

EXTENSIONS OF REMARKS

WINNERS OF THE OLIN E. TEAGUE AWARD

HON. BOB STUMP

OF ARIZONA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, December 7, 2000

Mr. STUMP. Mr. Speaker, in a ceremony on Wednesday, September 13, 2000, in the House Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing room, the Orientation and Mobility Section, Western Blind Rehabilitation Center, VA Palo Alto Health Care Facility, Palo Alto, California, received an Olin E. Teague Award for their efforts on behalf of disabled veterans.

The Teague Award is presented annually to VA employees whose achievements have been of extraordinary benefit to veterans with service-connected disabilities, and is the highest honor at VA in the field of rehabilitation.

The Section members, Miriam Emanuel, Scott Johnson, Julie Hazan, Richard Ludt, Patrick Ryan, Jennifer C. Smith, Candace Thelen, and Paul Thomas, Blind Rehabilitation Specialists; Charles "C.T." Vasile, Supervisor Blind Rehabilitation Specialist, and Bill Ekstrom, Chief Western Blind Rehabilitation Center, were selected to receive this prestigious award in honor of their work to develop the first power scooter training program for low vision blinded veterans with ambulatory problems.

Realizing that current support items such as canes, walkers, and scooters did not meet the needs of the less mobile, blind veteran, the team determined to find a solution. The team worked with specialists in Physical Therapy, Physical Medicine, and Prosthetics Service to study the various types of power scooters available for sighted individuals. In addition to their full daily schedules, the team members made the time to actually become power scooter travelers to learn to navigate on the scooters as sighted individuals. When they became fully knowledgeable of power scooter travel, they began to develop options to adapt the power scooter for use by blind veterans. Their enthusiasm, persistence, and creativity paid off. Two distinct power scooter programs were developed to meet the differing needs and capabilities of legally blind low vision veterans. These programs offer veterans a higher quality of life and a highly valued commodity—their independence.

Mr. Speaker, the name Olin E. "Tiger" Teague is synonymous with exemplary service to the Nation's veterans. The late Congressman Teague served on the House Veterans Affairs Committee for 32 years, 18 of those years as its distinguished chairman. No one who opposed him on veterans' issues ever had to ask why he was called Tiger. He set the standards by which we can best serve all veterans. I know my colleagues join me in offering our deep appreciation to the Orientation and Mobility Section for their concern, dedication, and innovation in meeting the special rehabilitation needs of disabled veterans. We congratulate them for the excellence of their

work and for the distinguished award they received.

SECRET AGENT MAN

HON. JOHN CONYERS, JR.

OF MICHIGAN

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, December 7, 2000

Mr. CONYERS. Mr. Speaker, I submit the following articles, which appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* on December 7, 2000 into the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD.

SECRET AGENT MAN—FASHION PHOTOGRAPHER SCORES BIG OFF PALS IN THE NARCOTICS TRADE

BARUCH VEGA MADE MILLIONS AS A FEDERAL INFORMANT, BUT WAS JUSTICE SERVED?—A PRIVATE JET TO PANAMA CITY

By Jose de Cordoba

MIAMI BEACH, Fla.—For years, fashion photographer Baruch Vega jetted from Miami to Milan, shooting the industry's top models.

Few knew of Mr. Vega's off-the-books job, one that was far more lucrative—and dangerous. When he wasn't snapping collections for Versace or Valentino, Mr. Vega, a Colombian by birth and an engineer by training, was covertly meeting with some of the world's most-powerful drug traffickers, trying to persuade them to surrender to U.S. lawmen.

By most accounts, he was a star operative. "We regarded Vega as our principal weapon" in the battle against Colombia's drug cartels, says one former U.S. agent. "I think he was very successful," agrees retired cocaine kingpin Jorge Luis Ochoa, speaking by cellular phone from Colombia, where he recently completed a six-year prison term. "A lot of people got into his program and cooperated with him, and he with them."

So many, in fact, that a meeting brokered by Mr. Vega last year in a Panama hotel drew more than two dozen drug dealers or their representatives, according to Mr. Vega and the lawyer for one of the suspects. Rattled by a new Colombian policy permitting traffickers to be extradited to the U.S., they met in marathon sessions with Drug Enforcement Administration agents, negotiating plea agreements that would potentially net them reduced jail terms in exchange for providing information on drug shipments by other traffickers.

But in March, Mr. Vega's secret life unraveled. As he was unpacking from a photo shoot, agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation burst into his penthouse and arrested him on money-laundering and obstruction-of-justice charges. In a criminal complaint filed in Miami federal court, the government accused him of receiving million-dollar fees from drug lords, in return for promising to use his influence with U.S. agents—and even bribes—to help them with their legal problems. The name he gave the operation, according to the complaint: "The Narcotics Traffickers Rehabilitation Program."

Mr. Vega, a trim 53-year-old who favors black T-shirts, readily admits he accepted the traffickers' money, which he says totaled

about \$4 million, but which others familiar with his midwifery put at as much as \$40 million. Mr. Vega says he took the payments as part of his undercover persona, and that his law-enforcement handlers knew it. He also denies paying any bribes. "The agents I worked with used to joke: 'Baruch, we trained to put people in jail, but with you, we get them out,'" he says.

However the case sorts out, Mr. Vega's story offers a rare look into the twilight world of the narcotics informant—and into the questionable relationships and accommodations. U.S. authorities sometimes enter into as they pursue the global war on drugs. Already, it is proving an acute embarrassment to the DEA, which has placed two agents on paid leave pending an internal investigation of their relationship with Mr. Vega. And it comes at a delicate time, just as the U.S. government begins to implement a \$1.3 billion program to fight the narcotics trade underpinning Colombia's bloody civil war.

Because of the highly secretive nature of undercover operations—and law enforcement's reluctance to disclose the details of cooperation agreements with drug suspects—it's impossible to answer the central question of whether traffickers who paid fees to Mr. Vega received special treatment from the U.S. justice system. No evidence has been presented that any agents accepted bribes. But what can be pieced together, through court documents and interviews with Mr. Vega and others involved in his career, suggests at the very least a highly unorthodox operation that took on a life of its own, fueled by piles of underworld cash.

RED FACES AT DEA

In a brief statement, the DEA says it is "very concerned about the allegations . . . concerning the conduct of certain DEA agents." It declines to comment further, citing a continuing investigation. The Justice Department also declines to comment.

Mr. Vega became a law enforcement go-between almost by accident. He was working in New York City in 1976 as a structural engineer when a neighbor and fellow Colombian was arrested in a police raid. The neighbor's wife tearfully sought Mr. Vega's help. Mr. Vega, who was studying law at night, had befriended a fellow student then working at the FBI. According to Mr. Vega, his friend said the case against the neighbor appeared weak, and charges would probably be dropped soon. They were.

The grateful neighbor, who was indeed involved in the cocaine trade, gave Mr. Vega \$20,000 for what he believed was a successful intervention. Word of Mr. Vega's supposed clout began to spread, and he soon met many of the future capos of Colombia's drug cartels, most of whom were then living in New York.

By 1978, Mr. Vega was dividing his time between New York and Miami, which was immersed in the violence and decadence later made famous by the television show "Miami Vice." "There were the beautiful people, cocaine, models, the fast life," says Sgt. June Hawkins, now a supervisor in the homicide unit of the Miami-Dade police department. There were also lots of unsolved murders involving Colombians with false names. "They were who-isits, not who-dunnits," says Sgt. Hawkins.

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