

**Robert F. Shea and John C. Wilson Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 07/01/64**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Robert F. Shea and John C. Wilson

**Interviewer:** Francis J. Hunt DeRosa

**Date of Interview:** July 1, 1964

**Place of Interview:** American National Red Cross, Washington, D.C.

**Length:** 28 pages

**Biographical Note**

Vice presidents, American Red Cross, involved in the Cuban prisoners exchange. In this interview, Shea and Wilson discuss the involvement of the Red Cross in the effort to release Bay of Pigs prisoners.

**Access**

Open – No Interlibrary Loan

**Usage Restrictions**

According to the deed of gift signed **January 28, 1965**, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

**Copyright**

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be “used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.” If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of “fair use,” that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

**Transcript of Oral History Interview**

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

**Suggested Citation**

Robert F. Shea and John C. Wilson, recorded interview by Francis J. Hunt DeRosa, July 1, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

## FOREWORD

The literary property rights in this transcript have been donated by Robert F. Shea and John Wilson to the John F. Kennedy Library. To facilitate the research use of the interview it has been decided that persons wishing to publish short quotations from this transcript do not have to obtain the permission of either Mr. Shea or Mr. Wilson or the John F. Kennedy Library.

While a precise and consistently applicable definition of "short quotations" is impossible, it should be understood that the allowable length of a published excerpt is similar to that which is commonly permitted under the legal doctrine of "fair use" of material that is protected by statutory copyright. The Kennedy Library will provide assistance on this matter to researchers, and their editors and publishers.

This transcript may not be copied or duplicated in any way without the permission of the Director of the Kennedy Library.

The transcript may not be deposited in another library or used by anyone other than the person to whom it was given by the Kennedy Library.

Permission to quote extensive segments of the transcript must be obtained through the Director of the Kennedy Library.

The suggested citation for information contained in the transcript is:

John Smith (interviewee), recorded interview by

Bill Jones (interviewer), date, page, John F. Kennedy

Library Oral History Program

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Problems with negotiations of the release of the Bay of Pigs prisoners
3	The decision for the Red Cross to become involved
6	Logistical aspects of the project, including leaders, financing and government involvement
23	Summary of the project and it's success

Oral History Interview

with

Robert F. Shea  
Vice President of the American Red Cross  
and  
John C. Wilson  
Executive Vice President of the American Red Cross

July 1, 1964  
Washington, D.C.

By Francis J. Hunt DeRosa

For the John F. Kennedy Library

WILSON: At about 12:30 on December 5th, I received a call from the Attorney General's Office, asking if the Deputy Attorney General, Mr. Nicholas Katzenbach, could come over to talk with me. The appointment was set up for about 3:30, but I had no idea of the purpose of the conference. Mr. Katzenbach came with Mr. Lewis Oberdorfer, an Assistant Attorney General. Harold Starr, Chief Counsel for the American National Red Cross,

[-1-]

joined Mr. Oberdorfer, Mr. Katzenbach and me for a discussion of the problems related to negotiations being carried on by Mr. James B. Donovan, who was representing the Cuban Families Committee in seeking to obtain the release of the Bay of Pigs prisoners. We were told that this is an extremely confidential matter that could not be discussed outside of the top echelons of the Red Cross. We were led to believe that if \$53,000,000 in food and medical supplies could be delivered to Cuba, these prisoners would be freed and, furthermore if

\$11,000,000 or 20% of \$53,000,000 could be delivered prior to Christmas, the prisoners would be released in time to be reunited with their families by the holiday. Mr. Katzenbach wanted to know whether or not the Red Cross was capable of handling a supply operation of this magnitude, and for humanitarian reasons would the Red Cross be willing to assume the responsibility of delivering the supplies. He pointed out that up to this point none of these men had defected, and they represented the cream of Cuba, that their physical condition was deteriorating rapidly, and that he believed that this might be the last chance to free the prisoners. Furthermore, they did not believe this project could be completed without an organization like the Red Cross. He stated that the Cuban government, and Dr. Castro in particular, would not deal solely with the United States government

[-2-]

and that the United States government in turn could not deal with the Cubans because diplomatic relations had been broken off, but that Dr. Castro, and his negotiations with Donovan, wanted assurance that an organization of international stature, that could guarantee delivery of the supplies, would be involved - an organization in which there would be confidence not only in Cuba but also in the United States. I asked Mr. Katzenbach how long we had to make this decision, since General Gruenther, the President of the Red Cross, was ill at the time. Mr. Katzenbach said it was a matter of great urgency. I replied that if he'd give me 24 hours I would discuss the matter with our top Management Group and with Mr. E. Roland Harriman, Chairman of the Red Cross, Board of Governors, who is in New York, and we would give him a reply. I informed Mr. Katzenbach that I, of course, could not commit the organization since this was a very unusual request, but that it did appeal to me, that I appreciated the humanitarian aspect of it, and that I would immediately discuss it with our management group and notify him as quickly as we could reach a final decision.

Following the conference with Mr. Oberdorfer and Mr. Katzenbach, I met with the vice presidents of the Red Cross and discussed the project at great length. It was our unanimous opinion that the Red Cross should undertake this project. We did

[-3-]

recognize that there were many hazards in it. We recognized the diverse points of view in the United States regarding Cuba and the fact that the Red Cross might come in for some very severe criticism by participating in this project. We weighed all of these factors and decided that we, as a management group, were willing to take this chance and run the risk of the criticism and try to cooperate in the effort to free the prisoners in Cuba. following the meeting with the management group, I contacted Mr. Harriman and reviewed the meeting which I had with Mr. Katzenbach and Mr. Oberdorfer and also the meeting I had with the vice presidential group. After some discussion of the subject, he agreed that he thought the Red Cross should participate. Following this conference Mr. Katzenbach was notified that the Red Cross is ready to go to work and that I had designated Mr. Robert F. Shea as the vice president responsible for the operating phase of the project and that we should begin

immediately setting up the staff in the program that would enable us to fulfill our part of the mission.

In regard to Mr. Harriman's Part in the project, I think it should be mentioned that his role went far beyond just giving the okay to Red Cross participation. He offered much enthusiastic support. When the question of the letter of credit arose, Mr. Katzenbach flew to New York to talk to Mr. Harriman

[-4-]

because it finally became necessary for the Red Cross to actually guarantee the delivery of the supplies, which meant we had to put this guarantee on record with the insurance company and to back their own guarantee of Red Cross performance with red cross resources. This required swift action. Mr. Harriman talked to me, with Mr. Katzenbach sitting in his office, about going to the Executive Committee or the Board of Governors of the Red Cross for approval of this commitment. We sent a wire to all members of the Executive Committee, telling them the problem in detail and outlining what it would take to get the project moving, as well as that the project had Mr. Harriman's approval. We immediately received unanimous approval from the entire Executive Committee. This resulted in final completion of plans for the letter of credit. Mr. Harriman followed the project rather closely. He was on the phone two or three times a day with a different one of us to be sure everything went smoothly and wanting to know if there was anything that he could do to help. When there's a problem of a major nature, we always get in touch with him, and he did help us through many of the difficult problems that involved basic questions of Red Cross policy. I might say that this was an operation in which we operated without the book, and I think that is the secret of the project's total success. No one was following the book when it

[-5-]

came to getting this particular job done. We saw a job that needed doing. I think this is what the Justice Department saw, and what industry saw. This is what everyone connected with the project saw. The top people from all of these groups were together and making decisions and in not trying to follow an existing set of regulations. Instead, they were trying to make the rules as we went along. I know this is what we did in the Red Cross. We made our decisions on the basis of the facts at hand, and I think this is actually one of the reasons that the project was so successful. We got cooperation at every hand; and when you put that kind of cooperation together, what can be accomplished is unlimited.

SHEA: The initial action taken when we recognize in the beginning the broad outline that we were discussing, the movement of \$53,000,000 worth of goods and materials in the movement of a significant portion of that had to be accomplished very rapidly, was to organize a special operating set up at National Headquarters in Washington. We recognized also that it would be necessary to bring into the special office some outside resources in terms of the transportation, etc., if we were to get the job done. We assigned our Disaster Services and to our General Supply Office the

responsibility for carrying out the actual acceptance of the donated materials and the movement of those materials to such points as

[-6-]

were determined and would be determined in terms of later movement to Cuba. My own initial personal contact with Mr. Katzenbach and Mr. Oberdorfer was in connection with the demand by Dr. Castro that there be a letter of credit executed in connection with the pending agreement. Mr. Katzenbach and Mr. Oberdorfer came over here to our office. Mr. Wilson, Mr. Starr, Mr. Robert Edson, our Director of Disaster Services, and Mr. E.V. Bighinatti, Assistant Director of Disaster Services, who had been assigned as field director of the project, met with them. The problem was how a letter of credit could be executed which would give Dr. Castro the assurance he apparently required and at the same time not obligate the Red Cross beyond a reasonable basis in terms of its ability to produce the supplies. In other words, the Red Cross could only guarantee that we would accept and forward materials that were donated; but a letter of credit could in effect bind our organization to produce \$53,000,000 worth of supplies whether or not they were actually donated. This resulted in the development of the letter of credit issued in the name of the Red Cross by the Royal Bank of Canada, underwritten by the Bank of America and the Morgan Guarantee Trust Company and guaranteed by the Continental Insurance Company, which also donated the insurance coverage on the supplies. The way we worked together with Mr. Katzenbach and Mr. Oberdorfer

[-7-]

to accomplish this is important in terms of the operating history of the project because it was at this point that a direct and continuing operational link was established between Mr. Oberdorfer in the Attorney General's Office and my office at the Red Cross. This relationship was maintained throughout the whole process of the Cuban prisoners exchange project. The operational link was essential because we were, of course, moving in an area involving international shipment to a nation with which the United States had no existing diplomatic relations. This was an area in which the Red Cross did not have the know-how in terms of governmental regulations in the various requirements involved in the movement of food and medical supplies. Within a very brief period of time, through Lou Oberdorfer's office, we were directly involved with most of the major departments of the United States government which would have some relationship with this project. We were involved with the Maritime Administration in terms of the shipment of goods, with the Civil Aeronautics Board in terms of movements of supplies and people by air, with the Department of Labor in terms of union regulations that would enter the picture in connection with the loading of ships, and for various other reasons with the Department of State, the Department of Agriculture, the Interstate Commerce Commission, the Department of Commerce, and the Immigration and Naturalization

[-8-]

Service. I think one of the important elements in the operation from this point of view of getting things done was the 24-hour liaison that existed between Lou Oberdorfer's office and this office. Throughout the entire seven months of the project, we always had immediate access to Mr. Oberdorfer and other governmental officials. During the early days of the project this round-the-clock liaison resulted in the Red Cross being aware of every facet of Mr. Donovan's negotiations -- the periods in which they were moving well towards completion, the periods when blocks would develop, the problems that developed in the working out of the actual agreement, all of which had a direct relationship to what we were doing in terms of acceptance of material from the various corporations in forwarding of these materials. The immediate major problem, to be sure that we could receive and forward \$11,000,000 worth of goods required to assure the return of these men by Christmas, caused a major supply problem. This resulted in some very unusual contacts at the manufacturers at all hours of the day and night and made us lean heavily on the transportation people. For instance, both the Air Transport Association and the Association of American Railroads had members of their staff on duty with our central office. They had to be able to tell us at any time where railroad cars were, what supplies are being moved to what airports, when they would arrive

[-9-]

in the greater Miami area, by rail or by air, and how the supplies would be moved from their arrival points to Port Everglades, where the ships would be loaded, into Opa Locka Airfield that would become the major air base for the project. The American Trucking Association also played a key role in enlisting truck transport, and the Committee of American Steamship Lines donated the first ships for actual transport of supplies to Cuba. Subsequently, the other maritime associations and the United and Standard Fruit companies also contributed ships. Pan American Airways agreed to donate an airlift capability from Florida to Cuba to take supplies in and bring prisoners out.

A special word should be said, too, for Barrett Prettyman, one of the private attorneys working on the project, because Barrett had a very difficult role, that of obtaining and coordinating the land, sea, and air transportation, among other things. He was tireless. He did a splendid job.

Also, during the same hectic period, we began to move more directly into participation in the operation in the sense that Mr. Donovan needed for his negotiations written evidence from the Red Cross as to its part of the exchange and as to the Red Cross's assurance that the \$11,000,000 worth of supplies would be forwarded. This resulted in letters addressed to Mr. Donovan

[-10-]

from the Red Cross giving the information and the assurances that were needed. These letters were rushed to him to be picked up during his flying trips to Miami so he could take them back to Havana.



At the same time a magnificent job was done by the people soliciting contributions from the corporations -- people recruited by the Justice Department and Mr. Donovan to assist the Cuban Families Committee with the project. Many of them were private attorneys who literally gave up their practices to solicit the supplies. One such group, in New York, was headed by Robert Knight, the other, in Washington, by John Nolan. They in turn had the wonderful support of the Manufacturing Chemists Association, the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association, and the Grocery Manufacturers Association, among others. The Red Cross, incidentally, did none of the soliciting, but the solicitation efforts were extremely well related to the Red Cross end of the project.

WILSON: I think we should add that this was a demonstration on the part of business in this country unlike anything that we have previously seen. I don't think too much can be said for the generosity of the transportation industry in moving the supplies under great difficulties at times and at great sacrifice in certain instances. The labor unions, too, were extremely

[-11-]

cooperative. All in all, I think the willingness of the business world, especially those who were dealing in the commodities that were involved, to contribute to this project is a great tribute to American industry. I think our record would reflect that, and we have said this many items in speeches and conferences that we have held across the country.

WILSON: As I mentioned in the first conference with Mr. Katzenbach, we anticipated / that there would be criticism of the Red Cross for its part in this operation. We didn't undertake the project with the idea that it would bring great publicity and credit to the Red Cross. In fact, the secrecy and other problems involved in the project made even a routine public information job extremely difficult. We undertook the project because we believed it was a worthwhile humanitarian effort in which the Red Cross should, because of its capability, cooperate and do the job. We were delighted that our fears proved wrong. The public did accept the role of the Red Cross in this operation. Repeatedly I was asked, and I am sure Bob was asked, "What are you getting in the way of criticism?" The number of complaints and critical comments that the Red Cross received on this project was practically nil. The public accepted it; they thought our role was correct, and they supported our role in the operation. I think this is an interesting side of the story. In

[-12-]

part, it may be due to the fact that our public information people, headed by Roy Johnson, released only factual information when such releases would not affect the delicate balance of the negotiations or subsequent relations with the Cubans and avoided any statements that might be considered political or not in keeping with the world-wide neutral role of the Red Cross.

SHEA: One of the important factors in relation to the cooperation of the national business community in this project had to do with the need for the movement of the \$11,000,000 in a few short days before Christmas. Obviously these supplies had to be moved by air whenever possible. This raised certain difficulties in instances where the solicitation of the contribution from industry had taken place and the firm had indicated it was willing to give specific commodities in certain quantities and of certain value. This meant last-minute contacts and rearrangements in order that as much as possible of the \$11,000,000 worth could be shipped by air. Let me give one example. I called at midnight one night to Mr. Beasley, President of Eli Lilly, whose pledged contribution was in the neighborhood of a million dollars. I advised him that this action was wonderful and generous, but the offer was in heavyweight commodities. I asked him if he could conceivably, on such short notice, enhance his firm's contribution to high-value,

[-13-]

low-weight pharmaceuticals. He said yes immediately, then proceeded to activate the assembly lines in the Eli Lilly plant to produce the substitute items we requested on a 24-hour basis and to cooperate in the movement of those items by air.

I think it is of interest that the reason we mobilized our operation through Disaster Services is that the Red Cross has a basic policy that all personnel of the organization have a disaster responsibility, so that when we deal with a large natural disaster we call personnel from every segment of the Red Cross and assign them to these operations. The same was true of this Cuban prisoner operation. While we gave the leadership roles to those people having the competence, like George Smith, our General Supply Officer, and Bob Edson, our Director of Disaster Services, and his assistant, E.V. Bighinatti, we also pulled people from every part of the Red Cross and from every kind of job in order to get the necessary hands and talents. We pulled our medical personnel, for instance, from the Blood Program in connection with items on the list of drugs requested by the Cubans. This list is what we called the wish list. They worked with consultants from the American Pharmaceutical Association and other trade associations to interpret the list, parts of which were quite old and out of date. We pulled in our military personnel, and our disaster services

[-14-]

field personnel, and we mobilized them in Washington at National Headquarters, in Miami, and in Port Everglades, in Miami at Opa Locka in connection with the air shipments, and in Fort Lauderdale, at Port Everglades in connection with the movement of supplies by ship. We had about 150 people of our staff pulled from various segments of the organization who became directly involved in the Cuban prisoners exchange project. They managed to assemble the \$11,000,000 down payment in just six days to help get the prisoners home by Christmas. Bighinatti, W.D. Dibrell of our Southeastern Area Disaster Services, and Ben Lovejoy of our Supply Services were in charge of the operation in Florida. In addition, this staff worked with hundreds of volunteers and staff from the Red Cross Chapters in Broward County in Fort Lauderdale and Dade County in Miami, to provide important welfare services

for the prisoners when they arrived at Homestead Air Force Base, Miami, and then when they were finally reunited with their families at the Dinner Key auditorium. Red Cross teams were also on hand at Port Everglades, where the shiploads of Cuban refugees were brought, and later on provided additional services at the Miami International Airport for plane loads of refugees and Cuban-American repatriates and at Homestead Air Force Base for Americans released from prisons in Cuba.

[-15-]

WILSON: Those two Red Cross Chapters in Miami and Fort Lauderdale were keys to the success of this operation. If we had not had the support that we got out of those chapters and their volunteers, we would have had difficulty finishing this job. Both chapters gave us unlimited support, and I think while we are talking about chapters we should add that we did pull staff and volunteers from other chapters and some of them and national staff members were used on the ships that returned with refugees. These volunteers included men who assisted with supervision of the cargo unloading in Havana and then worked with the American Red Cross medical teams of doctors, nurses, and nurses' aides to care for the thousands of refugees who came to the United States crowded into the holds of the ships. Miss Virginia Elliman, National Director of Disaster Nursing, working with the Dade County Medical Society and the Miami Chapter, organized the medical teams. Ray Sabo, Traffic Manager in Supply Service, directed the assembly of all cargoes after the first ship. Other chapters were involved at various American ports and in dealing with local industries on some of the special supplies that were needed during the project. Talking of special supplies reminds me of some of the problems that were connected with certain items on the wish list. This was not too unusual in the early days since parts of it were based on outdated

[-16-]

catalogs which showed medical supplies no longer manufactured. Also, there were many items that were given generously by manufacturers which were not suitable for ultimate use or shipment to Cuba. To illustrate, we accepted a shipment of a half million dollars worth of Salk vaccine, which had to be kept refrigerated at all times. It was shipped to Cuba. It turned out, however, that the Cubans had already immunized all of their population with oral vaccine obtained from the Soviet Union and did not need the Salk vaccine. We had to bring it back. We contacted the company that donated it. They did not want the vaccine back, and therefore we were able to give it to some other South American Red Cross Societies. There were many problems that came up in connection with the supplies. The public just had no concept of what was involved. Some of the problems had to be negotiated by Mr. Donovan, others involved last-minute shifts in cargoes. For example, we had one hundred and ten tons of patented pain reliever tablets that the Cubans didn't want.

SHEA: The way in which some of what became standard operating procedures evolved was interesting. At the point at which we began to move air supplies

to Cuba we had a question as to whether these supplies on the Cuban end would be checked in with accuracy and the credit we would be giving ourselves in terms of

[-17-]

amounts shipped would balance the credit they were giving us in terms of amounts shipped. The results of this question was the decision made by Lou Oberdorfer and myself that we would put Red Cross personnel aboard the planes, and this led to the putting of Red Cross personnel aboard the ships, which led in turn to the establishment of an on-site operation in Havana which continued throughout the whole course of the operation. As soon as the first ship had been unloaded in Havana, we became aware that any concerns we had about the accuracy of the checking were not necessary. The inventories done in Cuba were accurate and complete. The need, however, for our personnel to be in Cuba became important to the Cuban government, and as a result we continued the assignment of Red Cross personnel to Havana in connection with each shipment and in permanent residence in Havana during the entire operation.

WILSON: Mr. Ralph Mitchell, Deputy Manager of our Southeastern Area Office, Mr. Dibrell, and Mr. Wilton W. Gaefe of our Military Welfare Service, were assigned to Havana. Mr. Mitchell was our top man and stayed throughout the operation except when brought home on appropriate occasions. Early in the operation personnel were loaned to us by the American Pharmaceutical Association to go to Havana to assist in interpreting supply problems and the use of substituted pharmaceuticals to the Cubans. We should add too that the Cubans did supply housing maintenance for our

[-18-]

staff in Cuba and that the relations between the Cuban Red Cross and the American Red Cross were very friendly and cordial. Dr. Cervantes, who is the President of the Cuban Red Cross, worked very closely with us. In fact, early in the project Dr. Cervantes and two other Cuban Red Cross representatives flew to Miami to check the cargoes waiting shipment in the first \$11,000,000 worth to assure Dr. Castro that the agreement was being faithfully carried out. The Cuban Red Cross also assisted with the embarkation of refugees when they boarded our ships or planes in Havana.

I might add, though, that during a visit I made to Cuba, the Cubans sought a change in the letter of credit that would strengthen their control over what was shipped to them under the agreement with Mr. Donovan. I told them we had no intention of changing the letter of credit, that the word of the American Red Cross was all that was necessary. When we said we would deliver \$53,000,000 worth of supplies to Cuba, we intended to do it and we would do it.

SHEA: Another point of interest is that until the project became a standardized operation its unique nature required continuing consultations. I recall on more

than one occasion, when Lou Oberdorfer and I were in Miami, we would have to be

[-19-]

in communication with Mr. Katzenbach at very unusual hours of the day and night; and in certain instances Mr. Oberdorfer would have to be in communication with Mr. Katzenbach and the Attorney General. The rapidity with which necessary decisions were made and actions were taken made the difference between getting the job done and not getting it done. There were occasions during the final phases of Mr. Donovan's negotiations when Mr. Donovan would return to Miami to advise that a hitch had developed, or would communicate such a problem by other means. There was more than one occasion when it would appear that the entire project was going to come to a sudden and tragic halt. I recollect vividly the rapidity and ingeniousness with which what appeared to be insurmountable problems were handled and alternate proposals were relayed to Mr. Donovan. Such quick action was definitely a part of the successful completion of those negotiations.

WILSON: Although I knew he was available to us if needed, the only direct contact I had during the operation with the Attorney General was over the problem of shipping. It became difficult towards the end to get ships for the operation. The Attorney General called a meeting of some of the top governmental people in his office to try and solve the shipping problem. After the meeting he asked that I remain for a few minutes with Lou

[-20-]

Oberdorfer. We discussed a problem that the Cubans had raised with regard to some of our supplies. The Attorney General wanted to be sure that if the Red Cross needed personnel from any part of Government to assist us that he would be glad to do what he could to help secure such personnel who might be used for inspection or any other type of operation in connection with the delivery of supplies. The Attorney General expressed great satisfaction over how the operation was going and wanted to assure the Red Cross that Government, though, not formally involved in the negotiations or the carrying out of Mr. Donovan's agreement, was most appreciative of what the Red Cross was doing.

SHEA: There was in addition to the agreement pertaining to the movement of supplies to Cuba an additional agreement that refugees would be allowed to come from Cuba to the United States. This resulted in the movement of about 8,000 Cuban nationals who desired to leave their homeland. It also continued the rather intensive operation for the Red Cross because it meant that in addition to the supply operation we had to continue planning for and providing various welfare services for these people on board the ships at Port Everglade and at the Miami airport. This also put a heavy load on all of the Federal agencies involved in the movement of people from other lands into the United States, especially the

[-21-]

Immigration and Naturalization Services and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The Coast Guard also had to arrange escorts for the ships from the limits of Cuban territorial waters to Port Everglades, for each ship was carrying far more than its rated passenger load. These activities continued until the final ship came into Port Everglades on the morning of July 3rd. It also brought back to the United States our permanent staff in Havana and all of the equipment, including the communications equipment we had placed in Havana for the use of our staff. We had established a direct teletype link between our Havana staff, our Miami office, and National Headquarters in Washington.

WILSON: This I think is rather significant. The teletype was never disconnected during the entire operation. While the United States Government communicated with Havana diplomatically through Bern, Switzerland, and dealt with the Swiss Ambassador to Cuba, Mr. Stadelhofer, who represented United States interest in Cuba, the American Red Cross was communicating directly with Havana by teletype. I think this is an interesting phase of the Red Cross operation because it is further evidence of the ability of our organization to cross lines in situations of this type even though the governments involved do not have diplomatic relations. We were able to move in and not only come and go freely but were also

[-22-]

able to communicate directly, in spite of the fact that what was involved was even more than a break in diplomatic relations -- this project was launched immediately after the Cuban Missile Crisis.

I think that as we are wrapping this up a summary would be of interest. If my memory is correct, the total amount of cargo transported to Cuba was 45,000 tons. There were nine ships and thirty-seven planes, a rather sizeable fleet of ships and planes, all donated for this operation. Of course, the value of shipments was the agreed upon \$53,000,000.

SHEA: I recall a conversation with the Attorney General near Christmas, after which he telephoned Mr. Harriman on his own initiative to discuss with Mr. Harriman a public announcement concerning the completion of the initial mission and to express to Mr. Harriman his appreciation and the appreciation of the Government for the Red Cross part in the project.

WILSON: Towards the end of the operation we had a meeting of the Red Cross Board of Governors. The Attorney General came to this meeting and brought with him Lou Oberdorfer, Nick Katzenbach, and John Jones, another member of his key staff who had been deeply involved in the project. At this Board of Governors meeting the Attorney General talked informally but very movingly about the operation and about the role of the Red

[-23-]

Cross in making it possible. The effect of his talk on the Board was very, very great. After he had gone, they discussed the operation in further detail. The discussion contained many comments about the Attorney General, his deep interest in the project and his understanding of the humanitarian values involved and his great appreciation for what the Red Cross was doing.

SHEA: I recall another incident involving the Attorney General. As we were getting ready for the final shipment, there were extreme difficulties in finishing plans for the last ship. The difficulties involved extensive negotiation on the part of the Department of Labor with unions which were involved in a jurisdictional dispute which tied up the ship which had been donated for this last shipment. At the same time we were, of course, anxious to move the supplies we had remaining; and in the course of one of the many meetings a question arose about some of the regulations in connection with what items could or could not be sent to Cuba. One time in particular had to do with retractable steel rulers which were manufactured for the Spanish trade and which had not been sold by the manufacturer, who had made them available as a donation for this project. The Cubans wanted them, but the rulers fell into a gray area of items that might nor might not be moved. When this question came up at a meeting in the Attorney General's Office,

[-24-]

he asked, "Are they bombs?" His question resolved the problem. The rulers were included in the final shipment. I think we should probably mention the fine cooperation we received from Abba Schwartz in the State Department. We were in daily contact with him and had nothing but the finest support from him. Also, we had many situations in which our people needed passports. Normally the routine procedures for obtaining passports take some time. Yet the Passport Division of the State Department developed a special system for this project so that passports were available as quickly as we could move people to pick up the passports they required.

WILSON: Of course, there were a tremendous number of people associated with Government, such as Mike Miskovsky and Frank DeRosa, who facilitated the carrying out of this operation, and without whom we would not have been able to execute it. It is interesting to note that in a project of this kind, which has an emergency ring to it, there is a closeness that develops among the people who are concerned with the operation. It is a closeness which other people might find difficult to understand, but it is also characteristic of the people associated with the Red Cross disaster relief operations.

[-25-]

SHEA: This kind of operation has to be complete as a concept in someone's mind;

and from my observations of the entire operation, the Attorney General had a total concept of what the project did involve and what it would involve, and he very quickly shared that concept with his associates in the Justice Department. They shared it quickly with those of us in the Red Cross so that in a matter of a very few days those concerned with the overall phases of the operation knew what it was we were working towards and what we were working with. This had a strong effect on the way in which we were able to do the job.

WILSON: I think there is another thing that I would call the philosophy that went with the concept. This philosophy, I think, was that there was nothing that could not be done. That philosophy permeated the entire project. There just were no obstacles that could not be overcome, and no one was allowed to create a problem that couldn't be solved. Even if it was midnight, or whatever, the obstacles were quickly removed.

SHEA: This philosophy carried over even after the project was officially completed. As late as July 10, 1963, an emergency meeting was called in the middle of the night at Lou Oberdorfer's office. Bighinatti, John Jones, John Nolan, Frank DeRosa, and Lou Oberdorfer were all there at two in the morning.

[-26-]

They were there to deal immediately with the problem created by Fidel Castro's statement that the Red Cross had failed to deliver all that was pledged. This was after the project was over, but the basic philosophy still held; the problem was to be solved immediately, and before the night was over a statement in reply was issued by the United States State Department.

WILSON: This is the philosophy I am talking about. It was our philosophy too. We accepted it; we operated on it, and we never admitted that anything could not be done. We just went ahead and did it. I think everybody in the Red Cross from the national chairman to our local chapters was grateful that we had had a part in this project and that out of it came only good. Actually the Red Cross gained from this operation. I think this is significant because it was certainly far from what we expected when we went into it. Yet I believe today the evaluation without question in the minds of everyone was that this added to the stature of the Red Cross. We are certainly glad we could participate in this project, not for that reason, but that we could have a meaningful part in this unique humanitarian venture. One last note -- President Kennedy was very much concerned about the

[-27-]

success of this project and upon its successful completion wrote a letter to Mr. Harriman, expressing appreciation for the work of the Red Cross.



[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-28-]