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The Bay of Pigs

Cuba 1961



Alejandro de Quesada • Illustrated by Stephen Walsh

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ADEQHA = AdeQ Historical Archives; BoPVA = Bay of Pigs Veterans Association; NA = National Archives; USA = United States Army

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THE BAY OF PIGS

THE ROAD TO GIRÓN

Most of the veterans of Assault Brigade 2506 formed the nucleus of the Cuban community in South Florida. This memorial to the Brigade is located in the heart of “Little Havana,” on SW 8th Street in Miami. (Author’s photo)



On July 26, 1953, Fidel Castro led an attack upon the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba with 170 armed rebels. The failed attempt ended with the army and police of President Fulgencio Batista’s Cuban Republic hunting down and summarily executing many of Castro’s followers; he himself sought refuge with the Catholic Archbishop of Santiago, and after guarantees of safety the rebel leader surrendered to

police. He was tried for insurrection and sentenced to 15 years at the Isle of Pines prison. At the time the local Communist party in Cuba regarded Castro’s rebels as “*putchistas*” and adventurers; the few who did not side with the Party’s line were rewarded with important positions after the victory of the Revolution in 1959.

After Batista’s re-election as president, Castro and his remaining followers were released from jail under a general political amnesty in May 1955. Castro was exiled to Mexico, but later toured cities in the United States (such as New York, Tampa and Miami) to garner support for his fight to overthrow Batista. The former Cuban president Carlos Prío and other anti-Batista supporters contributed money and an old yacht, *Granma*, to Castro’s cause. In Mexico, Castro’s men were trained by a former Spanish Republican veteran, Col Alberto Bayo; amongst them was an Argentinian doctor who was to become an icon of the socialist revolution, Ernesto “Ché” Guevara. On November 25, 1956, a force of just 83 men embarked on the *Granma* and sailed from the port of Tuxpan; 22 of them were veterans of the Moncada attack,

Members of Fidel Castro's July 26 Movement (note armbands), wearing uniforms and using equipment captured from Fulgencio Batista's forces, 1956–59. The organization was named after the date in 1953 when Castro led 170 rebels in a failed attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba. (ADEQHA)



and five were foreigners born in Mexico, Spain, Italy, the Dominican Republic and Argentina.

On December 2 the rebels landed on Coloradas Beach near Belic at the southeastern tip of Oriente Province. As the yacht was being unloaded a Cuban coast guard vessel spotted her; the rebels were soon under fire, and fighter aircraft were called in. Soldiers and naval infantrymen managed to intercept the beleaguered rebel force at Alegria de Pio, where 21 rebels were killed and 26 captured, and several prisoners were summarily executed by overzealous “*casquitos*.”¹ Within a month four more were captured, including Castro’s deputy Juan Manuel Marquez, who was caught and shot on December 15. Although eight prisoners managed to escape, only 15 rebels succeeded in reaching the Sierra Maestra mountains with Castro. This handful of survivors became the nucleus of the rebel army, and would become among the most powerful members of the government established by Fidel Castro after the overthrow of Batista.²

The repressive attempts of Batista’s police and military to stamp out the actually minimal peasant support for the rebels backfired literally overnight, when Batista’s men executed several farmers in front of their families at Palma Mocha. Soon terror was being spread by both sides, and the poverty-stricken peasants were caught in the middle. Both Batista’s and Castro’s forces executed prisoners and anybody they considered a collaborator, and desertion also became a problem for both sides. Castro’s propaganda war received a boost after his interview by Herbert Matthews was published in the *New York Times* in February 1957, and soon new groups of volunteers were traveling to Cuba to join his revolution. Eventually Castro was able to lead a group of about 500 men onto the offensive.

¹ The soldiers of Batista’s forces were called *casquitos* from the Spanish *casco*, helmet – the distinguishing feature worn by Cuba’s armed forces was the US M1 “steel pot.”

² Fidel’s brother Raul Castro, Ernesto “Ché” Guevara, Camilo Cienfuegos, Universo Sanchez, Faustino Perez Hernandez, Ciro Redondo Garcia, Efigenio Ameijeiras, Julito Diaz Gonzalez, Calixto Garcia, Ramiro Valdes, Jose Moran “El Gallego,” Juan Ameida Bosque, Reinaldo Benitez, Luis Crespo and Rafael Chao.

His capture of the El Uvero barracks on May 28, 1957 would be considered as the foundation of his *ejercito rebelde* (rebel army). In early 1958 Castro opened a second front in the Escambray Mountains of Las Villas Province. On March 14, 1958, the US government announced an embargo on further sales of military hardware to Batista, citing human rights violations. Batista turned instead to Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic and other countries (including Britain), and international arms dealers were happy to cash in on the opportunity. In April a general strike by anti-Batista factions failed.

In May 1958, Batista unleashed a general offensive but this ground to a halt in July, with Castro's followers well established in all the provinces except Havana and Matanzas. A combined army-navy offensive against rebels in Oriente Province was commenced by Gen Eulogio Cantillo on May 24, and by June 29 about 90 percent of the rebel-controlled area had been occupied before the rebels began to fight back. Two months later the government offensive collapsed, after its forces had suffered over 1,000 casualties, of whom more than 400 had been captured by the rebels. A battalion led by Maj Quevedo, surrounded and forced to surrender, quickly changed sides, including their commander. This was one of the last nails in the coffin of the Batista regime. In August 1958 Camilo Cienfuegos and Ché Guevara sent their columns racing toward central Cuba from the west and east respectively, as other anti-Batista groups joined Castro's forces; on one occasion 200 guerrillas defeated 5,000 demoralized troops. On December 28, 1958 the capital of Las Villas Province, Santa Clara, fell to the rebels, and on January 1, 1959 Batista fled Cuba.

The Revolutionary regime

By February 7 several hundred members of the military had been arrested, retired or discharged. In March 1959, Raul Castro and Ché Guevara began to organize the means to defend the island from any

Counterrevolutionaries captured in the Escambray Mountains await their fate. These groups, which became active before the end of 1960, brought together former members of the Batista regime, businessmen and landowners, but also students and workers, and even disillusioned ex-members of the July 26 Movement and the Revolutionary Armed Forces. (ADEQHA)



The blowing up of the French ship *La Coubre* in Havana Bay on March 4, 1960 was one of many acts of sabotage against the Castro government; she was carrying a large cargo of munitions purchased from Belgium. (ADEQHA)



possible American intervention. At the end of April, Maj Guevara announced the formation of a worker's militia (*Milicia Revolucionaria – MR*); the pre-revolutionary army was disbanded on August 9, and within days the new revolutionary army (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias – FAR*) was proclaimed. All the officers of the Batista army were replaced with officers from Castro's July 26 Movement and other revolutionary organizations. Traditional military rank titles were abolished; the highest rank was *comandante*, equivalent to major (but naturally distinctions had to be made within the rank of major: as George Orwell wrote in *Animal Farm*, "all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others").

Immediately after the fall of Batista, Fidel Castro began consolidating his power through a series of mass arrests and executions of anyone who might pose a threat to him, including some who had fought alongside him. The *New York Times* reported that in the first six months of 1959 a total of 364 former Batista officials had been executed, and Associated Press reported that as of January 21, 1959, 288 former military and/or civilian informers and followers of Batista had already been executed. Political parties and social organizations were outlawed, with only the Communist Party remaining as the supposed voice of the workers. Castro provoked a mass exodus of Cubans from all economic classes to the United States, by "reforms" that resulted in the nationalization of private businesses and property. Almost overnight Cuban refugees transformed the quiet southeastern town of Miami, Florida, into "Little Havana" – a natural hotbed of anti-Castro sentiment and activities.

COUNTERREVOLUTION

Between 1959 and 1961, as the newly formed militia marched daily through the streets of Cuban cities shouting their cadence and socialist slogans, the amused locals reacted to this wholly foreign-seeming militarization of their society by countering with the chant "*¡Uno, dos,*

tres, cuatro – comiendo mierda y rompiendo zapato!” (“One, two, three, four – eating shit and breaking shoes!”). Prior to the 1959 Revolution many Cubans had looked to the United States for stability in case the political situation on the island got out of hand (the gunboat diplomacy of the early 20th century had seen US Marines landed in 1906 and again in 1912). Cuba was a largely pacifist society, unprepared for Castro’s revolutionary reforms; they had never faced forced conscription prior to the Revolution, and the military had been strictly volunteer. Now, families who had the means sent their sons of military age overseas for education, and there was a vague expectation that the arrival of American Leathernecks, and the shedding of someone else’s blood, would liberate Cuba from the Communists. When this complacent hope was disappointed, a few began to take matters into their own hands.

Within a year of the Revolution several counterrevolutionary groups were formed, and guerrilla operations against the Castro government began in the Escambray Mountains during the latter part of 1960. The secularization of the educational system – whereby all church property and schools (including private schools) were taken over by the government, and hundreds of priests and nuns were forced to leave the country – led men of devout Catholic convictions to throw in their lot with the counterrevolutionaries. Two former officers of the July 26 Movement who became prominent among the guerrillas who took up arms against the new regime were Majors Porfirio Ramirez and Evelio Duque, who had had a wide local following in the Escambray Mountains during the struggle against Batista. Now both Ramirez and Duque managed to defy thousands of government troops, under the direct command of Raul Castro and Ché Guevara, sent in to destroy the counterrevolutionaries; Guevara’s forces suffered a notable defeat at Potrillo in 1960.

Taking lessons from the Spaniards during Cuba’s Wars for Independence (1868–98), the regime moved thousands of peasant families out of the area and relocated them to larger towns to deny the counterrevolutionaries material support in the cultivated areas close to the mountains. Anyone caught within these closed areas was considered an enemy of the Revolution and arrested, and in many cases executed. This period became known officially as *La Lucha Contra Bandidos*, “The Fight Against Bandits.”

One major incident attributed to one of the CIA-backed counterrevolutionary groups was the alleged sabotage of the French steamship *La Coubre* on March 4, 1960, while docked in Havana Bay. She was carrying more than 70 tons of grenades and other munitions purchased from Belgium. At 3.10pm, while unloading was underway, an explosion killed a number of dock workers and unleashed chaos in surrounding neighborhoods. The public rushed to the aid of the injured, and in the midst of their rescue efforts a second explosion raised the death toll to 76 – including six French sailors – and the wounded to more than 200.

The CIA

In the United States, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had already begun to take an interest in those anti-Castro Cuban groups who wished to prepare for an expedition to the island, and the Agency started providing them with military training in the Florida Everglades as early

as March 1960. The relationship between Cuba and the USA worsened when President Dwight D. Eisenhower broke off diplomatic relations on January 3, 1961. Supplies were dropped to guerrillas from planes flown by CIA recruits from among the Cuban exile community, but those operating in the Escambray Mountains and elsewhere were largely snuffed out by March 1961. Castro's new intelligence network also overwhelmed the urban underground; more than 15,000 opponents of the regime had been jailed and hundreds had faced firing squads. This brutal suppression of any internal opposition to Fidel Castro left only one possible solution: an invasion force with superior capabilities to those of the Revolutionary Armed Forces.

RAISING AN ARMY OF LIBERATION

It was obvious to the Eisenhower administration that within the structure of international law no overt action could be taken to replace the Cuban regime. Since the CIA had proven capable in the overthrow of Latin American governments, staging a successful coup in Guatemala in 1954, the president asked Agency director Allen Dulles to put together a "program" for dealing with Castro. On Dulles' instructions the head of the CIA plans division, Richard Bissell, began work on a "Cuba Project" for covert action. From the beginning the considerable expenses could not be totally concealed within the Agency's budget. At a cabinet meeting on August 18, 1960 the president approved \$13 million and the use of some Department of Defense personnel and equipment for the training of a Cuban guerrilla force outside the United States. It became apparent at this time that no US military personnel were to be used for the logistical aspects of the plan. The program included a series of independent operations which would come together as the grip of the Castro government began to weaken.



Augusto Maxwell and his friend Daniel Moreno posing for a photo with family members before they reported to the recruiting office of Assault Brigade 2506 in Miami, Florida. (Courtesy Augusto Maxwell)

Howard Hunt and Gerry Droller were sent to Miami to try to form a coalition of all the splintered groups of Cuban exiles, so as to enable the creation of a representative government-in-exile; before any operation could be prepared a leadership had to emerge on a basis of trust, to lend an air of legitimacy to the training and equipping of a counter-revolutionary force. A group of guerrilla fighters had to be recruited, equipped, trained and delivered, to act as a nucleus to which anti-Castro citizens in Cuba would be attracted, and which could train and equip them in turn. The CIA set up a recruiting network in Miami, and soon had enough Cuban volunteers to begin initial training. In violation of their government guidelines they established training centers within the United States, in Florida, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia and at the Jungle Warfare Training Center in Panama. David Phillips, who had handled the propaganda program for the Guatemala scenario, began to set up a propaganda operation on Swan Island off the coast of Honduras, where a group of Cuban refugees began broadcasting anti-Castro speeches between musical selections. It was initially believed that it would take six months to stimulate the desired action.



Alejandro del Valle, commander of the Brigade's parachute battalion (left), with Dr Manuel Artime, the political leader of the Brigade and its main contact with the wider Cuban exile activist movement and with US government agencies. (BoPVA)



Members of the Brigade posing with their M1 Thompson SMGs during training at "Base Trax" in Guatemala. (ADEQHA)

Small-unit infantry tactics and survival skills were the basics of the training given to Cuban exiles in Guatemala during the fall of 1960. In November the emphasis was changed from guerrilla skills to conventional warfare and amphibious operations. Both CIA advisors and US military instructors were involved in every stage of the Brigade's preparations. (ADEQHA)



Assault Brigade 2506

The group that eventually grew into Brigade 2506 originally consisted of just 28 men; the nucleus was ten former Cuban military officers who had been recruited by Dr Manuel Artime, head of the *Movimiento de Recuperación Revolucionaria* (MRR). The group had been told that Americans, claiming no association with the US government, would supply generous amounts of arms, equipment and funding. The Americans tried to give Artime and his men the impression that an anonymous Cuban millionaire was paying the bills, but the Cubans eventually began referring to their benefactor as “Uncle Sam.” At secret camps in Florida, Panama, and eventually in Guatemala, the US government trained the core of future leaders in guerrilla warfare.

Dr Artime’s MRR organization in Miami was the principal recruiting apparatus for Brigade personnel, and the chosen military leader of the Brigade was José “Pepe” Pérez San Román, a graduate of Cuba’s military academy who had also undergone US Army officer training at Fort Benning, Georgia. He had been freed by Castro from a Batista prison, but later re-imprisoned by the new regime before escaping from Cuba. However, Dr Artime remained the key figure in the US government’s relationship with the activist exiles and the Brigade. Initially, the Brigade was to be the military arm of the *Frente Revolucionario Democrático* (FRD) headed by Dr Artime; but political infighting amongst the exile groups led to the dissolution of the FRD and the creation of a broader-based organization, the Cuban Revolutionary Council (CRC), of which Artime was also named director.

While Radio Swan continued to broadcast propaganda into Cuba, an agreement was reached with the government of Guatemala whereby a large plantation belonging to Roberto Alejos was leased and transformed into a training camp. Known as “Base Trax,” this was the primary training site for ground forces for the Bay of Pigs.

By September 1960 the initial cadre had grown to 160 men undergoing vigorous conditioning in the treacherous, densely forested Sierra Madre in Guatemala. That month one of them, Carlos Rodriguez Santana, was killed in a training accident, and in his honor his comrades decided to name the Brigade after his serial number: 2506. Training in guerrilla tactics continued through October 1960, with approximately 300 Cubans receiving instruction.

On November 4, 1960, the CIA sent a cable to Base Trax officially canceling guerrilla training for all but 60 of the Cubans, and specifying that the force would now be trained for conventional warfare, with an emphasis upon amphibious assault tactics. This cable indicated a major escalation of the type of operation to be mounted in Cuba, and it came only four days prior to the presidential elections of 1960, which were won by Senator John F. Kennedy. On November 27, President-elect Kennedy was briefed on the plan; he was disturbed only by the small size of the Brigade, and encouraged Allen Dulles to continue with the development of the force.

Creating a clandestine air force

Cuban exile flyers were trained by American pilots recruited by MajGen Reid Doster, head of the Alabama National Guard. Most of the American aviators he chose had extensive multi-engine experience, and most had flown in combat. Initially based in southern Florida, they had a difficult task: most of the Cuban students had less than 100 hours of flying time, and few had any experience with the heavy, multi-engine aircraft they would be flying. Nevertheless, a handful of Cubans with airline experience or who had served with Batista's air force quickly became the leaders of the fledgling Liberation Air Force.

When the CIA decided that it was time to get some safely distant foreign bases to complete the training of the Brigade's soldiers and pilots, Guatemala – with a friendly government and a similar tropical environment to Cuba – was again the solution. The CIA negotiated the establishment of two secret bases, one for training the Brigade's soldiers (codenamed "JMTrax") and the other its aircrews ("JMMadd"). JMTrax was located on the La Helvetia coffee plantation in the foothills between Quetzaltenango and Retalhuleu Departments; at first the Cuban pilots were also located there while their base was constructed, but two weeks later they moved to JMMadd (known to the Cubans as "Rayo Base").

BELOW LEFT Parachutists of the 1st Battalion, seen here wearing their olive-drab jumpsuits and "football" helmets, and armed with M3A1 SMGs. (BoPVA)

BELOW RIGHT A Brigade color guard, wearing their "Texas" hats and new camouflage uniforms, with scarves in unit-distinctive colors. (BoPVA)





A parade of *brigadistas*, showing the regimental standard and the variety of uniform styles worn. (BoPVA)

The air base was close to Retalhuleu city, right between the road to Champerico port and the railroad to Mexico. It had a 4,800ft paved runway, and an array of barracks, warehouses and supply shops scattered around a main building that served as the administrative and command center. Rayo's parking ramp proved to be something of a challenge, since the only way to accommodate the planes (C-54s, C-46s and B-26Bs) was by lining them up one behind the other, and there was no way to turn an aircraft around.³ JMMadd was disguised at all times as a Guatemalan Air Force base, despite the obvious lack of local personnel; thus many of the CIA planes based there were painted in Guatemalan Air Force colors, and in the case of the C-46s they even received faked FAG serial numbers in the 800 range.

The case of the B-26s was somewhat different: the aircraft had been delivered officially to the Guatemalan government, but after their arrival all but two were "leased" to the CIA. Thus, the Cubans and CIA pilots trained in aircraft sporting blue-white-blue markings, while Guatemalan Air Force pilots wondered where the new planes had got to. Little or no attention was paid to the fact that Castro's pilots were flying a different model of B-26 than the ones flown by the exiles, though this would later prove to be of some importance.

Most of the Cuban pilots were also checked out on the C-46 (Curtiss Commando freighter), but their main task was to become efficient B-26 Invader pilots. For their part, a group of US pilots concentrated on flying Douglas C-54s on supply missions between JMMadd and "JMTide" – the CIA air base at Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua. JMMadd was also supplied by C-54s flying from Miami and South Florida; in contrast with movements between the two secret bases, these flights were carried out

³ The Air Force would have a total of 16x B-26B, 6x C-46 and 6x C-54. The B-26s were not the Martin Marauder so designated in World War II, but the superior Douglas Invader attack bomber, redesignated from A-26 to B-26 in the early 1950s.

by “foreign national” pilots, mainly from Europe and Asia, under CIA contract. The end of JMMadd as a CIA secret base began in late March 1961 when the B-26 crews were transferred to Nicaragua, and it closed for good on April 10, when the last personnel were flown to JMTide together with all the equipment for the invasion.

The secret navy

To transport Assault Brigade 2506 and its equipment to the beaches of Cuba the CIA procured five cargo ships from the Cuban-owned García Line, whose owners were active in the anti-Castro underground; this satisfied the State Department’s request that only Cuban-owned and registered ships be employed. The vessels were the *Atlantico*, *Caribe*, *Houston*, *Lake Charles* and *Río Escondido*. Four of these – *Atlantico*, *Caribe*, *Houston* and *Río Escondido* – would be loaded with the ammunition and supplies required to support a force of 15,000 men for 30 days. The *Lake Charles* was to carry 15 days’ worth of supplies and unload after the fifth day of the landings; she would also transport the men of Operation 40 Group – the staff of a military government that would administer the beachhead and other liberated areas in Cuba. (A sixth ship would have been leased through a US commercial shipping line, to land additional supplies after the tenth day of the landings.)

These ships proceeded to New Orleans, Mobile, and other Gulf Coast ports, where they took on board the majority of the Brigade’s provisions, ammunition, aviation gasoline and other supplies, and then sailed to Puerto Cabezas. Upon arrival there, the crews were notified that they were to deliver the men and equipment of the Brigade to the shores of Cuba, and were given the opportunity to quit; one captain and six crewmen did, but they were quickly replaced without problems. In Puerto Cabezas, the ships were fitted with machine guns for self-protection.

The invasion convoy would also include two converted Landing Craft Infantry (LCI) – the *Blagar* and the *Barbara J* – outfitted as command ships; these were owned by the CIA and were exempt from the State Department request. The World War II vintage LCI was 159ft long, and had a large, capacious hold that ran almost the length of the hull. These two had been refitted for the operation with radio and electronics equipment, but initially the only armament each carried was four .50cal machine guns mounted on the corners of the bridge; eventually an additional eight .50cals were procured for the *Blagar* and mounted throughout the vessel. The LCIs were docked in Key West with other “ghost boats” of the CIA – the term used by the locals for the five or six black or gray vessels based there, ranging in size from 35ft to a 110ft former submarine chaser that the CIA used to supply the underground and for its infiltration teams.

Each LCI carried a crew of 30 men; the officers, engineers, radio operators and mates were all Americans, on loan to the CIA from the Military Sea Transportation Service (MSTS). According to Grayston Lynch, CIA case officer attached to one of the LCIs: “They were well qualified and experienced, but they were civilian merchant marine sailors, not US Navy combat men. They were not trained for combat. Their service had all been on merchant ships that sailed chartered sea-lanes, and in their minds the safety of their ship always came first.”



A Douglas B-26B Invader on display in Miami, bearing the Cuban Air Force markings that would have been seen during the Bay of Pigs fighting. For operations the tail would be marked with “FAR” (*Fuerza Aerea Revolucionaria/Revolutionary Air Force*) instead of “FAL” (*Fuerza Aerea Libertadora/Liberation Air Force*). (Author's photo)

The smaller landing craft of the brigade consisted of four Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel (LCVP), three Landing Craft Utility (LCU) and one Landing Craft Mechanized (LCM). These would carry five M41 (Walker Bulldog) light tanks, ten 2½-ton trucks with trailers of ammunition and supplies, a bulldozer with crane attachment, six jeeps, a water trailer (“water buffalo”), and a 7,000-gallon tanker truck filled with aviation fuel. A US Navy Landing Ship Dock (LSD) would transport the loaded landing craft, and then hand them over to Cuban crews before launching off at a point near the Cuban coast.

The invasion vessels were also supplemented with 30-odd aluminum and fiberglass boats with outboard engines. These were secretly flown to Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, where the crews of the *Barbara J* and *Blagar* were to assemble and load them. The completed bare-hulled boats were 15–16ft in length and powered by 75hp Evinrude engines; they were finished in battleship gray, and some had black skull-and-crossbones emblems painted on their bows.

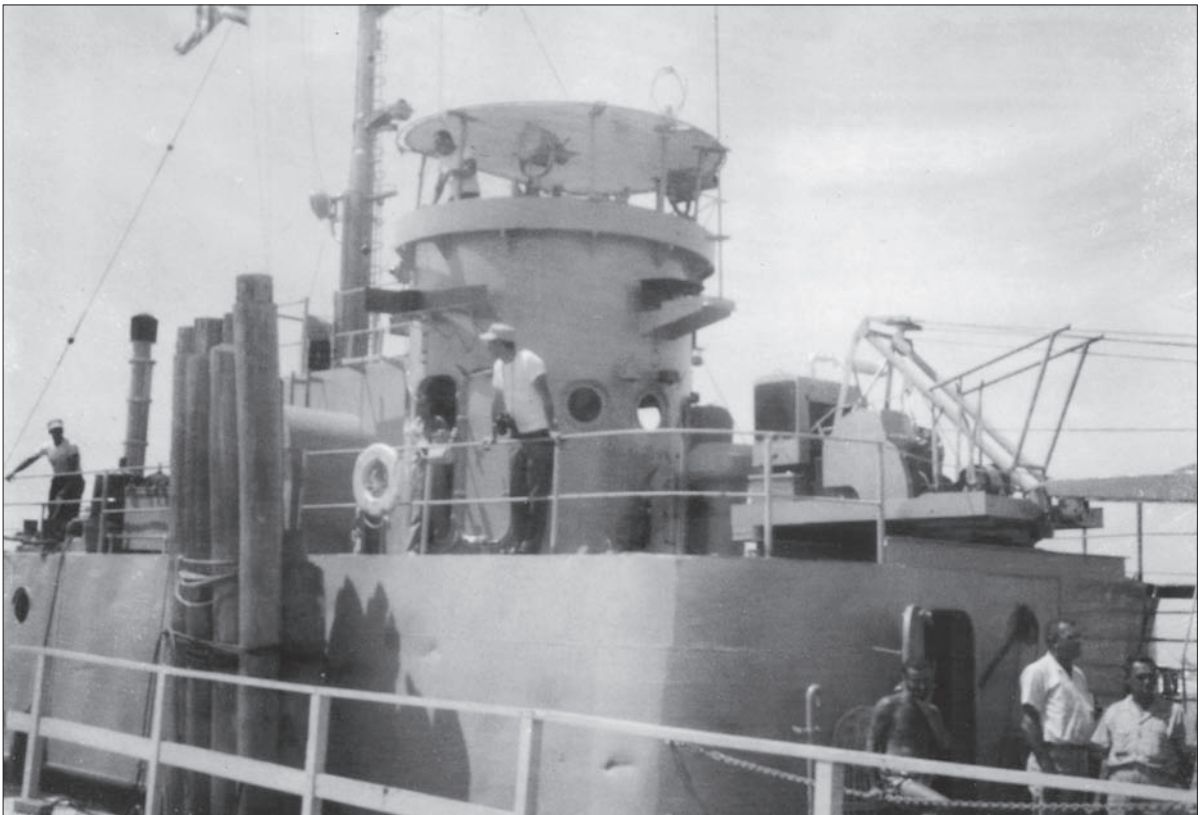
Puerto Barrios: interlude in Guatemala

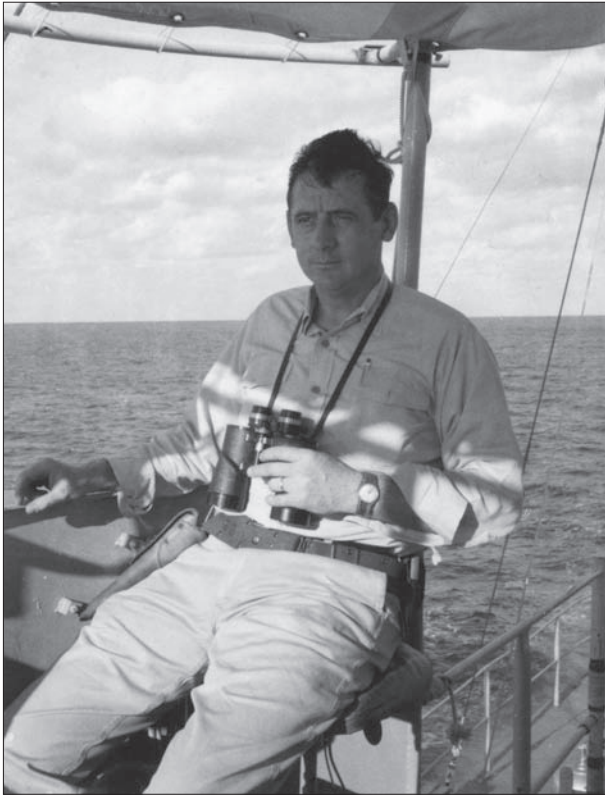
During the night of November 13, 1960, Col Rafael Sessan Perieira, supported by a hundred soldiers, rebelled against the Guatemalan government of Gen Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes and seized Fort Matamoros outside Guatemala City; other mutinous troops seized the military bases at Zacapa and Puerto Barrios, the nation's principal port on the Caribbean. Assault Brigade 2506's first taste of combat almost came while putting down this coup attempt in Barrios, close to the Honduran border. A brigade member, Felix Rodriguez, recounted: “There were about 600 of us at Trax; just about everyone volunteered to help the Guatemalan president, and 200 of us were selected. We were issued weapons, then trucked to Retalhuleu air base where we were to board planes that would take us to Puerto Barrios. We were somewhat nervous during the [truck] ride, and we kept our submachine guns at the ready,

pointed toward the jungle in case of an ambush. If somebody had fired a shot by mistake, we would probably have blown away a few hundred meters of roadside.”

The CIA planned for 100 of the *brigadistas* to fly on three C-46s to Puerto Barrios and take the airfield, after it had been softened up by the Cuban Liberation Air Force’s B-26 Invaders; the Cubans were then to hold the airfield until relieved by the rest of the force. The *brigadistas* hastily practiced deplaning and unloading equipment from the C-46, three times: twice while motionless, and once while moving. The C-46s circled around Puerto Barrios as the B-26s attacked, and Rodriguez witnessed the encouraging efficiency of the Brigade’s aircraft: “It was incredible to watch from the hatch of our C-46 as the bombers dived, circled, and dived again to do their deadly work. One scored a direct hit on a truckload of rebel soldiers, and from our vantage point 2,000ft away some of us said later they could see the bodies fly.” Afterwards, the C-46 came in and attempted to deplane its passengers, but reports of rebels returning fire forced the pilot to take off again and the planes returned to Rayo Base. The following day the *brigadistas* were thanked for their help by the Guatemalan defense minister. Rodriguez reported the minister as saying that “the rebel garrison had been told that 1,000 heavily armed, highly trained Cubans were coming to fight against them with sophisticated military equipment. When the rebels heard that, he said, they surrendered without firing a shot. He then told us we were all being granted honorary Guatemalan citizenship, to thank us for our work on behalf of his country.”

The *Barbara J*, a World War II-vintage Landing Craft Infantry (LCI), one of the two procured and converted by the CIA as command and supply ships for the operation. (ADEQHA)





“Rip” Robertson was one of the CIA agents who oversaw the frogman beach reconnaissance teams and the operations of the *Barbara J* during the Bay of Pigs battle. (ADEQHA)

Changing the plan

After a briefing on a report by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), on January 28, 1961, President Kennedy ordered a JCS committee under Gen Gray to review the CIA plans. The committee soon learned that the CIA operations were so compartmentalized that no actual written plan existed. Reporting his findings to the JCS on January 31, Gen Gray estimated the chances of success as “fair” but re-emphasized the need for absolute air superiority. On February 3 the Chiefs sent a report to the White House and the CIA; they believed that the chances of achieving military success were favorable, but advised that ultimate success would depend on political factors, such as the actual scope of the envisioned popular uprising and the ability to build a substantial force.

As planning and training continued, Hunt and Droller still had not been able to form an effective coalition government-in-exile in Miami – the factionalism of the Cuban politicians seemed to actually intensify as the Brigade’s readiness improved. Equally importantly, intelligence sources on

conditions and social attitudes within Cuba were offering conflicting estimates of the probable public reaction to an effort to oust Castro. The CIA’s sources were almost unanimously optimistic about the potential for a popular uprising once a landing ignited the spark. However, media coverage and reports from people who visited Cuba denied stories of poverty and discontent; they noted that Fidel Castro was riding a growing wave of popularity due to his land reform program and the nationalization of large US corporate assets in Cuba.

The meeting that President Kennedy held in the cabinet room on March 11, 1961, probably influenced the eventual outcome of the operation more than any other since the conception of the “Cuba Project.” Richard Bissell presented a brief on a proposed landing in the Trinidad area, which had significant advantages. It was located a substantial distance from Havana’s troop and aircraft concentrations; only one main road offered a military supply route and axis of advance for Castro’s forces, and this could easily be cut by destroying a single bridge. The population was fairly large and had demonstrated support for the guerrillas in the nearby Escambray Mountains. There were port facilities and docks nearby, which could be used for unloading supplies quickly. From a military standpoint, the area was extremely well suited to the operation; however, the small airfield at Trinidad could not support operations by the B-26 bombers, and this would destroy the facade that the air strikes were originating within Cuba, thus making US involvement obvious.

President Kennedy rejected the Trinidad Plan as much too spectacular, and stated his preference for a quieter landing, preferably

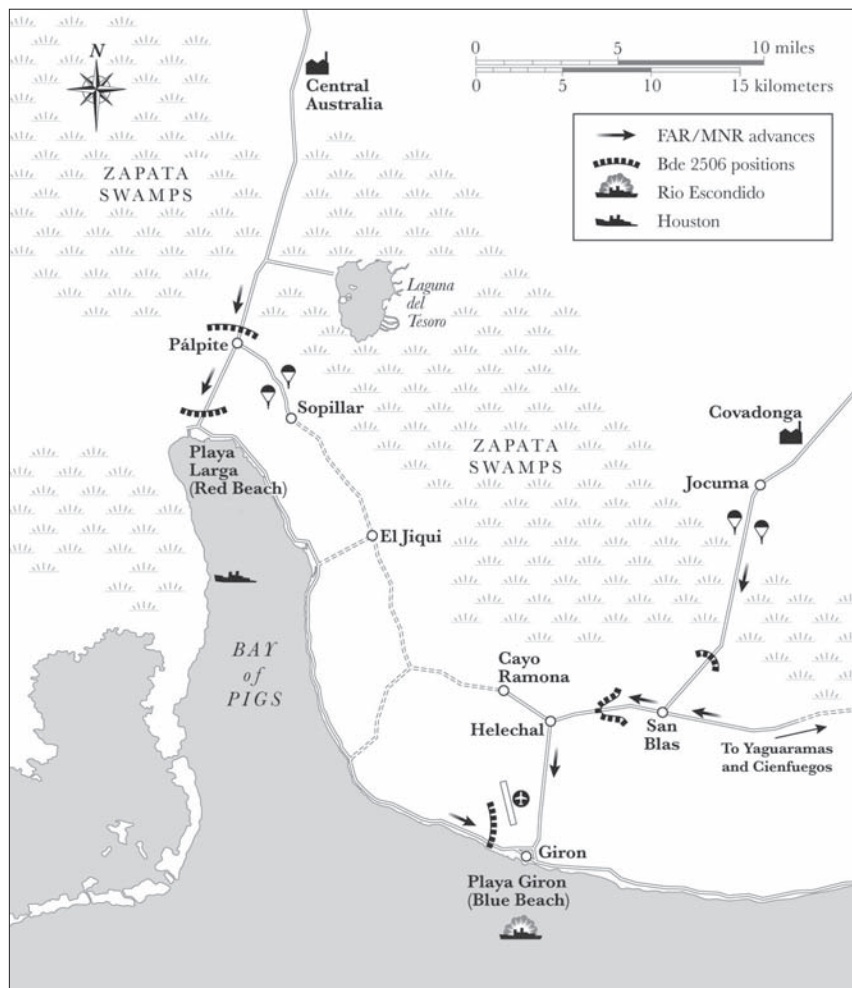
at night, with no basis for US military intervention. Kennedy adjourned the meeting by tasking the agencies involved to find a compromise plan that would reduce his political and military concerns. A task force worked to find an option that met the president's requirements; and four days later the JCS approved a plan calling for a landing on the coast of Matanzas Province near Bahia de Cochinos (the Bay of Pigs). The terrain was not as favorable as at Trinidad, but was deemed acceptable. The area bordered the Zapata swamps, where there were few access roads to allow Castro's forces to approach. Lacking port facilities, the Bay did permit the force to land up an inlet well away from the open sea; and the airfield at Girón, with a 4,900ft runway, could support B-26 operations. (The CIA later learned that only 4,100ft was usable, but this did not alter the plan.) The change of landing zone to the Bay of Pigs area cost the Brigade the ability to move into the mountains and revert to guerrilla warfare. Kennedy was not told this, and still thought they had this option. Additional critical factors were the Soviet-bloc weapons that were pouring into Cuba by the shipload almost daily, and the deadline for Castro's pilots to complete MiG jet flight training in Czechoslovakia. Once these pilots returned to Cuba they would eliminate any chance for the Brigade to achieve the required objectives. After he was briefed on the modified plan, President Kennedy advised the CIA to proceed. The Brigade's operation planning now began in earnest.

THE BAY OF PIGS

The bulk of the equipment for Bde 2506 was staged at "Base Trampoline" (Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua) or had been moved there from Guatemala

Parachutists of the 1st Battalion gathered for a briefing prior to their departure for Cuba; note the variety of headgear, including the use of hatbands made from camouflage parachute material. The Brigade's "battalions" were only a couple of hundred men strong; the intention was to expand them by local recruitment within a few days of their arrival on Cuban soil. For this reason sub-unit leaders had been trained to command elements one step larger, i.e. platoon leaders were trained as company commanders. (BoPVA)





Map showing positions held by Assault Brigade 2506 during the three-day battle of the Bay of Pigs. Fidel Castro made his headquarters in Central Australia located south of Jagüey Grande. The positions of the Brigade's 1st Bn of Parachutists were gradually pulled back as Castro's forces advanced toward Playa Larga and Playa Girón.

Girón was to be the center of the operation; Pepe San Román would land his men and establish his command post at Blue Beach. The paratroopers of 1st Bn would be dropped in three places to cut the roads crossing the swamps: at La Horquito, in front of Yaguaramas; at Jocuma, in front of Covadonga; and north of Playa Larga, along the road from the Central Australia Sugar Mill. Alejandro del Valle, the paratroop battalion commander, was to establish his headquarters at San Blas. Thus, the Brigade's initial holdings would extend inland for more than 20 miles.

The 2d and 5th Infantry Bns, under the command of Erneido A. Oliva, would land at Red Beach. Near Playa Larga, a paratroop detachment from 1st Bn would seize an airstrip and a town called Sopillar. Pepe San Román would land at Blue Beach with 6th Infantry Bn, 3d (nominally, Armored) Bn, and 4th (Heavy Weapons) Battalion. The 3d Bn would send a reinforced company with two of its only five tanks to support the paratroopers at San Blas; the rest of the battalion would enter the Playa Girón airfield, a major objective, where they would be held in reserve until needed. The Heavy Weapons Bn's guns and heavy mortars were to give general support to the paratroopers, and later to 7th Infantry Bn, which was to land at Green Beach.

as early as April 2, 1961. The base commander at Camp Trax, Guatemala, received the mobilization order on April 9; the time had come to move the Brigade from Guatemala to Base Trampoline, the springboard for the operation, and it took three days to complete the transfer. Prior to their departure from Puerto Cabezas the Brigade's combat leaders were briefed by CIA officials on the battle plans – for the first time.

Operation "Zapata" called for landings at three points: Playa Larga, called Red Beach; Girón, Blue Beach; and Green Beach, a point 20 miles east of Girón astride the road to Cienfuegos. From Red Beach extending to Green Beach, the Brigade would thus control 40 miles of the Cuban coastline.

During the briefing, questions were asked about the capability of Castro's planes to interfere with the landing and subsequent land operations. These questions always brought the same reassuring answer: that Fidel Castro's aircraft would be destroyed on the ground before the landings commenced. There was no mention of any alternate plan; such a plan had, in fact, been made, but was not communicated to the Cubans. The CIA officials decided that if they were briefed on an alternate plan it might weaken their resolve when things got rough. Instead, they were told that if things went seriously wrong they should contact the base camp, via radio, for further instructions. This decision by the CIA condemned the Brigade to be committed to the beachhead at all costs. When the briefing was completed the Cubans left, feeling confident.



The "business end" of a Cuban-marked B-26B, showing its nose battery of eight .50cal machine guns. The pretence that the preliminary air strikes on April 15 had been carried out by defecting pilots from Castro's air force was not helped by the fact that the Brigade's invaders were the metal-nosed B-model, while those of the *Fuerza Aerea Revolucionaria* were C-models with a plexiglass nose for a bombardier. (Author's photo)

D-3, April 14: the failed diversion

On the night of April 14 the flotilla of ships carrying the men and equipment of Bde 2506 slipped out of Puerto Cabezas and set course for the Bay of Pigs. The troops boarded the ships in khaki uniforms; by April 16, when they changed into their camouflage combat fatigues, the original khakis had turned fire-engine red from sleeping on the rusty decks. No cooking or smoking was permitted aboard because of the ships' cargos of gasoline and ammunition. The carrier USS *Essex* and her battle group of five escort destroyers were ready to escort the five freighters to a rendezvous point south of the Bay of Pigs. Their only task was to ensure that the Cubans got to the beaches, not to assist them once the landing was made. The USS *Essex* had taken aboard a squadron of new A-4D Skyhawk fighter-bombers, but their mission was as yet undefined.



Adlai Stevenson, US Ambassador to the United Nations, insisted to the General Assembly that the B-26s that had bombed and strafed Castro's airfields were flown by defectors, and denied any US government involvement. He would be greatly upset upon learning subsequently that he had been deceived by the administration. (NA)



Each Brigade member taking part in the invasion was issued approximately 100 counterfeit Cuban pesos made by the CIA. This money was intended for purchasing supplies from the peasants, and/or for bribery. (ADEQHA)

As the invasion force steamed toward Cuba, Nino Diaz and a reconnaissance group of 160 men prepared to execute a diversionary landing approximately 30 miles east of Guantanamo in the early hours of April 14. As the group neared the coast they saw what they thought were cigarettes being smoked by a number of militiamen on shore; the landing was aborted and the group returned to their small cruiser. When dawn broke they were well over the horizon, to wait and try again the next night. The failure of this diversionary raid had a profound effect on the success of the real invasion, since its mission was to draw Castro's forces to the east and confuse his command.

D-2, April 15: the air strikes

In the early morning of April 15, eight B-26B Invaders with faked FAR markings and flown by Cuban exile crews took off from "Happy Valley" in Nicaragua and headed for Cuba. Each was loaded with two 500lb demolition bombs, ten 200lb fragmentation bombs, and eight underwing rockets. The B-26B was the model mounting eight .50cal machine guns in the solid nose, for which each carried 2,800 rounds of ammunition; the B-26Cs flown by Castro's air force had clear plexiglass noses for bombardiers. In order to identify them clearly to friendly forces the B-26Bs also had a wide blue stripe painted on the fuselage. The attempt to confuse Cuban FAR forces over their identity was to prove ineffective.

At 6.00am on April 15 the Invaders attacked La Libertad air base, where they destroyed at least one Sea Fury fighter among other planes; seven people were killed. Later that morning another Sea Fury was destroyed in a hangar of the MOA bay mining company. Shortly afterwards San Antonio de los Baños air base and Antonio Maceo Airport were also attacked. By nightfall on April 15 the FAR was left with less than half of its original air power; there remained only two B-26Cs, two Sea Furies and two T-33A jets at San Antonio de los Baños, and only one Sea Fury at Antonio Maceo Airport.⁴

While these air attacks were being carried out, two other Cuban volunteer crews flew a special mission for the CIA: they were to fly to the USA, where they would land and claim that they were defectors from Castro's air force, and that it had been they who had bombed the airfields. They were given a statement to release to the media; afterwards they were to vanish, returning to Puerto Cabezas to resume their part in the air operations. The pilots were assigned aircraft numbers FAR933 and FAR915. Some panels were removed and had bullets fired through them before being replaced, to give the Invaders a combat-worn appearance. The two aircraft duly proceeded to the USA, where one landed at Miami International Airport and the other at Boca Chica Naval Air Station at Key West, Florida – each with one engine feathered. The pilots were whisked away by US Customs & Immigration officials

⁴ The basic inventory of Castro's air force is given in the panel on p.60. There are mentions of (some additional?) unserviceable aircraft being exposed as decoys at some point: 9x B-26C, 10x P-47D, 7x Sea Fury and 3x T-33A. The figure of 8x serviceable and 7x unserviceable Sea Furies is consistent with the known total purchase of 15 surplus Fleet Air Arm single-seaters.



A typical example of the small boats used by Brigade 2506 to ferry the troops to the beaches (note the skull-and-crossbones insignia.) They were not a success; the outboard motors proved temperamental, and many ran straight onto a coral reef which had not been reported by intelligence sources. (ADEQHA)

and their identities were not released to the press; the story provided for them by the CIA was later released. On the day of the air strikes, the story fulfilled its purpose and lent credibility to the US position that the attacks were nothing to do with the US government.

D-1, April 16: reactions

Adlai Stevenson, the US representative to the United Nations, was not party to the deception, and made an eloquent denial to the General Assembly of Cuban accusations of US involvement. Although the story of the aircraft landing in Florida and their crews defecting achieved the desired immediate result of casting doubt on US involvement, it was later to have a seriously adverse effect on the operation. The political pressure put on the administration as a result of the initial air strikes made President Kennedy extremely hesitant about launching further strikes until the Brigade was in control of the airfield at Girón, as a plausible



Upon hearing the news that the expected invasion was at Girón, a place where he often fished, Fidel Castro immediately took control of the situation and headed for the front. (ADEQHA)



Castro's forces clogging up a road leading to Girón. It was on these few and congested roads around the extensive Zapata swamps that the Brigade's aircraft caught several columns, causing heavy losses among the *Fidelistas* and delaying their advance. (ADEQHA)

source for such future attacks. This left the remnants of Castro's air force free to operate against the Brigade on the beaches: it removed the assumed element of air superiority upon which the whole plan was based, and probably turned the tide of the battle before it even began.

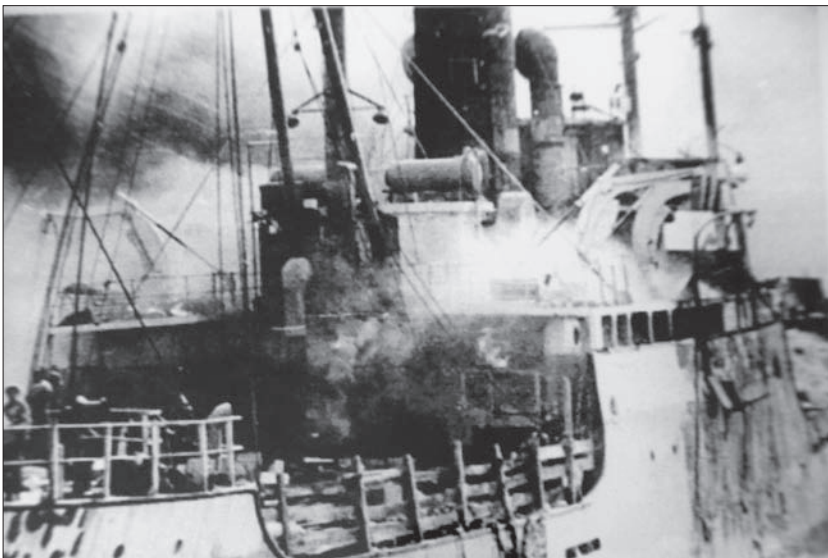
It was becoming obvious to Fidel Castro that his country was on the verge of being invaded. He had reports from his secret intelligence services, as well as American media reports, that the Brigade had left their training bases. Castro weighed the invaders' options: would they make a series of small, widely spaced landings, or a single major amphibious assault? Several small landings would prevent him inflicting a single crushing defeat on the invaders; different pockets of resistance along the coastline would split his forces and severely test his command-and-control network. A mass landing at one location was therefore his best hope of defeating the invaders.

Finally, at about noon on D-1, April 16, President Kennedy phoned Richard Bissell and gave him the go-ahead. His decision to continue with the invasion had been based on the following logic: it offered what appeared to be a last chance to overthrow Castro by the efforts of Cubans before the weapons and technicians acquired from the Communist bloc, and the repressive internal measures, made the task too hard without overt US intervention. It was recognized to be a marginal and risky operation; but Bde 2506, if not used quickly, would become a political liability, whereas using it in a landing might achieve important success before Castro became too strong. Even if they were unable to hold a beachhead the exiles would have accomplished something, since (as far as Kennedy was aware) the Brigade could turn guerrilla and provide a strong reinforcement to the resistance movement on the island.

Once the die was cast the extensive propaganda program conceived by the CIA was executed as planned. Radio Swan and 11 other CIA-controlled stations began an intense propaganda blitz, including in their broadcasts coded orders for operatives inside Cuba to execute pre-planned missions (most of which were never carried out). A planned leaflet drop by the Liberation Air Force was canceled, however – bombs were considered more important than leaflets. However, in a failure that finally destroyed what little chance of a popular rising ever existed, the CIA alerted neither the potent and widespread anti-Castro underground, nor the men from Bde 2506 who had infiltrated the island earlier. They were left ignorant of the location or date of the attack, and without instructions to carry out sabotage or to mobilize their ranks to contribute in any way to the operation. To this blunder must be added the fact that, on April 15, Fidel Castro launched the most massive pre-emptive roundup of actual or potential enemies in Cuban history: no fewer than half a million people were detained all over the island.

The political fallout from the alleged defection of the two B-26 crews began to weigh upon Kennedy's decisions, and what were probably the most important air strikes of the invasion were canceled on political grounds. (While on a tiny scale, the nature of this failure recalls Adm Nagumo's decision not to launch a third strike on Pearl Harbor to make sure of destroying the US carriers.) This message arrived at Puerto Cabezas just after the engines had been started up on the strike aircraft. When the senior American official read it he immediately sent a protest: the strike that had just been canceled had been designed to finally destroy Castro's air force on the ground, thus eliminating the need for defensive air cover for the Brigade's landings, and allowing the Brigade pilots to concentrate their efforts on air support for the ground operations. If Castro was able to operate any tactical aircraft at all, the Brigade would be at their mercy throughout the invasion.

The CIA immediately notified the Brigade leaders and warned them that enemy air attacks would, after all, be likely. They ordered the ships to expedite unloading and to withdraw from the beach before dawn on



The SS *Houston* was hit by Castro's aircraft and shore guns with most of the 5th Battalion still on board, and had to be beached, thus preventing the 5th Bn from playing a useful role in the first day's fighting at Red Beach. She burned for days, denying the Brigade much of its medical supplies. (BoPVA)



Only a small number of the FAR's Hawker Sea Fury FB Mk.11 fighter-bombers survived the initial air strikes, but they were enough. It was a Sea Fury that blew up the deck cargo of fuel drums on the supply ship SS *Río Escondido* on April 17, taking to the bottom much of the Brigade's ammunition and its vital communications equipment. This aircraft stands guard in front of the Girón Museum. (Author's photo)

April 17. The CIA set up a schedule to give the landing force continuous B-26 cover during daylight hours, and had the Joint Chiefs alert the US naval forces to the possibility of receiving the mission of providing air cover. The deputy director of the CIA personally called on the Secretary of State and requested that the US Navy provide cover and early-warning destroyers to protect the now-vulnerable ships of the Brigade. The request was put to President Kennedy; he forbade the air cover, in line with his original policy of no direct involvement by US military forces. He did, however, authorize the use of the early-warning destroyers for ship escort, with the proviso that they were restricted from approaching any closer to the Cuban coast than 30 nautical miles.

As the invasion force steamed on for Cuba the machine guns installed aboard the *Atlántico* for protection were being fired for training when a poorly welded deck plate broke loose, and the barrel of a gun dropped and fired through the deck. One man was killed and two wounded, one very seriously. The captain broke radio silence and asked for help; the destroyer USS *Eaton* responded and took the wounded men aboard for treatment. These were the first casualties of Brigade 2506.

April 17: the landings

Shortly after 8pm on the night of April 16, the freighters rendezvoused with the Landing Ship Dock USS *San Marcos*, which had carried the Brigade's landing craft. The LSD transferred three LCUs and four LCVPs exactly 30 nautical miles off the Cuban coast. These craft were already loaded with trucks, jeeps and some of the tanks. Just as the transfer was completed the single LCM carrying the other tanks arrived under its own power and was also transferred to the Brigade, which was now fully operational for the first time. The invasion flotilla arrived off the mouth of the Bay of Pigs and divided their formation, heading toward their assigned areas – the main landing on Blue Beach at Girón, and the supporting landing on Red Beach at Playa Larga, about 5 miles further up the inlet.

The first element to land would be the frogman advance team for 2d Bn at Red Beach. When the frogmen disembarked from the *Blagar*, into an 18ft catamaran with a towed rubber raft, they were surprised to find that one of their CIA advisors, Grayston Lynch, had decided to accompany them as far as the beach to see them safely ashore. The party planned to land near a rock jetty on the extreme right of Red Beach, to place marker lights on shore to guide the landing craft in. Intelligence sources indicated that the area should be quiet; the bulk of the local population were construction workers, who should be asleep at the time of the landing. As the exiles neared shore they were appalled to see that the Cubans had installed bright floodlights on construction sites for new resorts along the beaches, and that there were small groups of people scattered around on shore chatting. To the landing party, as Lynch later recounted, it seemed that the town of Girón was lit up like Coney Island. Lynch decided that the Red Beach landing site would have to be changed, and that to control the inevitable confusion he would have to go ashore himself.

Armed with a BAR and a radio, Lynch joined the Cubans in the rubber raft and proceeded toward the center of Red Beach. Then one of the beach marker lights they were carrying suddenly started blinking – although the switch was in the “off” position the light had short-circuited; one of the frogmen immediately covered it. Approximately 80 yards off shore the engine bottomed out on a sharp coral reef that ran almost the entire length of the beach. The frogmen got out into waist-deep water, and were wading in when they heard a jeep coming down the beach. The vehicle stopped opposite them, and swung its headlights around onto them. Lynch and the frogmen opened fire with their automatic weapons; there was no return fire from the riddled jeep, and its lights went out. The first shots in the Bay of Pigs invasion had been fired.

Immediately the lights on shore all went out, and a truck started down the beach toward the sounds of gunfire. The advance team radioed the *Blagar* and requested assistance, and an intense fire-fight broke out between the frogmen and the militiamen on the truck.



Castro's artillerymen firing on the Brigade's positions with 76.2mm Soviet field guns. (ADEQHA)

At Blue Beach, Pepe San Román decided to begin landing the Brigade anyway, and was in one of the lead landing craft. The Brigade soon had enough men ashore to establish a small beachhead, but trouble began when the first wave of the main force headed ashore from the *Caribe*. The small boats carrying them began striking the reefs at full speed; many of them sank on the spot, and most were at least delayed. The invasion schedule was slipping, and the advantage of surprise had been lost.

The beachhead at Girón was secured, the orderly unloading of vehicles and supplies from the landing craft commenced, and San Román set up his headquarters (his brigade HQ included two of the 2½-ton trucks and two rifle/SMG squads for security). It was assumed that Cuban militiamen had been able to transmit an alarm to headquarters in Havana before the Brigade had destroyed a radio microwave antenna in the area. Acting upon this assumption, San Román decided to cancel the follow-up landing at Green Beach and to consolidate the Brigade's troops, equipment and supplies at Blue Beach.

At Red Beach, the frogmen were able to place their marker lights despite being under fire from militiamen, and they radioed back to the *Barbara J* and the *Houston* to expedite the landing. As the *Houston* came within range FAR guns on shore opened up on her. The return fire from the ship caught the frogmen in a crossfire, killing one of them, but she was able to silence the shore guns. Erneido Oliva, the commander of the Red Beach force, saw the need for his leadership ashore earlier than expected, and landed with his staff in one of the first waves. However, the 2d Bn was very slow to come ashore. Failures of the unreliable outboard motors on the small aluminum-and-fiberglass launches caused major problems, and many were swamped by heavy seas on their way to the beach. Although the 2d Bn numbered only 185 men, they were still not all ashore at Playa Larga by 5.30am. Oliva ordered what men he did have to seize and destroy the radio station in Playa Larga; when it was captured it was discovered that the alarm had also been broadcast from there.



One of the Brigade's five M41 tanks, photographed on the beach at Girón after the battle. During the night fighting of April 17/18 their 76mm guns were valuable during Oliva's defense of road junctions in the western sector. (ADEQHA)



MNR militiamen following a T-34 tank head toward the Brigade's positions. Armor led the thrusts of April 17/18 on both the Playa Larga and San Blas fronts; in the latter sector it was held off by the heavy mortars of 4th (Heavy Weapons) Battalion. (ADEQHA)

First reactions from the air

Fidel Castro received the news of the landings at Playa Larga and Girón at 3.15am on April 17. The *Comandante* alerted the forces in the area, which consisted of several platoons of militia stationed at the Central Australia Sugar Mill, a battalion with three mortar batteries from Matanzas and three battalions from Las Villas, which were ordered to Yaguaramas and Covadonga. It was dawn before the first troops arrived at the front. The Revolutionary Air Force was ordered to attack the ships at Playa Larga and Girón at dawn; Castro's plan was to crush the landing at Playa Larga first, since it was the furthest inland. His forces would attack the beachhead at Girón from there, moving down the western flank of the swamps, since these were crossed by few roads. The landing of the exile provisional government must be prevented at all costs. Castro departed Havana for the Bay of Pigs after outlining his plan and issuing initial orders.

By 5.30am beachheads were being established at both Red and Blue Beaches, and San Román and Oliva established their headquarters and command posts. Upon hearing that Castro still had operational aircraft the Brigade leaders had advised that the ships pull back to sea before the attacks began, expecting them to return the following night, but there was no time to coordinate such a change to the plan. At 6am the frogmen reported that they had charted a path through the reefs for the landing craft. Twenty-five minutes later, as landing craft from the *Blagar* were moving the tanks and the Heavy Weapons Bn ashore, a FAR B-26C attacked, and was soon joined by a T-33A and several Sea Furies.

The remainder of 4th (Hvy Wpns) Bn, as well as 3d (Armd) and 6th Inf Bns, was forced to land while under heavy fire from the air. At 6.30am the *Houston* was crippled by air attack and her captain beached the vessel on the west shore of the Bay of Pigs, approximately 5 miles below Red Beach. The 5th Bn was aboard her when she was hit, along with ammunition, fuel and a field hospital. Most of the men of the 5th were able to get ashore eventually, but many were unarmed, and due to a lack of leadership they were never a viable unit from that point.

The first air attack ended at 7am; the Brigade claimed to have shot down two B-26Cs, but they had suffered great losses themselves. With many of the medical supplies lost when the *Houston* was sunk, the doctors on the beaches were soon overwhelmed with casualties. The



The burnt-out hulk of a FAR T-34 destroyed by elements of Brigade 2506. As well as the M41 gunners, the infantry fought off tanks with mortars and bazookas. (ADEQHA)

radio equipment that had been brought ashore was soaked with salt water and inoperable, so San Román and Oliva in the two beachheads were unable to communicate with each other. The landings and air attacks caused confusion; units got dispersed, command disintegrated, and adequate communications ceased.

Nevertheless, all the tanks and other vehicles had been unloaded at Blue Beach by 7.30am, and by 8.30am all personnel were ashore. The militia in the immediate area were unable to gain ground, and elements of 3d (Armd) Bn soon achieved their mission of securing the airstrip. In theory, the Brigade aircraft now had a field from which to operate.

The airdrop

At 7.30am, five C-46s and one C-54 passed overhead with the paratroopers of 1st Bn en route to their drop zones. The heavy equipment was dropped first over a DZ north of Playa Larga, followed by paratroopers; but the equipment and some 'troopers landed in the swamps, making them ineffective for a considerable time. Others landed under fire and some fell behind enemy lines, several being killed while still under their 'chutes. The other elements of the lift, further to the east, landed safely without opposition, and proceeded to take up positions along the roads to Covadonga and Yaguaramas. These positions were each manned by about 20 men, with one 57mm RCL rifle, one .30cal MG, one bazooka, and a BAR squad. The paratroopers came under attack shortly after getting into position, and performed well. The airborne drops had secured two of the three main roads; but the road north of Playa Larga leading from "Central Australia" remained open, permitting Castro's forces to concentrate, and posing a major threat to the Brigade.

A 1998 Cuban article recounted one peasant's experience during the first hours of the battle: "Victor Cepero, a leathery 68-year-old *guajiro* who worked fields in the area, remembered the battle well. He was working as a night watchman when the big guns opened up. 'I thought it was a thunderstorm. Then I saw the parachutists landing,' he said, speaking in a hamlet called Pamplona. He ran home to make sure his family was safe. 'We took down our picture of Fidel, just in case.' The paratroopers asked him to join them in fighting Castro's forces, but he declined." San Blas was the only area where the populace showed any real support for the Brigade; a number of local citizens offered assistance to the paratroopers, volunteered to carry supplies and water and worked as nurses. Five civilians volunteered to fight; they were given uniforms and weapons and integrated into the unit.

Consequences of the loss of the *Rio Escondido*

The second wave of air attacks now hit the flotilla, and off Blue Beach a direct hit by a Sea Fury on the *Rio Escondido*, loaded with 200 barrels of aviation fuel stored above decks, forced the captain to give the order to abandon ship and call the *Blagar* for assistance. The crew were taken off successfully with only one man sustaining any injuries. After she was abandoned the ship was destroyed by three tremendous explosions, the sounds of which were heard right across the bay. The loss of the *Rio Escondido* dealt a staggering blow to the Brigade; she was carrying not only fuel, but the first ten days' supplies of ammunition, food and medical supplies for the entire force. Also aboard was the radio truck that was the heart of the Brigade's communications system and provided the only link with the Liberation Air Force. A third vessel, the *Barbara J*, had suffered engine damage from a strafing attack and was taking on water.

The lack of communications prevented the leaders of the Brigade from forming an accurate picture of the situation. San Román could not contact any of the units outside of Blue Beach; he never had any radio communications with the paratroopers, nor even with the ships. It was 10am before he made radio contact with Oliva at Red Beach. The latter reported that 2d Bn were all ashore and involved in heavy fighting, but that 5th Bn was nowhere to be seen; that he had no communications with 1st Bn, who had dropped to the north of him, but felt that something had gone wrong, since Castro's forces were coming down the road that the paratroopers were supposed to be blocking. Oliva asked San Román to send a tank and a squad of infantry to reinforce him, and San Román agreed.

By noon on D-Day, San Roman was beginning to get a grasp of the situation. His men were pinned down in the beachheads and their supply lines were temporarily cut when the ships put back to sea. Communications were limited, with most messages being sent by runners. The Brigade leaders had assumed that Castro's main thrust would be from the east through San Blas to Girón, and they had deployed their forces to defend against this expected attack. However, it was becoming obvious that Castro was sending his

A member of the Brigade killed in action; note his dog tags attached to his pants belt loop. (BoPVA)





A militiaman guarding a downed B-26B of the Brigade, "935"; he is armed with a Czech-made Vz52/57 rifle. (BoPVA)

main force from the north, down the road and railroad bed from Central Australia to Playa Larga. Red Beach, with only one battalion ashore, could not withstand a sustained attack.

At 2.30pm, Maximó Cruz's scouts reported that a column of militiamen and troop-laden trucks were advancing down the road toward Oliva's position. This was now reinforced with two M41 tanks and elements of the 4th Bn sent over from Girón by San Román. Without knowing how close they were to 2d Bn's position, the militiamen of the 339th Bn from Matanzas halted and began setting up their mortars under the gunsights of the *brigadistas*. Oliva's force opened fire on the unsuspecting militiamen with every weapon they had, including recoilless rifles and the tanks' 76mm guns, and reduced the column of trucks to flaming hulks. Then two of the Brigade's B-26Bs appeared and joined the attack; after expending their .50cal ammo they released their bombs and rockets upon the remaining vehicles. Only a handful of the 968 men of the 339th Bn were left to creep away into the nearby swamps; in Cuba this episode has been remembered as "the Slaughter of the Lost

Battalion." From the prisoners they took the *brigadistas* learned that Castro was massing his forces at Central Australia, and there was a possibility of a major attack that night; Oliva had his men prepare defensive positions astride the main road and railroad bed.

* * *

The air war over the Bay of Pigs was not going well. One of the C-46s had been shot down by a Sea Fury as it turned back out to sea after dropping its stick of paratroopers. Another C-46 on a resupply mission was coming in to land at the Brigade-held Girón airfield, but it turned back within sight of the beachhead when warned over the radio by a B-26 pilot that two T-33As were in the area. Without air superiority the Brigade's captured airfield could not be used. Of the two B-26Bs that assisted in the annihilation of 339th Bn, one was shot down by a T-33A after making his bomb run, and the second reported that he was receiving fire from two Castro aircraft. This incident would lead to one of the few examples of direct, if very limited involvement by the American military during the battle, although this had been forbidden by the White House.

As mentioned, a task force of the USS *Essex* and several destroyers had escorted the invasion flotilla to within 30 nautical miles of shore. While the Brigade's planes were being shot down by Castro's surviving aircraft, USN A-4 Skyhawks of VA-34 on the USS *Essex* were forbidden to intercede on behalf of the exile crews. The Skyhawk pilots were limited to flying reconnaissance over the beach areas, and were permitted to fire only in self-defense; their US markings were quickly painted over in a futile attempt to disguise American involvement. Commander William Forgy

(executive officer of VA-34) and his wingman came upon a Sea Fury attempting to shoot down a B-26B flown by Cuban exile pilot Jose A. Crespo and his navigator Lorenzo Perez-Lorenzo. The B-26B was in flames when Forgy arrived, and he immediately radioed for permission to intercede in the fight. Denied approval, Forgy decided to scare off the Cuban fighter; the jet easily overtook the piston-engined Sea Fury and took formation on its wingtip. The FAR pilot, believed to have been named Douglas Rudd, broke off his attack on the bomber and returned home – but the crippled B-26B never made it back to its Nicaraguan base.

* * *

The four remaining ships of the flotilla had been ordered to sail outside the 12-mile limit of Cuban national waters. The *Atlantico* and *Caribe* pulled out first, then the more heavily armed *Blagar* escorting the crippled *Barbara J*. Although under air attack none suffered significant damage, and the *Blagar* even managed to down another of Castro's B-26Cs – it crashed so close to the ship that wreckage ended up on the decks. The crews on the ships knew that the Brigade was using so much ammunition that it would need resupply after this first day's fighting. The plan was to rendezvous about 50 miles out to sea, and then to return to the 12-mile limit during the night, to unload their cargo onto the remaining landing craft for transport ashore. However, when the *Barbara J* and *Blagar* reached the rendezvous point they were unable to contact the other two vessels; the *Atlantico* and *Caribe* had actually left the area and headed south. US Navy destroyers intercepted the *Atlantico* 110 nautical miles south of the beachhead and convinced her captain to return, but she would not arrive in the area again until 6.30pm on D+1, April 18. The *Caribe* was not overtaken by a destroyer until she was 218 miles south, and was not available to resupply the Brigade before the beachhead collapsed.

* * *

As D-Day drew to an end, the Brigade held beachheads around both Red and Blue Beaches, as well as the airfield at Girón. The force at Red



A militiaman armed with a folding-stock Vz25 SMG is seen here examining what appears to be an unexploded 200lb fragmentation bomb spilled from the bay of a shot-down Liberation Air Force B-26B. (ADEQHA)

Beach was bearing the brunt of the action, with high casualties and decreasing ammunition and supplies. The FAR/MNR were threatening to push down the road into Playa Larga, under the umbrella of Castro's air force. Brigade air support had been weak, and four aircraft had been lost; two ships had been sunk, and two more had completely departed the area.

Washington knew that ammunition was running low, and ordered airdrops from the Nicaraguan base for the night of April 17. Missions were flown by four C-54s and two C-46s; of these, five of the drops were successful but the cargo of the sixth was blown out to sea. In addition, the *Barbara J* and the *Blagar* were ordered to resume resupply after nightfall. Some supplies were delivered ashore, but the limited remaining landing craft were not able to sustain the needs of the Brigade.

The CIA's failure to notify the network of infiltrators and the Cuban underground of the invasion, even after it had begun, wasted a potentially useful asset. One infiltrator later reported that around noon of D-Day he finally received a message that the invasion had begun and he should blow the bridges between Central Australia and Playa Larga. He could not do this in daylight because of the massive Cuban mobilization – and it would have made little difference anyway, since the militia had crossed the bridges six hours earlier. The failure to use the covert forces available to the CIA cost them the opportunity to divert Castro's forces, and allowed them to focus solely on the beachheads.

In the meantime, the Joint Chiefs had taken all steps to be ready if called upon to intervene in the battle, and were prepared to offer any support ordered by the president. They had moved several aviation units inside striking distance, to bases in the South, and the Navy was prepared to assist with air cover, escort or naval gunfire as soon as the word was given; but the word never came. At the old Opa Locka Naval Air Station just outside Miami, the Cuban exile officials of the provisional government were still waiting – under strict guard in the barracks – to be transported to the beachhead. They had been furnished with a radio by their guards, and heard the optimistic claims of Radio Swan that the invasion force was winning the battle. The CIA public relations office in New York released what they called the Cuban Revolutionary Council's Bulletin Number 3; the announcement read:

The Cuban Revolutionary Council wishes to announce that the principal battle of the Cuban Revolt against Castro will be fought in the next few hours. Action today was largely of a supply and support effort to forces which have been mobilized and trained inside Cuba over the past several months. The tremendous army of invincible soldier-patriots has now received its instructions to strike the vital blow for the liberation of their beloved country. Our partisans in every town and village in Cuba will receive, in a manner known only to them, the message that will spark a tremendous wave of internal conflict against the tyrant.



2a

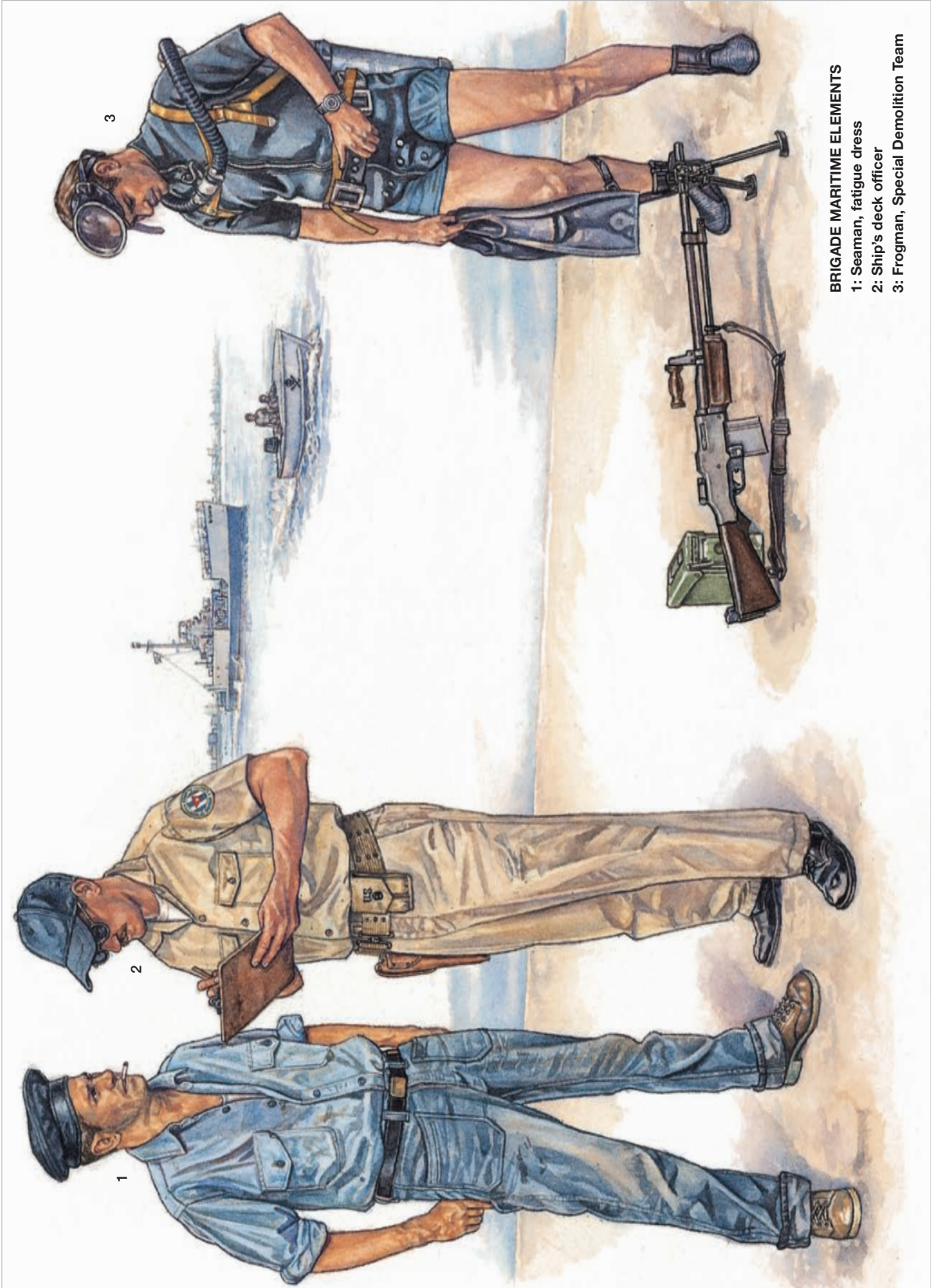
BRIGADE TRAINING IN GUATEMALA

- 1: CIA instructor
- 2: Garrison dress, with Brigade flag
- 3: Fatigues, with 2d Inf Bn guidon





BRIGADE AIR ELEMENTS
 1: B-26 pilot, flight suit
 2: Paratrooper, 1st Bn (2a, guidon)
 3: Major, Alabama Air National Guard
 4: Ground crewman



3

2

1

BRIGADE MARITIME ELEMENTS

1: Seaman, fatigue dress

2: Ship's deck officer

3: Frogman, Special Demolition Team

THE BEACH LANDINGS

1: Brigadista, 2d Inf Bn

2: Dr Manuel Artime

3: Tank crewman, 3d (Armd) Bn





4



3



2



1



CUBAN REVOLUTIONARY ARMED FORCES
1: Infantry private
2: Comandante Fidel Castro
3: Sgt 3d Class, tank squadron
4: Capt, Revolutionary Military Police

CASTRO'S AUXILIARY FORCES

1: Militiaman, Bn 123, MNR

2: Officer, PNR Police Bn

3: Official, Cuban Red Cross



RELEASE AND AFTERMATH

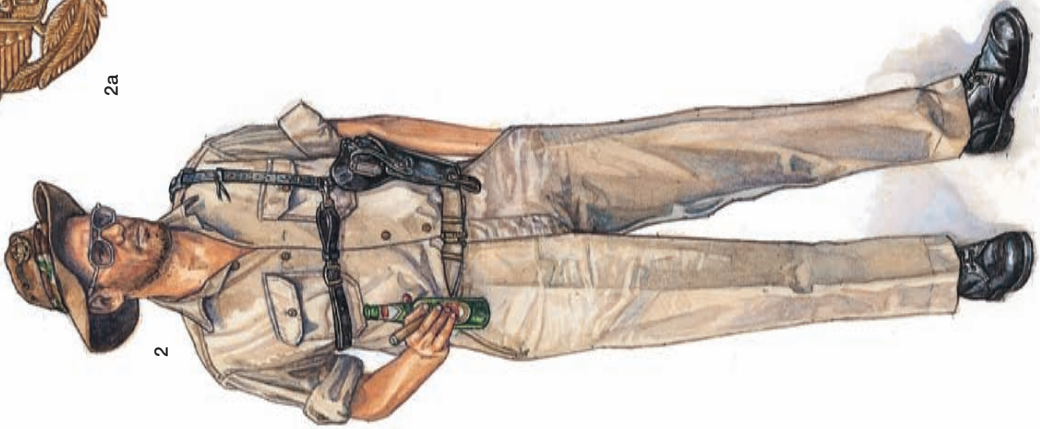
1: Returned POW; Miami Orange Bowl, Dec 28, 1962

2: Pilot; Albertville, Congo, 1965

3: Member, BoPVA; Miami, April 17, 2006



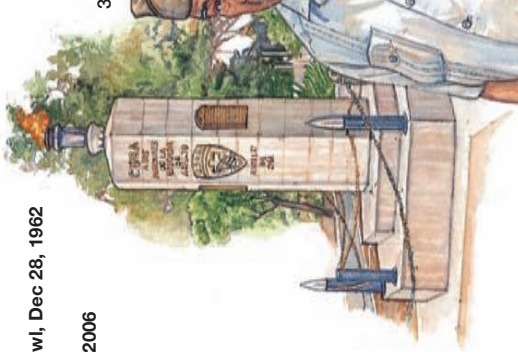
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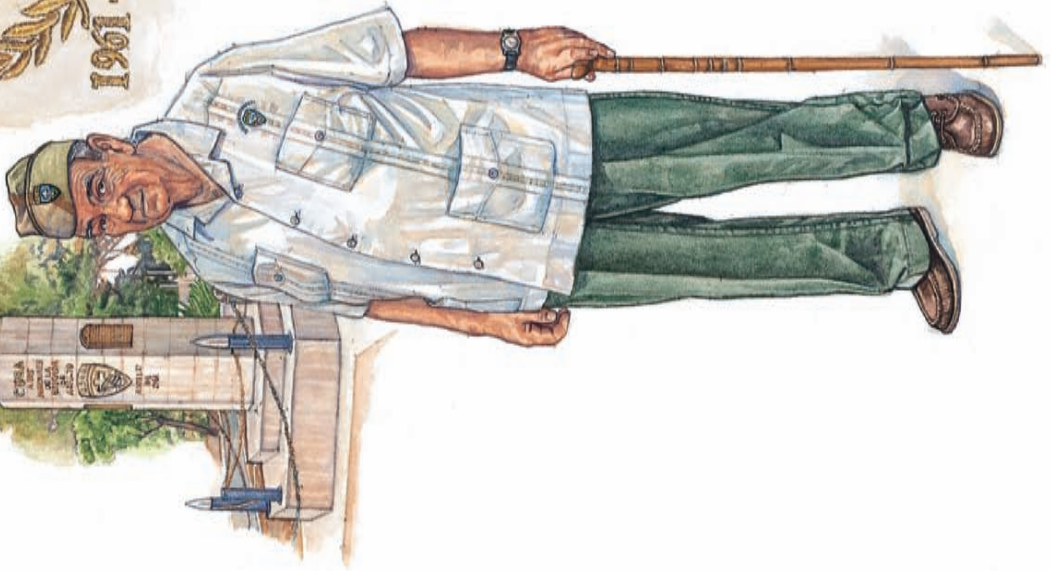
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INSIGNIA

See commentary for details

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April 17/18: night battles

Back in the real world, Pepe San Román ordered his men to prepare for the night defense of Blue Beach. Throughout D-Day there had been periods of heavy fighting along both roads leading into the area as the FAR/ MNR probed Brigade positions, and the advanced post on the road to Covadonga came under heavy artillery fire soon after nightfall.

San Román sent the other three tanks and six 4th Bn mortars toward Red Beach to reinforce Oliva; nothing was kept in reserve as Oliva prepared for what would become fierce fighting, and the M41s took up positions at two sets of crossroads with excellent fields of fire. The first attack of the night soon occurred, but it did not come from the expected direction: the Brigade's advanced guard from San Blas made contact with an armored column. The Castro force overpowered the small unit, and its survivors evacuated by trucks in the face of the advancing column. When they had fallen back to a safe distance the *brigadistas* were joined by a mortar unit. They observed the *Fidelistas* coming down the road, and held their fire until the enemy was well in range; the mortars halted any further advance toward San Blas for the rest of the night. After this attempt was checked a 1st Bn paratroop company made contact along the road from Yaguaramas. The parachutists intercepted enemy radio transmissions which revealed that they were opposed by four infantry battalions and two companies of armor. They opened fire with devastating effect on the lead unit as it approached their positions.

Throughout the evening San Román expected the ships to return, and had a large working party standing by to unload the much-needed supplies, but no ships or landing craft arrived. A 25ft launch with a radio operator was ordered out to sea to try to contact and locate the vessels, but the Cuban crews aboard the *Blagar* and *Barbara J* refused to return anywhere near the beaches.

At 8pm Castro's 76.2mm and 122mm batteries brought down fire upon the *brigadistas* holding Playa Larga. When Oliva learned from interception of FAR's radio frequency that the enemy was being reinforced with 40 tanks, he immediately deployed his bazookas to the front lines closest to the road. At 11.55pm the artillery bombardment stopped after delivering more than 2,000 rounds – with little effect, due to the long, narrow front and entrenched positions of the Brigade. A column of T-34/85 tanks then rolled through the crossroads; the M41s fired from fixed positions, knocking out the first two. When a third T-34 came around the two disabled tanks an M41 rammed into it, backed away, and then fired point-blank, damaging its track and forcing it to withdraw. By 12.20am the narrow road was blocked with the burning tanks, trapping those behind them.

Infantry assaults followed. At 1am Oliva called in mortar fire on Castro's infantry, with deadly results; but, out of ammunition, the Brigade tanks were forced to pull back by 4.45am. Castro's tanks kept coming, working their way past the wreckage; as one was knocked out by a Brigade bazookaman another took its place, and the ammunition continued to dwindle. At about 5.45am a T-34 rolled into the crossroads – but the driver got out, surrendered, and said that he wanted to join the Brigade. He explained to Oliva that during the night Oliva's 370 men had faced and defeated more than 2,100 men (300 FAR regulars, 1,600 militia, and 200 policemen) and more than 20 tanks. He claimed that Castro's force

Militiamen examining a destroyed ammunition truck after the Brigade's B-26Bs successfully strafed and bombed a FAR convoy advancing on Girón from Playa Larga on the afternoon of April 18. (ADEQHA)



had suffered over 500 killed and 1,000 wounded; Oliva no doubt made due allowance for exaggeration – a tank driver was hardly a reliable source for such overall figures – but since he knew his own casualties were 20 dead and 50 wounded, the obviously shaky morale of his adversaries was heartening. However, Oliva's men had no ammunition with which to hold their position any longer; by 9am on April 18 they had mounted the remaining trucks and headed south toward Girón – where they imagined that they could be resupplied.

San Román's position had come under heavy artillery fire around 4am. He split his reserve and placed the troops in blocking positions along the two roads coming in from the east and northeast, as well as establishing a blocking position along the road from Playa Larga to the northwest. He figured that Oliva would be falling back on Blue Beach to consolidate the Brigade. During the night six Brigade B-26Bs had taken off from Puerto Cabezas at around 2.30am, arriving over Cuba at dawn in another attempt to destroy Castro's aircraft on the ground; however, the mission was aborted due to heavy haze and low cloud cover.

D+1, April 18: strangulation

The men from Red Beach arrived at Girón, where Oliva and San Román met and studied the situation. They had troops in contact along the road to the northeast, and expected at any time to come under attack by forces following Oliva down from Playa Larga to the northwest. All units were low on ammunition, and mortar rounds had been rationed since midnight. They felt that if the Brigade could hold out until nightfall resupply would certainly arrive, either from the ships or by airdrop. The only fighting still continuing that morning was in the area of San Blas, where a *Fidelista* column was still stalled by the paratroopers. Oliva suggested that they break out to the east through Cienfuegos and try to reach the Escambray Mountains, where they could conduct guerrilla operations. San Román opposed this idea, considering that the mountains were too far away –

especially since there were too few trucks to transport the men. He made the decision to hold the beachhead.

Radio contact was finally established with the *Blagar* at 10.30am; San Román requested resupply of food, ammunition, medical supplies and communications equipment, and he was promised that it would be delivered that night by LCU and airdrop. The *Blagar* told him that if things really got bad they would evacuate the Brigade from the beaches. San Román replied: "I will not be evacuated. We will fight until the end here if we have to." This sealed his decision to remain at Girón.

Castro's forces began another push at San Blas at 11am. The 3d Bn was pulled off the blocking positions on the road to Cienfuegos to the east and relocated to San Blas; up to this time they had not seen combat and were still fresh. San Román took the 6th Bn from Blue Beach and placed them in the blocking positions on the road from Playa Larga. Castro's forces did not pursue the paratroopers when they were called back to San Blas. The Brigade was under continuous air attack, with Castro's planes making strafing runs throughout the beachhead. Brigade aircraft also flew missions that day, but some were flown by American CIA pilots; the Cuban pilots had made the aborted early-morning mission, and many were too exhausted to fly the six-hour round trip again. The American advisors were authorized to fill in for them by CIA officials without the knowledge of President Kennedy (who was not to find out for two years that four American flyers had been shot down and killed in the Bay of Pigs operation). Six B-26B sorties were flown in mid-afternoon of the 18th, attacking a long column of vehicles and tanks approaching Girón from Playa Larga; the air strike stopped the column dead, inflicting 1,800 casualties and knocking out seven tanks – as well as bombs and rockets, the Invaders delivered napalm for the first time during the operation. The Brigade knew nothing about this attack, and thought that they had received no air support at all. The only friendly aircraft the *brigadistas* saw on April 18 were two US Navy A-4 Skyhawks from the *Essex* that flew over the beachhead on a reconnaissance mission; the beleaguered troops were disheartened when they did not deliver any support.

The Brigade made it through the afternoon of April 18 without any further major action. The ammunition situation was critical; luckily the *Fidelistas*, although superior in numbers, had been bloodied badly each time they had mounted a major thrust. They continued to apply pressure on the shrinking perimeter of the beachhead, but were not anxious to mount an all-out attack on any front; this lack of aggressiveness reflected the respect they had gained for the Brigade during the initial battles.

Castro's artillery started pounding the advanced posts some time after 6pm, and a short time later the FAR/MNR made contact with Brigade blocking positions on both the

The bodies of Alabama Air National Guard officers Captain Thomas Willard Ray and Leo Francis Baker, shot down and killed while flying a Brigade B-26B on the last bombing mission on the morning of April 19. In 1979, Cuba returned Capt Ray's body to his family; Baker's remains were not returned. In the 1990s the CIA finally admitted Ray's links to the Agency and awarded him its highest decoration, the Intelligence Star. (ADEQHA)



Photographed on April 19, Cuban troops carry mortar equipment along a beach; the SS *Houston* is seen still ablaze in the distance, which may place these men on the western shore of the Bay of Pigs, moving southwards. (BoPVA)



east and west fronts. An attempted push at San Blas was halted before it gained momentum by sending two tanks to reinforce the positions. A Brigade C-54 made an airdrop of supplies over Girón airfield, but the wind blew all the parachutes into the swamp; another C-54 made a drop over the beaches, and the *brigadistas* had to watch as its load was blown away into the sea; nevertheless, about half of the supplies from both aircraft were recovered. At one point during the night of April 18/19 San Román thought the FAR were massing for an attack on his western front; he committed 2d Bn to that sector, but the attack never materialized. The only actions during that night were light skirmishes as the *Fidelistas* probed the Brigade's line.

D+2, April 19: destruction

Meanwhile, on board the *Barbara J* and the *Blagar*, the exile seamen knew that the situation was critical; about 50 miles south of the beaches the crews worked against time, trying to manually load supplies into the three LCUs. They did not think that they could get to the beaches and out again before daylight, and they therefore sent the following message: "BARBARA J, BLAGAR, and LCUs cannot arrive Blue Beach, discharge and leave by daylight. Request jet cover from US in beachhead area." This was followed by the transmission: "BLAGAR proceeding Blue Beach with 3 LCUs. If low jet cover not furnished at first light, believe we will lose all ships. Request immediate reply." President Kennedy was dismayed by the news coming from Girón, but was still not ready to commit American forces to save the Brigade; he did agree to provide limited escort for the Brigade aircraft for one hour on the morning of April 19, from 6.30am to 7.30am.

The Brigade had only seven of its original 16 B-26Bs left. American pilots again substituted for Cubans who were either too exhausted or who refused to fly. Four Invaders, two manned by Americans and two by Cubans, launched from Puerto Cabezas at around 2am on D+2. One of the Cuban-crewed aircraft developed engine trouble and turned back

shortly after take-off. The other three B-26Bs proceeded toward Girón; they arrived an hour before the US Navy jets were to be launched, but were unaware of this, and proceeded to their targets. One was shot down in the area of Central Australia, while another was hit by ground fire and crashed blazing into the sea; both were flown by the American crews. The Cuban-crewed B-26B hit targets in the San Blas area, but was damaged by ground fire; it limped back to Puerto Cabezas with 39 holes through the fuselage and one engine shot out. This was the last bombing mission flown by the Liberation Air Force.

At about the same time as this bomber mission a C-46 landed at Girón airstrip, delivering bazooka rockets, ammunition, maps and communication equipment. Three aircraft had taken off, but two had turned back. The C-46 picked up a wounded pilot who had crashed in the area days before, and left after being on the ground for about ten minutes. This would be the only aircraft to operate from the strip at Girón throughout the entire operation.

After the captain of the *Blagar* transferred her cargo to the LCUs he radioed a request for a destroyer escort to take him in to the beach, claiming that without it his crew would mutiny. The CIA ordered the *Blagar* to abort, and rendezvous at a point 60 miles south of Blue Beach. This ended the last opportunity to resupply the Brigade.

* * *

As the lone Cuban-crewed B-26B pulled away from its last bombing run at San Blas, the Brigade ground commander there sensed that this attack had caused confusion among the *Fidelistas*, and quickly organized the paratroopers and 3d Bn men there for a counterattack, moving forward against greatly superior numbers to exploit this momentary opportunity. His boldness paid off; the enemy's front folded, broke and ran. However, the attack faltered after a few minutes; out of ammunition, 3d Bn fell apart and began a disorganized retreat. Castro's troops entered San Blas at 10am and pushed through toward Girón. There was nothing to stop them until they reached the blocking positions just outside the town at about 11am. The *brigadistas* were reinforced there by two tanks, and held out until they too ran out of ammunition at about 2pm; they then fell back into the town of Girón.

Meanwhile, on the western front of the beachhead, a tank action developed at around 10am. Oliva held the line there and directed mortar fire onto the oncoming T-34s, forcing the Castro troops to retreat and regroup. At 2pm the *Fidelistas* renewed their attack; just as the Brigade lines were starting to fail Oliva ordered a counter-attack, thereby successfully holding the line. He eventually pulled his force back into Girón to establish new fighting positions.

Brigade commander José "Pepe" Pérez San Román photographed in captivity after the battle. (BoPVA)



San Román heard the T-34s rumbling into Girón, and realized the Brigade could not hold. He sent a final message to the *Blagar* reading: “Am destroying all my equipment and communications. Tanks are in sight. I have nothing left to fight with. Am taking to the woods. I cannot wait for you.” As Oliva pulled his men back to Girón he went to look for San Román, but the commander had already wrecked his headquarters and gone. Oliva found abandoned tanks, equipment and machine guns on the beach; men were wandering around aimlessly, with nowhere to go, or trying to get out to sea in small boats and rafts. Oliva formed a small unit of the men he could find and marched them to the east in the direction of Cienfuegos. A short distance out of Girón the column was strafed by two Sea Furies and a T-33A; it broke up, and men fled individually into the swamps. This ended the last organized fighting of the Bay of Pigs campaign. When the destroyer USS *Eaton* came in close enough to the beaches to evaluate the situation, Assault Brigade 2506 was gone and the beachhead had fallen.

The Cuban government initially reported its army losses to be 87 dead and many more wounded during the three days of fighting the invaders. The number of those killed in action during the battle was later revised up to 140, and finally to 161. However, these figures are for Cuban Army losses only, and do not include militiamen or armed civilian loyalists. The most widely accepted estimates put the total number of militiamen killed, wounded and missing while fighting for the Republic at around 2,000 (some believe as many as 5,000). The known casualties for the Brigade were 104 members killed, and several hundred more wounded.

AFTERMATH

For weeks following the battle the remnants of the Brigade were hunted down and captured, or managed to escape from Cuba by one way or another. The captured *brigadistas* were detained at first at the Sports



Fidel Castro among militiamen following the battle. Note the variety of equipment (one man even has a Boy Scout canteen). The militiaman behind Castro has a piece of camouflage material tucked into his belt; strips of the camouflaged parachute canopies were popular souvenirs, and many MNR men wore them as scarves. (ADEQHA)



Brigade members being rounded up as prisoners of war after the battle. Note the rare breast patch of the 1st Battalion being worn by the parachutist in the center, and the Bde 2506 shoulder patch displayed by the *brigadista* next to him. The soldier guarding them is armed with a Belgian FN-FAL rifle. (BoPVA)

Palace, and later in the Spanish colonial-era fortifications and prisons of Havana. After weeks without bathing or receiving fresh clothes the prisoners were greeted by a militia girl wearing a dark skirt and small fur-lined Russian boots, who passed among them handing out T-shirts, saying their color: “yellow, yellow, yellow.” The guards took up the chant; Fidel Castro kept saying that the *brigadistas* were “yellow worms,” and the shirts were a symbol of their alleged cowardice (Johnson, p.217).

During a series of show trials the *brigadistas* were paraded in front of the press, being questioned about their role in the Brigade and why they served as pawns of the CIA. Approximately five were put on trial for war crimes committed during the Batista period. During these long months the Castro government and the United States began negotiations for the release of the POWs, whom the Cubans had termed as mercenaries. In May 1961 Castro proposed an exchange of the surviving members of Bde 2506 for 500 large tractors. The ransom price later rose to US\$28 million, and negotiations were unproductive until after the Cuban Missile Crisis. On December 21, 1962, Castro and James B. Donovan, a US lawyer, finally signed an agreement to exchange the 1,113 prisoners for US\$53 million in food, medicine and agricultural equipment; the money was raised by private donations. On December 22, after 20 months in captivity, the majority of the POWs were allowed to leave Cuba.

Given the Kennedy administration’s promises to continue the fight against Fidel Castro’s Communist government, Dr Manuel Artime proposed that the *brigadistas* publicly present President Kennedy with their Brigade flag, as a symbol of their commitment to cooperate and their eagerness to fight again for Cuba’s liberation. The Brigade’s leaders decided that Erneido A. Oliva would make the presentation at the conclusion of brief remarks by Pepe San Román.



Manuel Artime evaded capture by Castro's forces for 13 days after the battle. (ADEQHA)

When Artime, San Román and Oliva informed the Attorney General of their decision, White House officials immediately began preparing for what culminated in an extraordinary ceremony on December 28, 1962, in the Orange Bowl in Miami. In front of thousands of Cuban exiles the Brigade made its final formation, and Oliva presented the Brigade flag to President Kennedy, with the words: "Mr President, the men of Brigade 2506 give you their banner; we temporarily deposit it with you for safekeeping." The President then unfolded the flag, paused for a few seconds, and in a voice filled with emotion declared: "Commander, I can assure you that this flag will be returned to this Brigade in a free Havana."

Fading hopes

Although Bde 2506 officially ceased to exist after December 1962, Manuel Artime – who had become known as the CIA's "golden boy" – was soon scouting around Latin America for sites on which to establish guerrilla training camps. By October 1963 he had established four bases for his "Second Naval Guerrilla Operation"; two in Costa Rica and two in Nicaragua. Artime's 300-man force consisted mainly of veterans of the Brigade; he would later admit that his resources included two large ships, eight small vessels, two speedboats, three planes, more than 200 tons of weapons and munitions, and about \$250,000-worth of electronic equipment. During his activities in 1963–64 Artime was able to conduct four operations, three of which failed: the mistaken shelling of a Spanish cargo ship; an infiltration mission in which all the participants were captured; an unsuccessful assassination attempt on Castro; and finally, a six-man infiltration mission that did succeed.

Throughout his year of activity Artime received US government support. Following the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, Artime said publicly that both the president and his brother were responsible for his establishing the Latin American bases. He said that after his return from Cuban captivity he met President Kennedy in West Palm Beach, Florida, and that Kennedy referred him to his brother. Artime said that he met Robert Kennedy in Washington and that the then-Attorney General promised him military aid if he, Artime, could get the bases. Artime claimed that his anti-Castro operations from the bases ceased "when Bobby Kennedy separated from the Johnson administration." Nevertheless, in December 1964 the Costa Rican police ordered that the camps be closed down when they uncovered a \$50,000 contraband whiskey operation involving a plane from Artime's group. The camps in Nicaragua were also closed, although Artime kept close personal ties to that country by becoming a beef broker for Nicaraguan President Gen Anastasio Somoza, the country's largest beef producer.



Fallout

The victory of Fidel Castro's forces at the Bay of Pigs propelled the dictator to declare Cuba a socialist country at the May Day rally a couple of weeks after the battle. This became known as the Second Declaration of Havana, and no longer left any question about the political affiliation of the Cuban government. With this open declaration the level of support from the Communist bloc increased, as did the direct participation of Soviet military forces in the island. This led to Soviet missiles and other new weapons being deployed to Cuba as early as July 1962. By October 1962, American U-2 aircraft and foreign intelligence warned the Kennedy administration of the situation that became known as the Cuban Missile Crisis.

With the defeat of Bde 2506 at Playa Girón, the anti-Communist guerrillas inside the country faced overwhelming odds. Between 1960 and 1965 there were close to 200 urban and rural guerilla groups fighting a losing battle to overthrow Fidel Castro's regime. At the time of Batista's fall at the end of December 1958 the Revolutionary Armed Forces had numbered 29,270 regulars and a reserve force of 18,542 men; by 1964 the conscripted FAR and militia had grown to over 300,000 men and women, and were receiving large quantities of modern weapons supplied by the USSR and Warsaw Pact nations. Special antiguerrilla mountain units were formed, with modern equipment and full support from all branches of the armed forces. Helicopters began making headway in the fight against the "bandits," quickly inserting troops into battle areas and pursuing guerrillas.

After the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 the guerrillas were doomed by the US decision to cease any kind of aid to them. US officials began

Brigadistas being loaded for their freedom flight to the United States in December 1962, after Castro's government received a ransom of \$53 million-worth of food, medical supplies and agricultural equipment. (BoPVA)

intercepting and arresting Cuban exile groups as they attempted to launch attacks against military installations in Cuba – the guerrilla groups now faced enemies on both sides of the Florida Straits. By the end of 1964 the last of the internal groups had been defeated. “Cuban government estimates place the number of guerrillas killed or captured between 1960 and 1965 at 3,591. About 500 government soldiers died during the same period” (Fermoselle, p.286).

In the years following the battle, veterans from both sides encountered one another from time to time on the battlefields of the Cold War. The victory at Girón emboldened the *Fidelistas* to spread Communism to Latin America and to the rest of the world. While Cuba provided support and even men to aid various guerrilla movements in Central and South America, it was in Africa that they would make their greatest impact in the 1970s. On the other side of the coin, many former Brigade members continued the fight against Communism by joining the CIA and the armed forces of the United States.

During the 1964–65 phase of the bloody and never-ending chaos in the former Belgian Congo, approximately 200 Cuban combat troops under the command of Ché Guevara went to the Congo to train Chinese-backed “Simba” rebels fighting against the pro-Western prime minister, the Katangese leader Moise Tshombe. (Given that the rebels believed firmly in

fetishes such as the bullet-repelling powers of water blessed by their spiritual leader Christophe Mulele, Guevara had his work cut out, despite the generous shipments of Chinese weapons crossing Lake Tanganyika from what is now Tanzania.) The Cubans entered the country from Tanzania in spring of 1965 and made their headquarters at Kitgona; *Comandante* Guevara remained with them from April to December 1965. Since the previous year the CIA had been assisting the Congolese government troops by providing a squadron of B-26 Invaders and T-28 attack/trainers, crewed by former members of the Cuban Liberation Air Force (these Bay of Pigs veterans were allegedly hired by Caramar – Caribbean Marine Aero Corp, a CIA “proprietary”). In his memoir the leader of Tshombe’s white mercenary 5 Commando, Maj Mike Hoare, pays tribute to the valuable support provided by the T-28s and B-26s.

* * *

These conflicts between former veterans of the Bay of Pigs finally culminated in the inglorious defeat

Congo, 1964–65: former members of the Liberation Air Force photographed while loading nose-gun ammunition into a B-26B of the CIA-backed mercenary air force that flew from Katanga in support of Prime Minister Tshombe against the Communist-backed “Simba” rebels. (ADEQHA)





Memorials to members of Castro's forces killed during the battle, seen along the roads and in fields on the approaches to Girón. (Author's photo)

of one of the leaders of the Cuban Revolution and of the ruthless repression that had followed it. Ché Guevara entered Bolivia to create a revolutionary army in November 1966, but by February 1967 he could muster only 15 Cubans and 12 Bolivians. The jungles of Bolivia proved difficult for the Cubans, who were more used to the conditions of the Sierra Maestra, and even foraging for food proved a problem. The Cuban/Bolivian group was hunted down by the experienced Rangers of the Bolivian Army; in early March 1967 guerrillas clashed with elements of IV Division at Camiri. Another disaster followed with the discovery of Ché's camp at Ñancahuasú on March 23, and from that point on his group was on the run. The CIA assisted in the hunt by the provision of US troops to train Bolivian Rangers, and veterans of the Bay of Pigs who were familiar with Cuban tactics.

Among the Cuban veterans sent by the CIA was former *brigadista* Felix Rodriguez, who was involved in the capture of Ché Guevara after an ambush at Quebrada del Churo on October 8, 1967. Rodriguez was able to document the capture by posing for a photograph with the wounded rebel leader, and to this day he still wears the Rolex watch he "liberated" from Ché. Despite the CIA's desire to keep Ché alive for interrogation, the Bolivian military ordered his execution in order to prevent future political problems. By the end of 1967 only three of the 15 Cubans who had accompanied Ché had survived, by crossing over into Chile. The widely publicized death of Guevara greatly restrained the militancy of the Cuban leadership in exporting the Revolution to Latin America.

Retrospect

Today, tourists laze in the sun on the Cuban beach where one of the most famous battles of the Cold War was fought. The swamps where the *brigadistas* hid after they were routed on Playa Girón are now part of a wildlife sanctuary, home to rare birds and crocodiles. "History and beauty!" announces a colorful sign on the scenic road through the Zapata Peninsula to the southern coast, a cheery welcome to tourists from the cash-strapped Cuban government. A more traditionally



Relics from the Bay of Pigs battle exhibited at the Museum of the Revolution in Havana: a T-34/85 tank, and one of the Brigade's small landing boats. (Author's photo)

militant slogan greets visitors at the village itself: a billboard showing a brandished rifle and the words “Playa Girón, the first imperialist defeat in Latin America.” Along the roads south to Playa Girón are monuments raised where Cuban government soldiers fell; schoolchildren in white and red uniforms and red bandanas troop into a museum full of weapons and battle memorabilia, to learn a lesson in revolutionary heroism. Across the Florida Straits, the memories of the battle are still painfully remembered. What follows is the author’s record of his attendance in 1999 at the annual reunion of the dwindling numbers of veterans of Assault Brigade 2506:

It is that time of year again when in the days leading up to April 17, Juan Perez-Franco, the president of the Brigada de Asalto 2506 Veterans Association, calls for his comrades-in-arms to perform the annual ritual of appearances for a series of local radio and television interviews with him. Brigade veterans and curious onlookers began congregating at the Bay of Pigs memorial in Miami’s “Little Havana” (located on the corner of Cuban Memorial Way and SW 8th Street or “Calle Ocho” as it is known by the Cuban community) as early as ten in the morning of the 17th. The old *brigadistas*, as they fondly call themselves, excitedly shout out names and color metaphors in the Cuban manner at their recently arrived compatriots, whom at times they haven’t seen since the last reunion. Some have traveled from as far as Argentina, such as Ramon Masvidal of the 6th Battalion, while others arrived from Puerto Rico and the Dominican

Republic. However, most of the veterans reside in Miami, Florida where there is a large and thriving Cuban community. Not far away, the veterans maintain a museum and library devoted to the history of the Bay of Pigs as well as to the history of Cuba.

The *brigadistas* came from all walks of life; there were no color, socio-economic class or religious barriers amongst them. Most formed long-lasting bonds from the strain of combat... and from their years as prisoners of war in Fidel Castro's prisons. The common link amongst all of the veterans is a fevered hatred of communism and Fidel Castro. As more Brigade members gathered for the one o'clock ceremony, some began to openly notice that there were fewer compared to previous years, from 2,000 in the 1960s to only about 400 showing up for the annual commemoration of the battle. But, despite their dwindling numbers, most *brigadistas* continue to carry their fight against communism and against Castro's government. "As long as there's one Cuban alive, Cuba will be free!" exclaimed Alfredo Barrera of the 5th Battalion. Mr Barrera, who is wheelchair-bound because of a stroke, is a former US Army captain and Vietnam War veteran who proudly wears his American Legion cap. His nurse has cared for Alfredo for nine years, and exclaimed "It's very important for him to be here with his old Brigade. He hasn't missed a single reunion since I've been with him!" Other *brigadistas* attending can be seen with caps from the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Society of the Purple Heart, and the Disabled American Veterans. Many former Brigade members served their newly adopted country by joining the armed forces to continue the fight against communism in Vietnam.

Veterans recounted various experiences endured during the three-day battle and subsequent capture. Jorge Marquet from the 5th Battalion remembered his escape from the troopship *Houston* when it was bombed by one of Castro's warplanes, and an ambush upon a boatload of *Fidelista* militia who refused to surrender. Another account came from former brigade paratrooper Mario M. Sanchez Abascal, who survived the "*rastra*": upon the orders of the Cuban field commander, Osman Cienfuegos, a refrigeration truck was crammed with 140 captured *brigadistas*, including Mario. The truck made its eight- to ten-hour journey to Havana without ventilation, and ten POWs were found dead due to heat stress and suffocation at the end of the trip. Most Brigade veterans shared a common memory of being without water, and unquenchable thirst for days after the battle while evading capture by Castro's forces. There

An SU-100 tank destroyer that reportedly took part in the battle, now displayed in front of the old presidential palace in Havana. (Author's photo)





TOP LEFT **Brigade 2506 veterans at an exhibition in 2006; Felix Rodriguez (center) took part in the capture of Ché Guevara in Bolivia in October 1967. (Author's photo)**



TOP RIGHT **Augusto Maxwell, the author's uncle, served with the 7th Battalion of Assault Brigade 2506. (Author's photo)**

were also former intelligence officers, such as Jorge Garcia Rubio and Felix Rodriguez, who served the Brigade and later the CIA in operations against Fidel Castro's Cuba and communist movements elsewhere during the hottest moments of the Cold War.

The ceremony finally began at one o'clock with the playing of the American and Cuban national anthems. Father Carrijo of the 1st Parachute Battalion gave the benediction. As Taps was played the names of those who fell, both Cuban and American, were read. As each name was read, the *brigadistas* shouted back in unison: "*Presente!*" The widow of one of the downed Cuban pilots was the guest speaker, and stated in her speech "that the *brigadistas* fought for a place where liberty can live... We will never abandon our homeland!" Jorge Garcia Rubio gave a poetic oration on the martyrdom of the fallen on the blooded beaches of Playas Larga and Girón, much to the acclaim of the veterans in attendance. A proclamation from Florida Governor Jeb Bush made April 17 the official date to commemorate the Bay of Pigs Invasion and the men of Brigade 2506. Juan Perez-Franco exclaimed, "The Bay of Pigs was not lost in the sands of Playa Girón, the Bay of Pigs was lost in Washington, the Bay of Pigs was lost in the White House!" He continued, "Our goals remain the same: that the 2506 Brigade supports absolutely the embargo against Cuba and rejects categorically that the American government be blamed for the agony of our people, when in fact the Cuban communist regime is solely responsible for such agony. That the men from Playa Girón recognize and appreciate the help and support the US government has given the Cuban exile, although it is necessary that they recognize the debt contracted with the 2506 Brigade on April 17, 1961." The ceremony ended with the hymn of the Brigade, in which one verse reads: "*It is a hymn that the trees and the wind sing, in a song of war – it is the Blood of Girón*".

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Every April, veterans of the Brigade gather at the memorial in Miami to commemorate the battle and remember those that have passed on. (Author's photo)



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“Duck-hunter” camouflage uniforms, worn here by a delegation of Bde 2506 prisoners known as the “Tractor Committee,” being prepared for a flight from Havana to the United States in order to confer with US officials over finding a solution for the release of the captured brigadistas. (ADEQHA)



A Brigade paratrooper killed in action; note his 1st Battalion breast patch and Brigade shoulder patch – see Plate H. (ADEQHA)

UNIFORMS & EQUIPMENT

CUBAN LIBERATION FORCES

Upon acceptance for the clandestine operation, recruits were issued a common uniform worn by most members of the land, air and sea branches of the Cuban Liberation Forces. One Brigade member recounted: “We were issued uniforms, khaki shirt and pants, baseball cap, and a duffle bag. Finally we were given round metal tags engraved with our names. Mine, which I still have, reads ‘Eduardo Ferrer, 2492, Alerg. Peni A. P.’ (Ferrer, p.35). Upon arriving in Guatemala the recruits were issued “a rubber poncho, hunting knife, blankets and military boots. Each man also received a folding plate, a set of stainless eating utensils which fit inside the folded plate, and a mug” (Ferrer, p.43). Most of the equipment issued to the *brigadistas* was US Army surplus from World War II and the Korean War.

Later, the Brigade was issued camouflage uniforms based on those worn by the US military during World War II, in the popular “duck-hunter” pattern. These garments were manufactured by various firms, such as the Camouflage Manufacturing Co with its KAMO brand, but variations in patterns existed; this “Hunter’s Camo” clothing was commonly sold through mail-order catalogs, such as Sears & Roebuck, during the 1950–60s. The camouflage uniform consisted of a shirt with a single breast and two lower patch pockets; pants (two styles have been noted: one with patch front and rear pockets, and the other with large cargo pockets); and a cap resembling in shape the US Army ski cap worn during World War II. A shield-shaped Brigade patch was commonly worn on the left shoulder of the shirts (for this and other Brigade patches, see Plate H). Photographs also show some one-piece camouflage coveralls in use; these are believed to have been worn by the tankmen of 3d (Armd) Bn, since the parachutists wore olive-drab jumpsuits over their camouflage uniforms.

Various means were adopted to instil *esprit de corps* within units. Battalions were identified by neckerchiefs of different colors: the 1st Bn (paratroopers) wore blue, while the 4th (Heavy Weapons) Bn wore red.



Some of the Brigade's arsenal of weapons and ordnance, captured after the battle, is placed on display. The sinking of the two ships, the US refusal to provide air cover for resupply runs, and the relative failure of attempted resupply by air all ensured that they fell silent after three days' fighting. (ADEQHA)

Wide-brimmed felt hats with three air vents on each side, known as "Texas" hats by the *brigadistas*, were issued to the men as part of a "dress" uniform for their planned triumphal march through Havana; these hats appealed to the exiles' sentimental feelings towards the *guajiros* – the folk of the Cuban countryside. Some hats bore an oversized silver Cuban coat of arms on the front or pinned to the upturned left brim.

Liberation Air Force personnel wore the same khaki uniforms as Bde 2506, and aircrew were issued USAF flight suits and jackets. In addition many pilots wore yellow neckerchiefs, and USAF garrison caps (sidecaps) with the officer's flap-piping in silver-and-black or royal blue. On almost all articles of clothing, including baseball caps and flight suits, Air Force members wore a round patch showing a phoenix rising from flames. The ground crews wore T-shirts bearing the Cuban Air Force logo encircled by the words "FUERZA AEREA CUBANA".

Like their compatriots in the other branches, most mariners wore khaki uniforms and blue wool baseball caps. A simple printed patch was worn on the left sleeve, bearing the words "MARINA DE GUERRA/PATRIA Y LIBERTAD" encircling the colors of the Cuban flag. In addition, US Navy surplus chambray shirts and blue denim pants were issued to the ships' crews. A variety of headgear can be seen in photographs, from khaki officer's-style visored caps without insignia, to US Navy blue "Donald Duck"-style hats without tallies. It appears that most of the deck crews wore white undershirts (or even went shirtless) with shorts in the tropical heat of the Caribbean.

Flags and guidons (see Plates A & B)

These were designed and submitted by members and procured by the CIA through the US Army Quartermaster Depot in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They reflected both American and Cuban military traditions. The regimental flags and battalion guidons followed the dimensions prescribed in US Army regulations, while branch colors – such as green for infantry – followed traditions left in Cuba by the Spanish colonial troops from the 19th century. The regimental flag of Assault Brigade 2506 was initially designed by Carlos Rodriguez Santana, and upon his accidental death his serial number was added to it. It consisted of a royal blue charging *brigadista* with a bayoneted rifle on a yellow field; a small embroidered Cuban coat of arms was placed high on the left of the field; a riband in the same blue as the figure scrolled across the top, bearing the words “BRIGADA ASALTO”; and “2506” stood alone at the lower right. The flag was completed with yellow-colored fringes around the edges.

The battalion guidons differed according to the branch of service. The 1st Battalion’s was a swallow-tailed flag in royal blue with the emblem and edges in yellow; the emblem was crossed M14-style rifles between “Bn” and “1”. The rectangular guidons of Infantry Bns 2, 5, 6 and 7 were green, with numerals and crossed M1 Garand rifles in yellow. The guidon of 4th (Hvy Wpns) Bn was orange with crossed rifles, while that of the 3d (Armd) Bn was in yellow. The Heavy Transport Bn guidon was blue with the letters “GTC” in yellow.

The Cuban Liberation Air Force’s regimental flag consisted of an oversized rendition of the patch insignia of a phoenix and flames in the center of a blue background. While most of the Brigade’s battalion guidons were lost during the Bay of Pigs battle, the regimental flags of the Brigade and Air Force were left behind, and thus survived.

Assault Brigade 2506

Order of Battle:

1st (Para) Bn
2nd, 5th, 6th (Inf) Bns
3rd (Armd) Bn
4th (Hvy Wpns) Bn
7th (Inf) Bn (Reserve)
(remained in Guatemala)
1x Diver Pltn (3x 4-man SMG sqds, 3x BAR sqds)

Brigade Support

Brigade HQ (2x SMG/rifle sqds,
2x 2.5 ton trucks)

Cuban Liberation Air Force

1x Bomber Sqn (16x B-26B
Invaders)
1x Transport Sqn (6x C-46,
6x C-54)

Naval Assets

5x transport ships: *Atlantico*,
Caribe, *Houston*, *Lake Charles*, and *Rio Escondido*.
10x landing craft: 2x LCI
(*Barbara J* and *Blagar*), 4x
LCVP, 3x LCU, 1x LCM



Militiamen standing in formation; note the characteristic mix of pale chambray shirts and olive-drab fatigue pants, and the distinctive MNR patches worn on the left shoulder. (ADEQHA)

Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces

In 1961 there were nine Army light infantry divisions, each of two brigades, each of two battalions; battalions mustered about 900 all ranks. In addition there was one armored division, with headquarters at Managua. Brigade support units comprised an MG unit, an antitank battery, and an infantry reconnaissance company. Divisional units included up to a battalion of artillery, an antiaircraft battery and an armored company.

Elements of the following are believed to have taken part in the battles of April 17–19:

Army

Armored Div (Managua): tactical force, tank company

Artillery: Camagüey Bn, Batteries 3 & 11; Baracoa base bty
Unified Medical Bn

National Revolutionary Militia

Bns 26, 113, 114, 116, 117, 120, 123, 148, 180, 211, 219, 225, 227, 303, 339;

Artillery Bty 3

Revolutionary National Police Bn elements, Revolutionary Militia School

auxiliaries, National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA)

Air Force

The basic inventory of serviceable aircraft on April 15, 1961 is believed to have been as follows:

Bomber Sqdn (9x B-26C Invaders)
3x Fighter Sqns (2x P-51D Mustangs, 2x P-47D Thunderbolts, 8x Hawker Sea Fury FB11s)

Attack Trainer Sqdn (4x T-33A, 2x Sea Fury T20 two-seaters)

Maritime Reconnaissance Sqdn (1x

PBY-5A Catalina, ?x JRF-5)

Transport Sqdn (1x C-46, ?x C-45, ?x C-47)

Utility/Training Sqdn (8x Bell 47 helicopters)

Navy

The Cuban Navy still maintained from the Batista era three former US Navy frigates – *Antonio Maceo*, *Maximo Gomez*, and *Jose Martí* – and a large number of smaller coastal craft, in various states of repair. During 1961 it had also received its first equipment from the Eastern bloc: 6x Kronstadt-class submarine chasers and 12x motor torpedo boats. Of these only the patrol craft *Baire* was lost in action during the April 1961 fighting.

Weapons

The brigade used a wide array of small arms and heavy weapons. The paratroopers of the 1st Bn were armed with .45cal M3A1 “greasegun” submachine guns, while the line infantry had .30cal M1 Garand semiautomatic rifles. Support personnel were armed with .30cal M1 carbines and .45calACP M1911 semiautomatic pistols. Heavier arms included .30cal Browning Automatic Rifles, M1919 and M1919A6 machine guns, .50cal M2 heavy machine guns, 2.36in bazookas, recoilless rifles, 4x 4.2in mortars, 15x 81mm mortars, and 3x 75mm howitzers. Vehicles for the landings were five M41 tanks (76mm main gun), ten 2½-ton trucks and six jeeps, the softskins each mounting a .50cal machine gun.

CUBAN REVOLUTIONARY ARMED FORCES

In some respects the FAR appeared much like their predecessors prior to 1959, when much of the equipment and the uniform styles were heavily American; they were still using up US World War II surplus fatigues and web gear from the Batista regime. The “Walker” and “Ridgway”-style caps had been adopted by the revolutionaries, and are still in use to this day. A chocolate-brown uniform and visored cap based on the US Army Class A uniform of World War II was still in use by Cuban officers and senior enlisted men. US-style khaki shirts and pants as well as visored caps were used as garrison and everyday dress, and were also worn by other paramilitary organizations such as the Cuban Red Cross. The Cuban Revolutionary Police (*Policia Nacional Revolucionaria*, PNR) wore a combination of khaki shirts and olive-drab fatigue pants, with a distinctive olive-drab képi-style cap.

Cuban naval uniforms had also changed little since Batista’s time, and were based on US styles. The Revolutionary National Militia (*Milicia Nacional Revolucionario*, MNR) wore naval-style chambray shirts (with or without epaulets), and at times blue denim pants, taken from Navy stores in Cienfuegos and other locations, but the shirts were most often worn with olive-drab fatigue pants. The MNR shoulder patch, being introduced at the time, was worn on the left sleeve (see Plate H). Headgear consisted of a black or olive-colored beret with or without an MNR emblem.

Weapons

A large and varied arsenal from the Batista forces were carried by the FAR. Most were of US World War II or even World War I vintage, including 1903 Springfield rifles, M1 Garands, Thompson SMGs and M1 carbines. The militia even used a batch of turn-of-the-century Krag-Jörgenson rifles and carbines. More modern weapons in the process of being imported included Belgian 7.62mm FN-FAL semiautomatic rifles, and a large shipment of Soviet and other Eastern bloc types: mainly 7.62mm PPSH-41 and PPSH-43 SMGs, 7.62mm Czech Vz52/57 rifles, and 9mm Czech Vz23 and Vz25 SMGs. Handguns were mostly .45calACP M1911 US government model or 9mm Browning semiautomatics.

PLATE COMMENTARIES

A: TRAINING IN GUATEMALA

A1: CIA instructor

A2: *Brigadista* in garrison dress, with Assault Brigade 2506 regimental flag

A3: *Brigadista* in fatigues, with 2d Infantry Battalion guidon

Most of the CIA advisors and instructors (**A1**) wore combinations of civilian and/or paramilitary clothing. Initially the basic uniforms for the Cuban exiles in training were khakis for garrison or “dress” wear (**A2**) and olive-drab fatigues at other times (**A3**); the bearer of the Brigade flag wears a “Texas” hat with a large silver Cuban coat-of-arms badge (see **A2a**).

B: BRIGADE AIR ELEMENTS

B1: Pilot in flight suit

B2: Paratrooper, 1st Battalion

B3: Major, Alabama Air National Guard

B4: Ground crewman

The Cuban exile B-26 pilot (**B1**), a former member of Batista’s air force, wears his Cuban wings – without the “FAR” added from 1959 – pinned to the breast of his US Air Force flight suit, and the Liberation Air Force patch sewn to his right shoulder (see H1). The USAF sidecaps had officer’s flap-piping in either royal blue or silver-and-black twist cord. The yellow scarf was a unit distinction.

The paratrooper of the Brigade’s 1st Bn (see **B2a** for guidon) wears the “Texas” hat, and carries the football-style helmet worn for jumps – here personally painted with jump wings and other decoration, as was common practice among the paratroopers. He wears a two-piece combat uniform in “duck-hunter” camouflage, obtained for the Brigade from commercial sources; the Brigade patch is sewn to his left shoulder, and the battalion patch to his left breast (see H2 & H3). His weapon is the .45cal M3A1 submachine gun (aka “greasegun”) with a 30-round magazine.

The instructor from the Alabama ANG (**B3**) is wearing summer khakis and dress visored cap. He would have modified or changed his uniform to something less identifiably American before heading down to the secret “Rayo Base” outside Retalhuleu city, Guatemala, to continue flight instruction.

In the tropical climate, ground crews (**B4**) wore shorts, and T-shirts with the Cuban Air Force logo. The blue baseball cap was a common item of issue, here with the Liberation Air Force phoenix patch.

C: BRIGADE MARITIME ELEMENTS

C1: Seaman in fatigue dress

C2: Ship’s deck officer

C3: Frogman, Special Demolition Team

The crews of the ships that ferried the Brigade to Cuba wore a wide variety of clothing in khaki, chambray and blue denim; headgear was equally various, but included this US Navy surplus dark blue “Donald Duck” cap (**C1**). The deck officer (**C2**) wears the patch of the Brigade’s maritime branch (see H4) on his khaki shirt, and is armed with an M1911 semiautomatic pistol. The frogman (**C3**) has a double-hose

breathing apparatus and SCUBA gear typical of the early 1960s. In front of him is an M1918 Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) as issued to the Brigade’s Special Demolition Teams; the diver platoon comprised three four-man squads with submachine guns and three BAR teams.

In the background is the converted LCI *Barbara J*, and one of the small boats used to ferry the troops to the beaches.

D: THE BEACH LANDINGS

D1: *Brigadista*, 2d Infantry Battalion

D2: Dr Manuel Artime

D3: Tank crewman, 3d (Armored) Battalion

Sheltering beside one of the five M41 tanks, these *brigadistas* are wearing the “duck-hunter” camouflage uniforms. Like **D1**, most of the Brigade’s infantrymen were armed with the .30cal M1 Garand semiautomatic rifle and issued with World War II vintage web gear, while specialist troops carried .45cal Thompson or M3A1 submachine guns or – as in the case of the tanker – .30cal M1 carbines. There is some evidence for the use of one-piece camouflage coveralls of different shades to the fatigues worn by most Brigade members, and these may have been issued to the tank crewmen (**D3**) to prevent clothing from snagging in the tight and crowded confines of the tank. **D2**, the Brigade’s political leader Manuel Artime, is seen armed with a .45cal pistol, and attempting to communicate using one of the US Army surplus “walkie-talkies.”



December 28, 1962: President John F. Kennedy is presented with the regimental flag of the Brigade for safekeeping – see Plate A for flag. In the 1980s the Brigade veterans successfully sued for its return from the Kennedy Presidential Library, on the grounds that it never flew “in a free Cuba” as the president had promised that day. The flag is now exhibited in the Brigade veterans’ headquarters in Miami, Florida. (NA)



E: CUBAN REVOLUTIONARY ARMED FORCES

E1: Infantry private

E2: *Comandante* Fidel Castro

E3: Sergeant 3d Class, tank company

E4: Captain, Revolutionary Military Police

Fidel Castro and his men are seen wearing the typical US Army-style combat fatigues and field equipment left over from the Batista regime's purchases in the 1950s. However, small arms were more various: **E1**, an infantryman from the Tactical Group at Managua, has been issued a Belgian 7.62mm FN-FAL assault rifle and the appropriate magazine pouches, while **E4** carries a Soviet PPSH-41 submachine gun. The tank sergeant **E3** wears Batista-era US Army-style HBT coveralls with sleeve ranking, and a Soviet padded tanker's helmet; on his pistol belt is a liberated Batista-era Cuban National Police buckle plate with the letters converted from "PN" (*Policia Nacional*) to "ER" (*Ejercito Revolucionario*). Castro's epaulet insignia is his habitual red/black halved diamond with a white star superimposed.

F: CASTRO'S AUXILIARY FORCES

F1: Militiaman, Battalion 123, Revolutionary National Militia

F2: Officer, Revolutionary National Police Battalion

F3: Official, Cuban Red Cross

The majority of the infantry combat at the Bay of Pigs fell to militia units, and they took heavy casualties – particularly from Brigade air attack, but also in attacks against the stout defense of the road from Playa Larga to Girón by Oliva's force. This militiaman (**F1**) is wearing the common

Cuban MNR militiamen displaying war trophies captured from the Brigade's 1st Battalion, including parachute canopies, camouflage uniforms and decorated jump helmets – see Plate B2. (ADEQHA)

combination of a naval-style chambray shirt and military fatigue pants. He is armed with the Czech Vz25 submachine gun, with a folding stock that could serve as a foregrip when folded; the wooden-stock Vz23 version was also used.

The officer of the Revolutionary National Police (**F2**) has just been wounded by a strafing B-26 of the Liberation Air Force (the smoke of his burning jeep has attracted the attention of an FAR Sea Fury pilot). He has the PNR's distinctive képi and shoulder patch (see H10), and is armed with a Czech Vz52/57 rifle. The Red Cross official helping him (**F3**) is wearing a paramilitary khaki uniform and insignia basically unchanged since the Batista era.

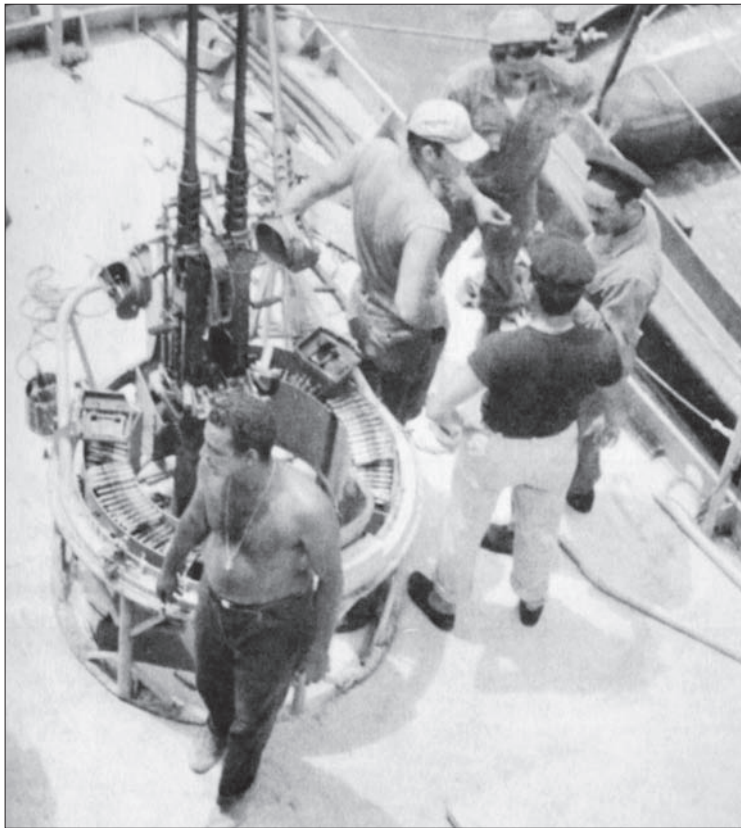
G: RELEASE AND AFTERMATH

G1: *Brigadista*; Miami Orange Bowl, December 28, 1962

G2: Pilot, ex-Cuban Liberation Air Force; Albertville, Congo, 1965

G3: Member, Bay of Pigs Veterans Association, 2006

At the review of the recently ransomed Brigade prisoners by President John F. Kennedy in Miami's Orange Bowl in December 1962, this former POW (**G1**) is wearing new military-style khakis with the Bde 2506 patch sewn to his sleeve. **G2** is a B-26 or T-28 pilot enlisted by the CIA to support the Congolese forces of Prime Minister Tshombe against Chinese-armed "Simba" guerrillas supported by a



LEFT A number of twin .50cal anti-aircraft mounts were installed on the converted LCI *Blagar*. Note the motley shipboard clothing of the Cuban sailors, including (right) an old World War II US Navy hat – see Plate C. (BoPVA)

BELOW Although an invasion had been expected the time and place were unknown, and the initial phase of the landings caught Castro's forces in the area by surprise. The majority of those killed were militiamen rather than regulars – see Plate F. This man appears to wear a US surplus BAR belt. (ADEQHA)

Cuban unit led by Ché Guevara. Bush hats modelled on the Australian “Digger” type were popular; his has a band in “duck-hunter” camouflage and the badge of the Katanga-based mercenary air force (G2a).

The Brigade veteran attending the 45th anniversary ceremonies in April 2006 wears a white *guayabera*-style shirt with the Brigade insignia and the words “BAY OF PIGS VETERAN” embroidered above his left breast pocket. His overseas cap is in desert camouflage scheme, with the Brigade emblem on the left side and the 45th anniversary logo (G3a) on the right. In the background is the memorial in Miami, Florida, honoring Assault Brigade 2506.

H: INSIGNIA

H1: Cuban Liberation Air Force patch

H2: Assault Brigade 2506 patch

H3: 1st (Parachute) Battalion patch

H4: Cuban Liberation Navy patch

H5: Armband, Artime's Second Naval Guerrilla Operation, 1963–64

Castro forces:

H6: Cuban Revolutionary Air Force patch

H7: Girón Combatants Medal

H8: Cuban Red Cross patch

H9: National Revolutionary Militia patch

H10: Revolutionary National Police patch



INDEX

References to illustrations are shown in **bold**.

- Abascal, Mario M. Sanchez 53
Alabama ANG 11, 12, **B3**(34, 61), **43**
Artime, Dr Manuel 9, 10, **D2**(36, 61), **H5**(40, 63), 47, 48, **48**
Assault Brigade 2506
1st (Parachute) Battalion 9, 11, 17, 54
action 18, 28, 29, 41, 42, 45, 57
2nd (Infantry) Battalion
action (Red Beach) 18, 25, 26, 29, 30, 44
3rd (Armored) Battalion
action (Blue Beach) 18, 27, 28, 43, 45
4th (Heavy Weapons) Battalion 27
action (Blue Beach) 18, 27, 30
5th (Infantry) Battalion
action (Red Beach) 18, 23, 27, 29, 53
6th (Infantry) Battalion
action (Blue Beach) 18, 27, 52
7th (Infantry) Battalion
action (Green Beach) 18, 54
composition and strength 10, 11, 17, 53
frogman, SDTs 16, 25, 26, 27, **C3**(35, 61), 61
guidons **A3**(33, 61), **B2a**(34, 61), 59
insignia **A2a**(33, 61), **B2**(34, 61), **G1**(39, 62), **H2**, **H3**(40, 63), 47, 57, 57, 59
mobilization of 17–18
recruitment and training 8, 9, 10, 10, 11
bases 10, 11, 14, 15, 17, 18, **A2**, **A3**(33, 61)
regimental flag 12, **A2**(33, 61), 47–8, 59, 61
uniforms 11, 12, 17, 19, **A2**(33, 61), **B2**(34, 61), **D1**, **D3**(36, 61), 56, 57, 62
veterans of **C3**, **C3a**(39, 63), 52–4, 54, 55
weaponry
bazookas 28, 41, 45, 60
machine/submachine guns 9, 11, 28, **B2**(34, 61), **D1**(36, 61), 46, 58, 60, 61
mortars 18, 27, 28, 41, 42, 45, 58, 60
pistols 60
rifles 25, 28, **C3**(35, 61), **D1**, **D3**(36, 61), 60
tanks 14, 18, 24, 26, 26, 27, 28, 28, 29, 30, **D1**(36, 61), 41, 44, 46, 60, 61
- Baker, Leo Francis 43
Barrera, Alfredo 53
“Base Trampoline” (Nicaragua) 17, 18
“Base Trax” (Guatemala) 9, 10, 10, 11, 14, 17–18
Batista, President Fulgencio 3–5, 6
Bay of Pigs invasion (Operation “Zapata”)
briefing of combat leaders 17, 18, 19
assignment of landing beaches 18
failure of diversionary landing raid 20
prisoners of war 45, 46–7, 47, 48, 53
interrogation/show trials 30, 47
negotiations for release 47, 49, 49, 56
repatriation and review 49, **G1**(39, 62)
supplies, destruction/dwindling of
ammunition 27, 29, 31, 32, 42, 43, 45
food and fuel 13, 14, 24, 27, 29
medical 27, 29
radios 24, 27–8, 29, **D2**(36, 61), 43, 45
Bay of Pigs Veterans Association **G3**(39, 63), 52–4, 54, 55
Belgium, arms from 6, 7, 47, **E1**(37, 62)
Bolivia, and “Ché” Guevara 51, 54
Castro, *Comandante Fidel* **E2**(37, 62)
action as rebel 3–4, 4, 5
El Uvero Barracks, capture of 5
Moncada Barracks, attack on 3, 4
consolidation of power 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 16
internal opposition to 5, 5, 7, 8, 10
reaction to invasion 21, 22, 23, 27, 30, 46, 47
and Second Declaration of Havana 49
Castro, Raul 5–7
Central Australia Sugar Mill 18, 27, 28, 30, 32, 45
Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)
“Cuba Project” 8, 12
advisors/instructors 8, 9, 10, 11–12, 13, 18, 19, 20–1, 23, 25, 31, **A1**(33, 61), **B1**, **B3**(34, 61), 43, 43, 44, 45
and counterrevolutionaries 5, 5, 6, 7, 8, 23, 32
counterfeit currency 20
“defecting” pilots’ story 19, 20–1, 23
and government-in-exile 9, 10, 16
and Kennedy administration 17, 43
propaganda broadcasts 9, 10, 23, 32
chances of public uprising 16
recruiting network 9
Congo (Belgian) **G2**, **G2a**(39, 62–3), 50, 50, 62
Covadonga 18, 27, 28, 41
Cuban Air Force (FAR) 5, 22, 23, 27, 28, 43, 60
Douglas B-26C Invader 12, 19, 20
action 20, 23, 24, 27, 31
Hawker Sea Fury FB.11 24
action 20, 24, 27, 29, 30, 31, 46, 62
insignia **H6**(40, 63)
Lockheed T-33A, action 20, 27, 30, 46
Cuban Army/Revolutionary National Militia
action 25, 25, 27, 27, 29, 30, 32, 41, 42, 43, 44, 44, 45 49–50, 62
“Slaughter of the Lost Battalion” 30
Battalions 123 and 339 30, **F1**(38, 62)
insignia **H9**(40, 63), 59, 60
losses 28, 41–2, 42, 43, 45, 46, 50, 62, 63
Tactical Group **E1**(37, 62)
uniforms **E1**, **E3**(37, 62), **F1**(38, 62), 46, 59, 60
weaponry
antiaircraft guns 22
artillery 18, 25, 41, 43
mortars 30, 44
pistols 60
rifles 30, **E1**(37, 62), 47, 60
submachine guns 31, **F1**(38, 62), 60, 62
tanks 27, 28, 41, 43, 45, 46, 52, 53
Cuban Liberation Air Force
Curtiss C-46 Commando 12
action 15, 28, 30, 32, 45
Douglas B-26B Invader 12, 13, 14, 14, 16, 19, 19, 20, 30, 31, 43
action 15, 17, 20, 23, 30, 30, 31, 42, 42, 43, 43, 44–5, 62
Douglas C-54 Skymaster 12
action 28, 32, 44
ground crewmen **B4**(34, 61)
insignia **B4**(34, 61), 58, 59
pilots 11–12, 13, 31
American 31, **B1**(34, 61), 43, 43, 44, 45, 58
“defecting pilots’ story” 19, 20–1, 23
Cubans 43, 44
regimental flag 59
Cuban Liberation Front **H1**(40, 63)
Cuban Liberation Navy: ships/landing craft
clothing/weaponry **C1**, **C2**(35, 61), 58
insignia **H4**(40, 63), 58
LCI (modified) 13–14, 15, 16
Barbara J 13, 15, 16, **C3**(35, 61)
action 16, 26, 29, 31, 32, 41, 44
Blagar 13, 29, 45, 46, 63
action 14, 25, 27, 31, 32, 41, 43, 44, 45
LCM/LCU 14, 24, 43, 44, 45
LCVP/LSD (USS *Marcos*) 14, 24
small boats 14, 21, 21, 25, 26, **C3**(35, 61), 46, 52
SS *Atlantico* 13, 24, 31
SS *Caribe* 13, 26, 31
SS *Houston* 13, 23, 23, 26, 27, 44, 53
SS *Lake Charles* 13
SS *Río Escondido* 13, 24, 29
Cuban Missile Crisis 47, 49
Cuban Red Cross **F3**(38, 62), **H8**(40, 63), 60
del Valle, Alejandro 9, 18
Ferrer, Eduardo 57
Florida Everglades, CIA camps in 7–8, 10
“ghost boats” (CIA) 13
Girón 21, 22, 27, 45, 46, 51, 52
airfield 17, 21–2, 30, 31, 44, 45
Girón Combatants Medal **H7**(40, 63)
Guatemala 8, 9, 14–15
training bases/camps 9, 10, 10, 11–13, 14, 15, **A**(33, 61), 57, 61
Guevara, Ernesto “Ché” 3, 5–6, 7, 50–1, 63
“JMMadd” air base (Guatemala) 11–13, 14, 15
“JMTide” air base (Nicaragua) 11, 12, 13, 20, 23, 31, 32, 42, 44 5
July 26 Movement 3, 4, 6
Kennedy, President John F. 11, 22, 48
and CIA/JCS 16, 17, 23, 24, 32, 43
and invasion plan 16–17, 21–2
limits US involvement 24, 44, 45, 48
receives Brigade flag 48, 61
Lynch, Grayston (CIA officer) 13, 25
Marquet, Jorge 53
Masvidal, Ramon 52
Maxwell, Augusto 8, 54
memorials and museums 3, 51, 52, 54, 55
Moreno, Daniel 8
motor vehicles 14, 24, 26, **F2**(38, 62), 42, 60
Nicaragua 5, 48 *see also* “JMTide”
Oliva, Erneido A. 18, 42, 47, 48
landings (Red Beach) 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 41, 42, 45, 46
Panama, training base in 9, 10
Perez-Franco, Juan 52, 54
Playa Larga 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, 41, 42, 43
Puerto Cabezas (“Base Trampoline”) 11, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19
Puerto Cabezas air base *see* “JMTide”
Ray, Capt Thomas Willard 43
Revolutionary Military Police **E4**(37, 62)
Revolutionary National Militia *see* Cuban Army
Revolutionary National Police 41, **E3**(37, 62), **F2**(38, 62), **H10**(40, 63), 60
Roberston, “Rip” (CIA agent) 16
Rodriguez, Felix 14–15, 51, 54, 54
Rubio, Jorge Garcia 54
San Blas 18, 27, 29, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45
San Ramón, José “Pepe” Pérez 10, 42–3, 45, 47, 48
landings (Blue Beach) 18, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 41, 42–4, 46
Santana, Carlos Rodriguez 11, 59
“Second Naval Guerrilla Operation” **D2**(36, 61), **H5**(40, 63), 48
SS *La Coubre*, sabotage of 6, 7
Stevenson, US Ambassador Adlai 19, 19, 21
United States Navy, limits of action 14, 19, 21, 24, 30–1, 32, 43, 44, 45

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