a weekly tabloid called The Bomb connected the ship with Scientology; told the story of a leading local Calypso singer named Lord Superior who had joined the church and then rejected it, and in the end "appear to have soured the previously enthusiastic attitude of Trinidadians toward the Apollo."

The Bomb also speculated that the ship was linked to the CIA and Sharon Tate murders in Los Angeles. That led to a libel action by the Church of Scientology.

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