

Defendant vanished at sea, friends say

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Rafael Villaverde, a controversial anti-Castro activist and defendant in the drug case nicknamed Operation Tick Talk, has disappeared at sea, according to an account given by several of his friends to the Coast Guard.

No trace of Villaverde or of the boat he was reported aboard was found following a two-day search near the Northwest Berry Islands in the Bahamas, the Coast Guard reported Friday.

The Coast Guard was told the boat with Villaverde aboard had exploded and burned about 5 a.m. Wednesday and that one of the seven passengers was missing and last seen floating with a lifejacket.

Villaverde's attorney in Tick Talk, Ed Carhart, said: "I'm afraid he has been in a boating accident and he has been missing. . . I was told a stove exploded. He was cooking. It set him on fire and he jumped in the water."

Carhart said prosecutors in the Tick Talk case recently decided to drop several charges

against Villaverde. He is facing a single charge of conspiracy to traffick in drugs.

"The case was going very well for him," Carhart said. ". . . It doesn't make any sense he would take a walk at this point."

Information on the incident was sketchy and often contradictory. Coast Guard officials say the survivors, who were towed to Great Stirrup Key, have not been cooperative.

"These people [the six survivors] aren't being very helpful," Coast Guard Lt. Neil Armstrong said.

According to Villaverde's fiance, Lily Mestre, he had gone on a weekend fishing trip with six men aboard the Michele, a 36-foot Chris Craft cabin cruiser.

Armstrong said officials were told that after a fire broke out on the cabin cruiser, six of the passengers managed to swim to a second, smaller boat the Michele had been towing.

He said survivors reported they tossed a lifejacket to Villaverde, that he put it on, but that he never reached the second boat.

The second boat, according to the survivors,

drifted without power for about 13 hours until it was discovered by a tug, the Moby Two, which towed it safely to Great Stirrup Cay.

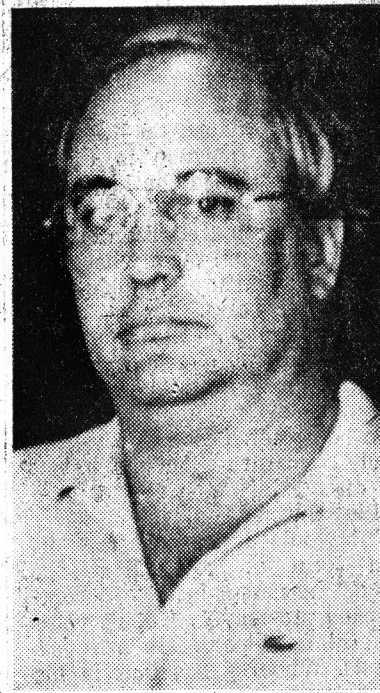
An air-and-sea search began after the tug's crew radioed the Coast Guard in Miami found no debris from the Michele. The search was called off Friday night.

Carhart said: "Not finding any trace is not especially surprising. If a boat burns, it is not hard for it to go down without a trace."

Villaverde's fiance, Mestre, said she first learned of the incident from the wife of Frank Castro, another anti-Castro activist.

She said she only knew the name of two of the six men who accompanied Villaverde on the fishing trip, Castro and Orlando Morejon, owner of the Michele.

Until indicted in the drug investigation, Villaverde was director of the Little Havana Activities Center, a program for Latin elderly. He also was a central figure in a federal investigation in Washington, D.C., in connection with allegations that he was recruited by former CIA officers to assassinate Libyan Moammar Khadafi.



Rafael Villaverde:
Well-known exile.