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CUBA REMAINS SILENT ON REPORTED DEFECTION OF HERO GENERAL BY LIONEL MARTIN, REUTERS

HAVANA, MAY 29, REUTER - THE CUBAN GOVERNMENT REMAINED SILENT TODAY ON THE REPORTED DEFECTION OF A GENERAL BUT OFFICIAL PUBLICATIONS SHOW NO MENTION OF HIM AS DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF OR AIR FORCE CHIEF AS CLAIMED IN WASHINGTON.

THE U.S. JUSTICE DEPARTMENT SAID YESTERDAY THAT BRIGADIER GENERAL RAFAEL DEL PINO NIÑO, IDENTIFIED AS A DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF AND FORMER CUBAN AIR FORCE CHIEF, FLEW HIMSELF AND FOUR OF HIS FAMILY IN A SMALL PLANE TO A NAVAL BASE NEAR KEY WEST, FLORIDA.

DEL PINO IS REGARDED AS ONE OF THE OUTSTANDING HEROES OF THE VICTORY OF FIDEL CASTRO'S FORCES OVER THE U.S. CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY-SPONSORED INVADERS AT THE BAY OF PIGS IN APRIL 1961.

IN 1982, HE WAS LISTED AS THE AIR COMBAT INSTRUCTOR OF THE BAY OF PIGS GUARD AERIAL BRIGADE BY AN OFFICIAL U.S. PUBLICATION DISTRIBUTED BY THE U.S. INFORMATION SERVICE TO JOURNALISTS IN HAVANA.

A CUBAN OFFICIAL WHO ASKED TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS TOLD REUTERS DEL PINO WOULD NOT HAVE ACCESS TO ALL THE SECRETS OF THE CUBAN ARMED FORCES BUT THAT AS AN AIR FORCE GENERAL HE WAS UNDOUBTEDLY FAMILIAR WITH CONTINGENCY PLANS IN CASE OF AN ATTACK ON THE ISLAND AND MANY DETAILS ABOUT THE AIR FORCE.

ACCORDING TO CUBAN OFFICIALS, DEL PINO HAS NEVER BEEN MENTIONED OFFICIALLY OR IN THE PRESS AS DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTIONARY ARMED FORCES, AS THE DEFENCE MINISTRY IS CALLED, OR AS AIR FORCE CHIEF.

WHEN THE CIA-BACKED INVASION CAME, THE 23-YEAR-OLD FLYER, WHO HAD LESS THAN 100 HOURS OF FLYING TIME LOGGED AND HAD NEVER FIRED FROM A PLANE IN TARGET PRACTICE, TOOK UP A T-33 JET COMBAT TRAINER TO MEET THE ENEMY.

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IN HIS FIRST ENCOUNTER, DEL PINO SHOT DOWN ONE OF THE B-26 BOMBERS THAT HAD BEEN SENT FROM AN AIR BASE IN CENTRAL AMERICA TO SUPPORT THE INVADERS.

DEL PINO WROTE A BOOK DESCRIBING HIS EXPLOITS AT THE BAY OF PIGS.

DESPITE HIS HERO STATUS, DEL PINO NEVER BECAME ONE OF THE POLICY-MAKERS IN THE CUBAN ARMED FORCES ALTHOUGH HE ROSE TO THE RANK OF GENERAL.

ACCORDING TO BIOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL AVAILABLE IN HAVANA, DEL PINO ATTENDED A SCHOOL IN THE UNITED STATES WHEN HE WAS A TEENAGER.

THE GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED MEDIA MADE NO MENTION OF THE INCIDENT, BUT MANY CUBANS HEARD THE NEWS ON VOICE OF AMERICA AND RADIO MARTI, TWO U.S. GOVERNMENT-OWNED STATIONS WHICH BROADCAST THEIR NEWS BULLETINS TO CUBA IN SPANISH.

REUTER