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Special for PRENSA LATINA

FA-8
History

HAVANA.-

One early morning, the pounding of anti-aircraft guns and several sharp explosions shocked me awake. I rushed out into the corridor on the ninth story of the old Rosita Hornedo Hotel, today the Sierra Maestra, and peered south through the lowered glass windows.

In the sky several miles away two airplanes were circling and from the ground came the rapid flash-fire of the defense batteries. Suddenly, one of the planes veered sideways like a seagull floating on an air current and headed down for a run on its target. Just as it pulled its nose up, rising and flying to the north, I saw an explosive ball of fire shoot up. Split seconds later the reverberating sound of the explosions reached me. The upward flashes of fire and the thunderous explosions continued for twenty minutes under a constantly expanding mushroom of smoke.

This was Havana, Cuba, April 15, 1961.

Down in the lobby that morning a radio blared forth revolutionary music. A Cuban journalist, Maria Blanca Sabas Aloma, come into the lobby and with a voice quivering with emotion announced: "We are not afraid. We shall triumph. Venceremos!". We learned from her that there had been simultaneous attacks on three military airfields. The bombing we had witnessed was of Camp Columbia, headquarters of the Revolutionary Air Force. Force.

The enemy planes were US-made B-26 bombers and each had simulated markings of the Cuban airforce. The American radio was telling about "Cuban airforce defectors who had taken off from Cuban bases, bombed them and then flown to Miami".

Some hours later I visited the bombed Havana airfield with a group of reporters. The headquarters building was pock-marked with machine-gun bullets. Its windows had been blown in and two larger holes were evidence of direct rocket hits.

In one office there was a large pool of blood, still crimson, on the floor. It belonged to a young militiaman who was mortally wounded in the attack. As he died he wrote a single word with his own blood on the cream-colored door: Fidel.

If the bombing had planned to destroy the small Cuban airforce, they had failed as was evidenced later during the Bay of Pigs. If these bombings were part of a psychological warfare plan to prepare the way for an invasion, they also failed. The bombs, in fact, gave birth to a profound display of Cuban national unity and revolutionary fervor.

A militant spirit of resistance had been built up in the weeks preceding the surprise air attack. Almost every day the evening stillness had been broken by the explosion of petards and bombs in some section of the city. They had gone off in a movie theater, a girl's preparatory school, and under the hoods of autos belonging to revolutionaries. Militiamen on guard duty had been shot down by gun fire and revolutionaries in the rural areas had been tortured and killed.

Two nights before the bombing, Havana's largest department store had been totally destroyed by arson. I watched as firemen and volunteers futilely sought to put out the blaze. The night before the bombing a gigantic mass meeting was held in front of the store's ruins. Telegrams were read from all parts of the country expressing determination and "country or death" and pledging increased vigilance. A part of the crowd sang that night:

Marchando vamos hacia un ideal,
Sabiendo que hemos de triunfar...

(Marching towards an ideal,
Knowing that we have to triumph...)

The Saturday morning air raids stiffened the will of the Cuban people even more.

The night of the bombing I visited the University of Havana campus where the bodies of the victims laid in state.

Tens of thousands of people filed by the row of coffins on that balmy night in silent tribute.

The late Leo Huberman and I sat on a bench not fifty feet from the row of caskets. He told me that Radio Swan, the counterrevolutionary mouthpiece, had announced the bombing and destruction of the Havana Libre Hotel. He was staying there and said with a mixed tinge of irony and humor that if they had destroyed the hotel, he, for one, didn't know anything about it.

We agreed that the bombing and the burning of the El Encanto Department Store were preludes to something bigger. It was no secret that Cuban mercenaries were being trained in Florida, Louisiana and several Central American countries. For several months news had filtered into American newspapers about these preparations and the imminence of landings on Cuba's shores. Before leaving the States I had seen many such articles.

The victims of the bombing were buried on Sunday. The flower-decked coffins on the beds of slowly-driven trucks moved up the avenue between sidewalks crowded with hundreds of thousands of Cubans. Tens of thousands of soldiers, militiamen, women and men, old and young, followed behind the trucks in the long death march to the cemetery. Among the marchers was a small contingent of American sympathizers of the Cuban revolution. One of them was carrying an American flag.

I watched as a battalion of the Rebel Army marched past. They had none of the neatness of the traditional parade soldier and neither their finesse nor precision of step. Their uniforms were unpressed and their boots dirty. Their faces were sunburned by exposure to tropical wind, rain and sun and their bodies were spare and strong. Many wore beards and were veterans of the guerrilla war against Batista. All of them looked rugged and tough and carried FAL automatic rifles and 30 caliber machine guns.

After the burial, the multitude assembled at an intersection facing the gates of the Columbus Cemetery. Built across one of the streets was a large wooden speaker's platform that had gone up that day. Opposite the platform, high on a scaffolding, were the television and movie crews. The other three intersections were filled with spectators. The overhead sun beat down and a few people held umbrellas to create some shade.

Banners with slogans were strung across the intersections.

One announced the coming May Day parade and another the words: WORK, STUDY, WEAPON (Trabajo, Estudio, Fusil).

Fidel Castro stepped to the microphone in the center of the platform. Cheers and chants rang out.

The speech was angry and it was clear that it reflected the mood of the crowd.

Castro talked of the sabotage in the sugar cane fields and of the French munitions ship Coubre at the cost of many lives.

He accused the CIA and the people shouted over and over again: "Pardon... pardon... pardon" (To the wall to be executed).

The Prime Minister was defiant.

"What the imperialists cannot pardon us for is the dignity, the strength of mind, the valor and the revolutionary ideology, the spirit of sacrifice of the people of Cuba. They cannot pardon us for making a socialist revolution in the very nostrils of the United States".

"... a socialist revolution in the very nostrils of the United States"... For the first time in the course of the revolutionary regime, more than two years after Batista's panicky flight, the word "socialist" was used to describe it.

Within a few days the exuberant revolutionaries of Havana were chanting with humor and defiance:

Somos socialistas,
P'alante P'alante.
Y al que no le guste
Que tome purgante.

We are socialists,
Pushing ahead, ahead.
And whoever doesn't like it
Can lump it.

Havana, Monday was bright and clear. A refreshing breeze was blowing from the Gulf, the kind Cubans call "norte". Five pages of the morning newspaper were devoted to Castro's speech of the day before. One had a huge banner headline: Long Live our Socialist Revolution!

There was an item datelined Paris. Using Bogota, Colombia, as its authority, it stated that an invasion of Cuba was imminent. I was reading the article when somebody came over to me and said that there was an invasion on the south coast. Soon, Communique Number One was read over the air: "Onward, Cubans!" it said. "With iron and fire answer the barbarians who despise us, trying to force us to return to slavery". At two-thirty in the morning of April 17th, counterrevolutionary troops trained in Guatemala, trained organized and financed by the CIA, disembarked in two spots in the Bay of Pigs: Playa Giron and Playa Larga. Microwave transmitters had sent word of the invasion to military headquarters in Havana.

The CIA had chosen the Cienaga de Zapata (Zapata swamps). By cutting off the three roads that crossed the swamp and passed by the beach resorts of Playa Giron and Playa Larga, they sought to secure a foothold on Cuban soil. Using this territory as a base, Cuban revolutionaries political leaders would establish a "legitimate Cuban Government" and immediately receive American recognition. A "mutual defense" treaty would be signed and the United States would feel free to openly send in military support.

The plan was insidious and clever, at least, theoretically. It might have succeeded but for the fact that American intelligence completely miscalculated the spirit of resistance of the Cuban people. It was this miscalculation that doomed Operation Pluto, as American planners called it, to failure from the beginning.

I went to the front with the first group of foreign reporters and was a witness to that spirit of resistance. Our cars were searched at the toll-gate of the Via Blanca Highway. As we drove off a militia man shouted: "Patria o Muerte! Venceremos! (Fatherland or Death! We will win!).

We got close to the front at one of the main staging and command centers: Jaguey Grande. Adolfo Carrasco, Commissioner of the town, told us how he and Emiliano Rodriguez were driving along in a truck when they spotted some men in a field. The men wore camouflaged uniforms and opened fire. They killed Emiliano Rodriguez and Carrasco gunned his engine and speeded off. He said his gear shift lever was sheared by a bullet, but he made it back to Jaguey Grande safely.

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The Commissioner, a tall, gaunt man looking very weary, took us to the town's "funeraria". The funeral parlor was in a state of disarray. Blood covered the cement like grease would a garage floor. Wads of rags had been thrown into a corner and a pile of boots lay next to them. Through a door we could see a man cutting boards on a circular saw, making the simple coffins for the heroes.

The Commissioner stopped at a coffin that somehow seemed too narrow and short. He opened the lid and said: "This is Rodriguez, my friend". He glanced in for a moment and then averted his face, still holding up the casket lid for the reporters.

On the cover of another casket there was a photograph of a young woman and her husband. You could see by the way he held himself in the picture that he was unused to the stiff collar. She stood beside him, smiling. Now he lay in a simple grey flannel covered box with plain brass fittings.

Flies were everywhere and we had to wave our hands to keep them away. The fetid smell of death and decomposition was thick. The mortician and young militia men helping there wore handkerchiefs over their noses, as did the visiting reporters. The smell became more and more overpowering as one remained there. Several of the visitors raced toward the door. The rest were taken to a room in the back.

There was a cadaver of a man on the floor. He was wearing a loose-fitting checkered shirt and baggy pants. They told us that he was one of the mercenaries. He killed a farmer, they told me, and took his clothes. They said he was an American. "Did you execute him?" a reporter asked. "No, he was killed in the fighting", they answered.

Just as we were leaving the funeral parlor of the dusty town a truck pulled up in front. We watched as the body of a young black militia man lying face down on a stretcher was being put down on the sidewalk in front of the already crowded "funeraria".

We talked to the militia men. One told us that frogmen had been sent in before the first troops disembarked. Another told us that a number of parachutists had fallen into the water of the swamp area and had drowned.



A group of milicianos who fought the
mercenary invasion at the Bay of Pigs



One of the US planes shot down at
Playa Giron

I spoke to a 14 year old wearing the uniform of a militia man with a Red Cross insignia tied around his arm. He told of his capture by the invaders. A bomb had fallen in the vicinity of his house and he had been knocked out. When he regained consciousness the counterrevolutionary troops were coming towards him. He was not wearing his militia uniform at the time. They put him in a house and held him for almost 24 hours. They knew their military position was deteriorating and that they would have to drop back. They told the boy: "We have come to help you. If we come into power people will eat more food. You want more food, don't you? We will begin trading with the United States again and you will eat better. We have come to help you".

The boy, Orlando Prado, said to us: "All they talked about was the good life. Nothing about oppression and ideas". The mercenaries, under fire and scared, finally gave him some cigarettes and released him. He came across the line with a white flag and immediately joined the battle against them.

There was great activity around the Australia Sugar Mill. Cars and trucks were everywhere. The soldiers were dirty and grizzled but in high spirits. Some of the soldiers wore the red and black armbands with a white "26" that marked them as veterans of the Sierra Maestra struggle of Fidel's Rebel Army. Some of the men, straight out of the fight against the counterrevolutionaries in the Escambray Mountains, had long hair and beards. They carried heavy automatic weapons and many had beads of varied colored seeds. One had 38 caliber brass shell casings interspersed with red and black seeds hanging to his belt.

Nearby in a field was a downed B-26; next to it was an unexploded 260 --pound fragmentation bomb-- Made in the USA.

As I approached the plane a militia man with khakicolored cross braces and a belt around his waist holding a 45 caliber pistol and a pocket for shells came over and asked: "Are you an American?". He had heard me speaking English. "Yes", I answered. He spoke to me in broken English and looked into my face. "We don't hold this against all Americans. It's not the people's fault".

The crashing plane had killed a cow and a calf. There was again the strong smell of decaying flesh. Several hens were pecking away. "Mata-vaca", "cow-killer", a militia man said, pointing at the plane. The expression was famous in Cuba. Some months before a missile was sent off from Cape Canaveral, Florida, down the Atlantic Range and crashed in Cuba, killing a cow. In a demonstration in Havana a large remnant of the USAF rocket was driven along on the back of an open truck to the amplified accompaniment of a cow mooing. Another militiaman pointed at the plane. He didn't say "Mata-vaca". He said "Mata-pueblo", "people killer".

We took the dusty road to Playa Larga, one of the landing beaches. Near the water, under the cover of trees were artillery pieces. About a mile out was a sunken freighter. "That was their communications ship" I was told. "Our planes got a direct hit on it".

Pulled up on the shore were two small boats with American-made Starflite outboard motors. My guide pointed and said "pirates". On the hulls were painted skull and crossbones.

We drove down the two lane asphalt road to Playa Giron on the southeastern tip of the Bay of Pigs. Soldiers, tanks, trucks, guns and other equipment lined the side of the road. There were militiamen in the thick foliage off the road. One could hear an occasional volley of shots. They were still rounding up invaders who had taken refuge in the swamp after their beach-head at Playa Giron had been overrun by Cuban revolutionary forces some hours before.

We were surprised to see men along the way eating oranges in the middle of that unproductive country. We caught up with the secret a little later. A truckload of oranges was going down the road to Playa Giron and four men were giving oranges to the fighting men.

Playa Giron, tactical nerve center of the invasion force and symbol of victory of the Cuban revolutionary forces, was a beehive of activity. In a kind of pavillion built by the revolutionary government at the beach resort were files of weapons, ammunition and war materiel, modern communications equipment, bazookas, Browning automatic rifles and machine guns. Nearby were tanks and trucks with specially built supports for 50 caliber machine guns.

In what had once been a locker-room, dozens of distraught looking prisoners dressed in camouflage sat on the wooden benches in front of the steel lockers. A Revolutionary army doctor was treating a minor leg wound in one of them. We asked the doctor if he liked the idea of caring for an enemy prisoner and he answered curtly: "That's my job".

The hundreds of prisoners who had surrendered or had been captured were housed nearby in the white concrete beach cabins. Some were still being brought in from the surrounding area. When asked why he had come, one prisoner said what we were to hear many times that day:

"They told us that there was discontent in Cuba. All we had to say is, "We are liberators" and the militia men were supposed to surrender. But things were different. When we faced our first group of militia men, we shouted: "We are your liberators!". But they answered: "Patria o Muerte" (fatherland or death) and began firing".

Most of them cursed out the Americans who, they said, had lied to them. Quite a few claimed not to be non-combatants. "I'm a cook" became a popular joke in Cuba in subsequent weeks as the prisoners made public declarations which were printed in the newspapers or broadcasts.

At the time I wished that a group of honest American reporters were there to report the truth more widely. I knew that in the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson was denying all U.S. involvement in the venture and that the American people were being fed lies.

Driving back to Havana, I recollected the view of an indignant Cuban militia man shaking his finger at a prisoner and shouting at him: "What the hell is wrong with you? You're a Cuban. Can't you see this place was built for the people. Don't you know that this is the best thing that has happened to Cuba in all its history. What's wrong with you, man? Are you crazy?".

It was dark when we got back to Havana. The driver had the radio on just before we entered the city. It was Radio Swan: "The forces of Fidel Castro are in full retreat. It is only a matter of hours before his government will be forced to capitulate".

At the end of the Via Blanca we passed through the toll gate. On our trip out the guard has shouted "We will win" (Venceremos) as we had driven away. Now a guard shouted "We have already won" (Vencimos ya).

From the victory on to the First of May, the streets and buildings were emblazoned with posters and stringers. Some said: "No matter how many more times they attack, we are more firm, more robust, more united". Another popular one read: "Long live the First Socialist Republic of the Americas".

The red color sprouted out all over. Triangular red neckerchiefs were worn by some and red ties and other items of red clothing came into vogue. The signs had red backgrounds and red flowers adorned the city. Red flags were placed next to the Cuban lone-star flag that hung from public buildings and private houses.

May Day was in the air. There was a great sense of expectation and exhilaration.

When one made a telephone call during those weeks, a voice would superimpose itself on the ringing and repeat over and over again: "Be at Revolutionary Square on the First of May".

At five o'clock in the morning of May Day, horns, sirens and factory whistles filled the city of Havana with their strident noise. The ships in Havana harbor joined in. The entire city awakened on a day that would bring the largest May Day celebration ever to be held in the Western Hemisphere.

By six o'clock in the morning the thoroughfares for a mile around Revolutionary Square were jammed with people. Some were waiting to take part with their contingents in the parade that would pass before the reviewing stand. Others, walking toward the Square, were going as spectators.

I moved with the flow of pedestrians. As we entered the Square the first thing that caught my eye was the towering Marti monument with a red lettered "Venceremos" from top to bottom. In the shadow of the monument stood the reviewing stand. Fidel Castro and Osvaldo Dorticos, the President of Cuba were already there. About twenty veterans of the Bay of Pigs battle sat on the railing dangling their legs. Revolutionary leaders, diplomats and other special guests filled the seats to both sides of the podium.

The buildings around the Square were bedecked with huge signs. Across the front of the National Theatre was a cut-out of a farmer and worker shaking hands and above them a white dove and the word "Peace". On the National Library was the slogan: "Cuba - Lighthouse of America". On the Ministry of Industry building was a slogan referring to the fact that 1961 was the Year of Education, the year of the mass literacy campaign.

The parade began.

During the morning hours worker's organizations marched through the Square. An army of tobacco industry workers, a sector of Cuba's working class with a venerable history, waved red flags. A contingent from the National Publishing House were preceded by a banner reading: "Long Live the Unity of Manual and Intellectual Workers".

A float carried welders in action, another a farm scene. The float of the Railroad Workers was a passenger car with militia men and women waving from its windows. Another one of the themes was that of international solidarity.

One float carried a huge golden cage full of doves. Standing atop the cage was a woman in flowing white garments, like the kind Liberty wears. In front of the cage were wreaths of red and white flowers. As the truck crossed in front of the reviewing stand, the birds fluttered out of the cage and for several minutes circled above before flying off.

A group of marchers carried the sign: "Our sons are dead. We will take their place". These were the parents of men and women who died fighting for the revolution.

It was already afternoon when battalions of youth dressed in the uniform of the literacy campaign began to march across the Square. They wore khaki berets and khaki pants tucked into high mountain boots. Tin cups hung from their shoulder straps and under their left arm they carried the textbooks of the literacy campaign. In their right hand they carried Coleman-type lanterns used by them in the mountains and rural districts. Some of them were carrying ten foot high yellow "pencils". One of the signs carried by the "alphabetizers" read:

El imperialismo los quiere ignorante
La Revolución los necesita cultos.

Imperialism wants them ignorant
The Revolution needs them cultured.

One contingent of marchers was made up of the repatriates who had come back from exile in the United States and other countries after the victory of the Revolution.

A huge block of young women dressed in peasant attire stopped in front of the reviewing stand and danced a Zapateo Cubano. Fidel Castro watched them through binoculars and then, when they finished and waved to him, he responded by waving back.

It was only in late afternoon that the military portion of the parade began. First came the Rebel Army. There were infantry troops, tanks and artillery pieces pulled by half trucks. A block of sleek 4 muzzled anti-aircraft guns glided by pulled by jeeps.

The people's militia came by in a seemingly endless procession. For hours men and women of the militia crossed the Square in the fading light. The last militiaman passed the reviewing stand at nine-thirty in the light of powerful klieg-lights.

The parade had gone on for more than 12 hours, most of the time with a burning tropical sun radiating from a blue sky. When the parade had finished hundreds of thousands rushed in to fill up the Square below the reviewing stand. The klieg-lights shifted to the podium. Fidel Castro stood at the microphone.

Fidel... Fidel... Fidel... the multitude shouted. Then in some portion of that huge crowd a group began shouting "Cuba, Si; Yankees, No", and soon that chant had superimposed itself of the other, and won out over the first. The same thing happened when still a new chant began:

Fidel, seguro
A los yankees dale duro

Fidel, for sure
Hit the yankees hard

The national anthem boomed out of the loudspeakers. The million voices sang: "To die for your country is to live".

Fidel Castro began. "I am going to be brief" he said. Someone in front of the reviewing stand shouted "Anything you want, Fidel. Don't make it short for us". (Lo que sea, Fidel).

Castro, affectionately called "the horse" by the Cubans because of his tremendous endurance, spoke for three hours.

He spoke of Cuba's enemies and of Cuba's progress under the revolution. Then he spoke of the meaning of patriotism.

"It was the custom on the part of a group of men to speak a great deal of 'our Nation'... But what 'Nation'? A 'Nation' where one man has 33,000 acres of land and three mansions while others live in miserable shacks.

"To which 'Nation', Mister, do you refer? The 'Country' where a few have all the opportunities and appropriate the work of all the rest. A 'Place' where men don't have work, where families live in poverty-ridden shacks; where a lot of hungry and barefoot children who beg in the streets! To what 'Nation' did they refer? The one that was the property of the few to the exclusion of all the rest...".

"In our nation now a days, we have won the right of directing our own destiny and of building a future that, of necessity, will have to be better than the present. It is a nation where no more can be said that it be the property of some few or that it be for the benefit of some few.

"Our nation will be from now on and for always what Marti wanted when he said, "With all and for the good of all"...

From the bombings of April 15 to May Day, 1961.-- Fifteen days that helped to consolidate and define the Cuban revolution.

When I finished reading through those notes made a decade ago, I thought of the situation today. Cuba has no unemployment. There is free medical care and education for everyone. There is no drug addiction and very, very few assaults with deadly weapons. Hundreds of thousands don't pay any rent at all while others only pay ten percent of their wages. They

don't need charities to take care of the sickly poor, the Government does that. There is no begging on the streets of Cuba and no tipping in hotels, restaurants or anyplace else. Education, employment and recreation are opened to black and white alike on an equal basis.

Cuba is waging a hard battle to pull itself out of its inherited underdevelopment.

Then I thought of the prevailing situation in most of Latin America where poverty, national submission, economic stagnation, corruption, delinquency and pillage rule the roost.

It was after midnight. I walked among the people in the Square. Most of them were sitting or lying on the ground. They were weary, exhausted from the long, exciting and hot day. Fidel Castro's voice, however, still came over the loudspeakers strong and vibrant.

Finally, after 1:00 am, the speech ended. The International came over the amplifiers and the people, on their feet now, sang, locking arms and rocking to the rhythm.

The fifteen days from the bombings of April 15 to May Day 1961 had come to an end.

I closed my spiral notebook and scrawled across the front of it - "15 Days that Shook the Continent - April 1961".