

Black Panther William Lee Brent, 75

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William Lee Brent, a member of the Black Panthers who hijacked an airliner to Cuba in 1969 and later wrote a gritty account of his life, died Nov. 4 of bronchial pneumonia at his home in Havana. He was 75.

After years of crime, prison and low-paying jobs, Mr. Brent joined the Black Panthers in 1968 and quickly rose in the ranks of the radical black-power organization based in Oakland, Calif. To avoid trial for his role in a shootout with San Francisco police, Mr. Brent hijacked a TWA flight and spent the rest of his life in Cuba.

He chronicled his life in his 1996 autobiography, "Long Time Gone: A Black Panther's True-Life Story of His Hijacking and Twenty-Five Years in Cuba." Although he came to miss the United States and had reservations about life in Cuba, he said he never regretted the actions that separated him from his family and his homeland.

Mr. Brent was born Nov. 10, 1930, in Franklin, La., and had a hardscrabble childhood in Louisiana and Texas before his family moved to Oakland in 1943. By the time he was in junior high school, he was selling drugs and committing other crimes.

In 1947, he bought a fake birth certificate to enlist in the Army but was discharged after eight months. Returning to Oakland, he fell into his old ways and served 18 months in a youth prison for stealing a bicycle. At some point, he took out a library card and began to read Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle's tales of Sherlock Holmes.

In the early 1950s, he was convicted of auto theft and armed robbery and was sentenced to five years to life in San Quentin State Prison. He served eight years before he was released in 1962.

"I promised myself I'd die in the gutter before I would ever go back to prison," Mr. Brent wrote in "Long Time Gone."

He worked for an auto-wrecking business and was married in 1964 to Gloria Harness, from whom he was later divorced. After learning about the nascent Black Panther movement, Mr. Brent attended a rally in Oakland in 1968 and joined the party.

At 37, he was one of its oldest members. He entered the group's inner circle and became a Panther spokesman and bodyguard to Eldridge Cleaver.

In November 1968, after a gas station robbery in San Francisco, Mr. Brent was involved in a drug-fueled shootout with police that left two officers severely wounded. Mr. Brent was arrested at the scene with two accomplices.

Free on bail, and vowing not to go back to prison, Mr. Brent surveyed his limited options.

"Shortly after I joined the Panthers I'd heard that revolutionaries who needed political asylum could get it in Cuba with no problem," he wrote in "Long Time Gone." "I considered myself a revolutionary and I certainly needed asylum."

Wearing a conservative suit and tie, he boarded TWA flight 154 in Oakland on the morning of June

17, 1969. The flight had originated in San Francisco and was scheduled to fly nonstop to New York.

Somewhere over Nevada, he told a flight attendant that he was hijacking the airplane. In the cockpit, he held a .38-caliber revolver to the head of the pilot, who calmly announced to the 76 passengers, "We have had a change of plans. We are going to Havana." It was the 28th hijacking of the year.

When the plane touched down in Havana, Mr. Brent expected to be greeted as a hero. Instead, he was put in a Cuban jail for 22 months as authorities sought to learn whether he was a spy. He later cut sugar cane and worked in a soap factory and on a hog farm. He married an American journalist living in Cuba, Jane McManus, and enrolled at the University of Havana, from which he graduated in 1981. (McManus died last year.)

Mr. Brent was part of a circle of other American political emigres in Havana and led a somewhat privileged life by Cuban standards, with a spacious apartment overlooking the Almendares River. He taught English at Havana's leading high school and became a disc jockey under the name Bill Beaumont -- after his onetime childhood home in Texas -- on Cuban radio.

While visiting Havana, Steve Wasserman, an editor with Times Books, urged Mr. Brent to write his memoirs, which were published to warm reviews in 1996.

"It was one of the great experiences I ever had as an editor, to watch this man whose life was chaotic and unruly obtain mastery over his own story by writing it in his own hand," Wasserman said in an interview.

Mr. Brent did not return to the United States because there is no statute of limitations for skyjacking. No one in his family visited him, and his isolation began to wear on him. He said he also recognized the false hope engendered by Fidel Castro's revolution, as life on the island grew ever more straitened.

"Bill refused to lie," Wasserman said. "He was certainly an unrepentant and radically minded guy, but he was not a man who liked to live in an illusion."

Without renouncing his radical fervor or the crimes and missteps that led to his exile, Mr. Brent admitted in 1996 that he missed "my people, the struggle, the body language" of America.

"You can't get rid of what you are, what you grew up in, the way you were formed."