

A Listening Post in Miami

Justin F. Gleichauf

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Justin F. Gleichauf served in the Directorate of Intelligence.

In early January 1959, Fidel Castro forced the ouster of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista and would soon assume control in Havana. I had no inkling that within two weeks I would be in Miami as head—and sole staffer—of a newly authorized field office of the Domestic Contacts Division in the Directorate of Intelligence. My task would be to monitor and report on developments in Cuba. The Headquarters briefing was short and not particularly enlightening as to my new duties: “Basically, use your own good judgment....” Raul Castro and Che Guevara were definitely identified as Communists, but Fidel’s political status was still uncertain. *The New York Times* had no such doubt. Herbert L. Matthews, its Latin American expert, viewed Castro as a latter-day Robin Hood, whose program “...although vague and couched in generalities, represents a New Deal for Cuba.”

When I arrived in Miami, the first wave of Cuban “refugees” had landed, some on their yachts, with jewels and *objets d’art*. Palm Beach became a safehaven for “Bastianos,” including Batista’s son-in-law. In contacts with them, I was never impressed with their opposition to Castro, although one offered the services of the captain of his yacht, who would “do anything” CIA desired. The trickle of refugees soon became a flood as the signs of a Communist state became more evident through the “intervention” of businesses and property. It did not take long for Robin Hood to change roles, and Castro’s firing squads took care of

several hundred dissidents, including a number of Americans.

My first problem in Miami was to learn who was doing what with the new arrivals. I found that 13 Federal agencies were actively dealing with Cubans, including INS; Border Patrol; Customs; Coast Guard; State Department; Health, Education and Welfare (HEW); the FBI; Army CIC; Navy ONI; Air Force OSI; and local law enforcement agencies. I made the rounds to introduce myself as CIA’s representative. Many were relieved to get rid of time-consuming problems, and all were cooperative. We soon formed an informal group of those most concerned with Cuban refugees, and we met regularly for lunch. Usual red tape among agencies was minimal.

The Intelligence Community (IC) was starved for any current information from Cuba. Because there was no direct air service from Cuba to Central or South America, all shipments to the area had to pass through the Pan American Airways base in Miami. Every night, I would head for the PAA base warehouse and pick up 17 copies of every newspaper, magazine, or other printed matter en route south. This included *Granma*, official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party, and *Olivo Verde*, which glorified the Cuban armed forces. Nothing could be done with the many tins of propaganda film heading south, but I was informed that quite a number were “accidentally” run over by a fork-lift truck.

Drumming Up Business

I also set about contacting representatives of American business interests whose properties had been taken over, and received complete and enthusiastic cooperation, including detailed information on oil refining, mining, industrial production, and sugar plantations. One aircraft maintenance and repair facility in Miami still held a contract to service FAR, the Cuban air force, and Cubana, the national airline. Many military and civilian pilots reportedly were disenchanted with Castro. I passed the word along, and shortly thereafter Pedro Diaz Lanz, commander of the FAR; his brother, the Inspector-General; and several top pilots of Cubana defected, which infuriated Castro.

To become more available to would-be informants, I listed a CIA phone number in the telephone book, and passed around a lot of cards with my home number. I heard from a motley collection of weirdos, but it paid off many times. One call was from a Canadian newsman who had been arrested and jailed briefly in Havana. A cellmate told him that he was a member of a CIA network that had been rolled up. Knowing he faced a firing squad, he wanted the Canadian to contact CIA on arrival in Miami and advise that any further messages from the network would be phony. He was a brave man, as were many in Castro's opposition.

There was no shortage of Castro sympathizers in Miami, as I soon found out. A brick was thrown through the windshield of my car parked outside the house, and my wife received a number of threatening calls along the lines of "...[x-

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date] will be a day that you and your family will never forget....” I received a barrage of late-night phone calls, with the caller remaining silent when I answered. I memorized Spanish insults, which I directed at Fidel via the open line. The calls eventually dwindled.

Initially, Headquarters directed me to contact a number of self-proclaimed influential political figures who boasted strong support which could be converted into armed resistance once CIA gave them the “green light” (read dollars).

There were scores of other opportunists in the Miami area, including gun merchants eager to sell equipment to the literally hundreds of “resistance” groups in the area. Newsphotos were common of grim-faced men in fatigues, holding rifles. There were also lots of would-be Mata Haris, eager to do anything for the cause. And I ran across a lot of soldiers of fortune looking for a fast buck. I did like one tall Texan who flew small planes. He “specialized” in setting Cuban sugar cane fields on fire. He did not heed my warning to stop, and he was shot down and killed. Another young man who also refused my pleas for caution was the son of an American, the longtime owner of a sugar plantation seized by the Castro regime. In

Miami, he joined a resistance group and returned to Cuba. The group was quickly captured and executed by a firing squad.

Back at the Office

My staff eventually numbered four, with the addition of one Air Force and two Army Spanish-speaking intelligence officers. We continued to try to interview leads provided by contacts at the INS and Customs facilities at the airport. The leads were hard to track down as they soon melded into the Cuban community and moved often.

After some time, a representative from the Clandestine Service (CS) was assigned to Miami, and we shared office space. On occasion, I filled in for him when he was otherwise occupied. Once, I was involved in the rescue of an officer of the anti-Communist bureau under Batista. A staybehind agent had arranged his escape via a small tramp steamer sailing from Cuba to Tampa. When he got off the ship, he was an astonishing sight; he had been hidden in the coal bin. I got him to a motel, cleaned him up, bought him a new set of clothes, and sent him on his way to Washington.

Parades and Helicopters

One of Castro's major public events was his annual 26th of July parade, commemorating the 1953 date of his abortive attack on the Moncado Barracks, following which he was captured and imprisoned, but later released under a general amnesty. (He then returned to Mexico,

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where he met Che Guevara and resumed his plotting against Batista.)

Castro showed off his military forces and militia, complete with Soviet-supplied equipment and, as usual, he talked for hours. Cuban TV gave the event full coverage, but reception in Miami was poor and unreliable. We obtained permission to set up a TV reception operation in the Florida Keys. Results were so promising that the Agency established a major reception post in Key West, only 90 miles from Havana, which was effective.

Key West was also the scene of some fast-breaking events. A FAR pilot brought in a MiG-15. Another involved the hijacking of a Soviet MI-8 helicopter; two air cadets shot the pilot and landed the copter at Key West Airport. The US military thoroughly checked out both aircraft, and we debriefed the pilots at length in safehouses. The MI-8 was especially interesting. An inspector told me that it was a “Rube Goldberg piece of equipment” but that it required less time for maintenance and repairs than advanced US helicopters.

Bay of Pigs Support

In early 1961, we had a stream of visitors from Headquarters as the planning for an invasion of Cuba began. This required a lot of support. With a real estate officer from Headquarters, I arranged for the lease of a strategic island for a dollar a year, visited the governor and the head of the Florida Highway Patrol to obtain a bloc of nonattributable license plates, and got fast

approval of space required to house a communications base, whose equipment was already en route to Miami.

Before the invasion, our relationships with the press and TV media had been exceptionally good, with no flaps. When *The New York Times* broke the story of the CIA Cuban-training base in Guatemala, however, local stories and photo coverage of Cuban Brigade 2506 recruiting centers and “black” flights out of Opalocka airfield broke wide open.

When the invasion began on 17 April 1961, I stayed close to my CS cohorts and was with them when the last messages were received from the ill-fated invaders, a sad period. I knew a number of the brave members of the Brigade, some of whom were past military age, but they still volunteered.

Many months later, after the Brigade had been ransomed for \$53 million in medical and other supplies, I watched the tribute in the Miami Orange Bowl to the Brigade. The stadium was nearly filled, and the survivors stood proudly at attention in the field as President Kennedy, presented with the Brigade flag, shouted, “I can assure you that this flag will be returned to this Brigade in a free Havana!” The stands erupted in emotion. Years later, the Brigade had a difficult time in regaining the banner from the Kennedy Library in Massachusetts.

A Boost from Washington

Following the failed invasion, our interrogation of new Cuban arrivals continued. Refugees were coming in at the rate of 1,700 per week via air, small boats, and even rafts made of old truck-tire inner tubes. Just before Christmas 1961, the late George McManus, Special Assistant to Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Allen Dulles visited me at home. The DCI wanted to know why there was so little reporting on Cuba. I replied that, with four interrogators and no interviewing facilities, we could not begin to cope with the influx. I added that I repeatedly had recommended establishment of a formal reception and interrogation center similar to the Camp Kilmer operation in 1957, where Hungarian Freedom Fighters and refugees were processed and interrogated.

Within two weeks, I was in Washington meeting with top officials of the Agency, the State Department, the INS, and the JCS. The President approved the project, and McManus was directed to draw up the charter, and I was to prepare the table of organization and direct the operation. The center was to open by 15 March 1962, by presidential directive.

Having served at Camp Kilmer, I was aware of the problems of loose direction and bitter rivalry among services for sources. While officially under cover of a third agency, the refugee interrogation center was under CIA direction, provided administrative and logistic support, and was solely responsible for the distribution of reporting to the IC. The JCS called

on all services for Spanish-speaking personnel, brought in from far-flung assignments. My deputy, Col. Samuel G. Kail, former Army attaché in Havana, and an outstanding officer, handled military administrative matters. The arrangement worked well; we never had a case of dissension between military and civilian personnel, or rivalry among services.

Preparations for the new center involved a search for a suitable location and accommodations. A long-unused World War II Marine airbase at Opalocka, Florida, was selected, and a compound was laid out consisting of two decrepit barracks, which had to be completely rebuilt. There was a host of imposing administrative and logistic tasks to accomplish, but somehow we managed to be ready on schedule to operate within two months.

Molding an Effective Unit

We operated on a seven-day-a-week basis. One team screened arrivals for knowledgeability, and a second team conducted interrogations in depth. Refugees could be held for a maximum of three days before being turned over to HEW for resettlement. We averaged 150 interrogations per day, but on 4 July 1962 a Red Cross ship brought over 500 refugees to Fort Lauderdale.

Women were not housed or interviewed at the center, but a Cuban-born, female Army intelligence officer contacted them. She was one of the first officers of the Women's Auxiliary Corps of World

War II, recalled to help on the Cuban problem, and she was one of our best interviewers.

The military staff consisted of about 50 personnel from all services, enlisted and commissioned, many with Puerto Rican or Mexican-American backgrounds. We had a lot of problems at the start. Almost none of the military had experience in intelligence, and they had to be trained in how to conduct interviews. CIA editors worked overtime converting native Spanish phraseology into clear, concise English. We also had to prepare a special glossary of "Cubanese." Many military assignees became very proficient, and some were outstanding interrogators.

We obtained a vast amount of information on developments in Cuba, in response to IC requirements. Under Colonel Kail's direction, military order of battle information was particularly good.

In the early stages of operation, we found Cubans to be optimistic about the possibility of a successful internal revolt. In March 1962, 66 percent of those interviewed believed an internal revolt would occur. As time went by, however, we began receiving increasing reports of arms shipments from the USSR and arrival in large numbers of young, able-bodied Russians in varicolored shirts (unit designations). Many Soviet ships carried large objects in crates, unloaded at night under strict security. Frequently, regular Cuban stevedore crews were dismissed and ordered out of the area, and the ships were

unloaded by special stevedore groups.

The Soviet Missile Crisis

A feeling of despondency became evident among new arrivals, especially during the summer months. By September, the number who felt an internal revolt would occur fell to 5 percent. Charts used in briefing visitors reflected the sharp decline. We also forwarded increasing reports of missiles, scoffed at by analysts who judged that, even if true, they would represent only defensive missiles. In their view, Khrushchev would never risk introducing offensive missiles into Cuba.

On a Sunday afternoon in mid-September 1962, a new arrival reported that six days before his departure, he had observed a large Soviet truck convoy at night leaving the Havana dock area under tight security. The trucks towed 65- to 70-foot trailers carrying objects so large they extended over the ends of the trailers. The objects were covered, but they had large fins. One of our best men, an Army lieutenant colonel, was conducting the interview and immediately recognized the potential significance of the information. He asked the refugee to sketch the object he had seen. It compared with photos of the Soviet SS-4, a medium-range ballistic missile capable of hitting most of the eastern United States. He then asked the refugee to identify the missile he had seen from various photos of several types of Soviet missiles, and the refugee picked the SS-4.

It was decided to put the report, identifying a possible SS-4, on the teletype to Headquarters immediately. It created a sensation. President Kennedy ordered a U-2 reconnaissance mission over the area, but heavy cloud cover hampered visibility until 14 October, when a flight proved conclusively that offensive missiles were indeed present in Cuba, and that missile-site construction was proceeding on a crash basis.

On 17 September, we obtained a second refugee report of the sighting of a large convoy in Pinar del Rio Province, carrying several possible missiles. It dovetailed with the original report and helped to trigger the targeting of the 14 October U-2 flight. The Cuban missile crisis was on!

Following confirmation of offensive missiles in Cuba, Florida quickly became an armed camp. Military convoys clogged highways, the railroad line to

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Homestead Air Force Base was jammed with military supplies, and rockets sprouted along the Overseas Highway. The 82nd Airborne took over Opalocka Airbase, and we moved elsewhere on 24-hours notice. As one of my last support activities for an expected invasion, I obtained 6,000 road maps of Cuba from a major oil company, ideal because of detailed local information. But Khrushchev backed down, and the maps were not needed.

Moving On

The Center remained active for several years, but it had lost its purpose. We provided support on a continuing basis to the CS base, but maritime harassment actions were little more than pinpricks against

Cuba, and the base was eventually closed.

Sometime later, I was assigned to open a new field office. But my departure was not the end of my Miami experience. In retirement, in 1980, I was recalled to assist in processing the chaotic influx of over 120,000 Cubans in the Mariel boatlift, as Castro outwitted us again, dumping thousands of criminals and other undesirables on us.

It is ironic that Castro is the ultimate survivor of the Cuban revolution. He has outlasted his ninth US president, powerful supporters in the Kremlin, fellow Latin American revolutionaries, a brain drain of a vast number of Cubans, and his own military and economic blunders.