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'I was packed... and leaving,' a rueful Flemmi testifies

Details getaway plans in testimony against Connolly



Testifying

yesterday in Miami against John Connolly, his former FBI handler, Stephen "The Rifleman" Flemmi responded to questions from Connolly's defense lawyer, Manuel Casabielle. (Al Diaz/ Miami Herald/ Associated Press/ Pool)

By Shelley Murphy

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MIAMI - Notorious gangsters and longtime FBI informants James "Whitey" Bulger and Stephen "The Rifleman" Flemmi were warned to flee just before their 1995 federal racketeering indictment. But while Bulger slipped away - and remains one of the FBI's 10 Most Wanted - Flemmi was not so lucky.

Yesterday, the 74-year-old Flemmi - serving a life sentence for 10 murders - testified wistfully about what might have been, and how he, like Bulger, had prepared for a life on the lam.

"I had an apartment in Montreal," Flemmi said. "I was packed. I had money, and I was leaving."

He added that he had a bank account in Canada, under the alias Bealieu, and another account in the Cayman Islands in the name of Three Islands Realty.

However, the aging gangster told a Florida jury, he hung around Boston too long after a Bulger deputy, Kevin Weeks, warned him around Christmas 1994 that retired FBI agent John J. Connolly Jr. had sent word to get out of town because indictments were coming.

"I procrastinated," said Flemmi, adding that a few days later, Weeks scolded him, wanting to know why he hadn't fled. "I said, 'I'm going to leave. I'm on top of it.' I just kind of fluffed him off."

On Jan. 5, 1995, Flemmi was arrested in Boston by State Police and the Drug Enforcement Administration.

"I'll never forget that date," said Flemmi, with a wry smile toward the jury. He hasn't seen the outside of a cell since, except for trips to court.

It was Flemmi's second day on the stand, facing the 68-year-old Connolly, his former handler, who retired from the FBI in 1990 after 22 years and is now being tried on murder and conspiracy charges in the 1982 slaying of Boston business consultant John B. Callahan. The ex-agent is accused of warning Bulger and Flemmi that Callahan - who could have implicated them in the slaying of Tulsa businessman Roger Wheeler - was being sought for questioning.

Flemmi testified that Bulger told him Connolly "felt if they questioned [Callahan], he wouldn't hold up" and would cooperate against them.

Flemmi said he was not present during the initial alleged tip from Connolly. But he said he was with Bulger and Connolly later when they told him that hitman John Martorano had been told about the suspected risk involving Callahan and would "take care of it."

Martorano testified last week that he shot Callahan, whose body was found Aug. 2, 1982, in the trunk of his Cadillac at Miami International Airport.

During cross-examination yesterday, Flemmi acknowledged that Connolly never told him and Bulger to kill anyone, and they never confessed to him that they had.

"The only person who ever told me to kill anybody was FBI agent Paul Rico," Flemmi said. Rico died in jail in January 2004 while awaiting trial in Tulsa on charges that he helped Bulger and Flemmi kill Wheeler. Flemmi said Rico was also involved in a gangland slaying in the 1960s.

Still, Flemmi insisted that Connolly knew his tip would lead to Callahan's murder, because he and Bulger had killed Revere bookmaker Richard Castucci in 1976 and Winter Hill gang associate Edward "Brian" Halloran in 1982, after Connolly warned that they were informants.

"When you give us information on one person and they got killed, when you give us information on a second person and they get killed, when you give us information on a third person and they got killed," said Flemmi, pausing. "I mean, he's an FBI agent. He's not stupid."

Flemmi testified that Connolly plotted to blame Cuban drug dealers for Callahan's murder, filing internal FBI reports filled with fictitious information that suggested Callahan had had a falling-out with some dangerous Cuban associates.

Filing false reports to protect Bulger and Flemmi was a pattern with Connolly, Flemmi said.

Flemmi told jurors that Connolly penned an anonymous letter that was sent to a federal judge in March 1997 on Boston Police Department stationery in an effort to undermine Flemmi's federal prosecution. The letter falsely accused Frank Dewan, a now-retired Boston police detective sergeant, of fabricating evidence against the two gangsters.

Flemmi described Dewan as an honest cop who "was investigating us." ■

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