

THE 'BAY OF PIGS'

Cuban Revolution Revisited

William Galvez

THE plans to invade Cuba were an open secret, as was the fact that Allen Dulles and Richard Bissell, first and second in command at the CIA, trained a mercenary force in Guatemalan territory with the intention of attacking the island.

When Kennedy was elected president of the United States in November 1960, he inherited the plans against Cuba that former President Eisenhower had approved. Eisenhower had completely suspended the Cuban sugar quota and diplomatic relations. Considering that a change of government in its northern neighbor could be seen as an opportune moment to execute an armed assault, the revolutionary government ordered the general mobilization of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) and Nationalist Revolutionary Militias (MNR).

The night before Kennedy was inaugurated as president on January 20, 1961, Eisenhower said to his successor: "At the present time, we are helping to train anti-Castro forces in Guatemala." It was his recommendation that this effort be continued and accelerated.

Of all the signs that a mercenary aggression could take place at any moment, the most evident was a document titled the White Paper, published by the US State Department on April 5. Raul Roa, minister of foreign affairs at that time, believed that the document was in fact "an undeclared declaration of war." Roa added: "The United States is seeking to have Cuba condemned by the OAS and then have a free hand to sweep away the Cuban Revolution... the current stage of the US plan of aggression against Cuba is the phase from undeclared war to declared war."

At dawn on April 15, Fidel was informed from Oriente province that several boats had been located to the north of Baracoa. Battalions in that area, reinforced with mortar and anti-tank batteries, were immediately put on alert.

At around six in the morning of that same Saturday, April 15, Fidel and those accompanying him observed a B-26 nearby and, after a few minutes, they heard bombs exploding, followed by anti-aircraft fire. It was the attack on the Ciudad Libertad Air-base, where the Artillery School was also. Another enemy plane immediately joined the first. Given that situation, Fidel exclaimed: "This is the aggression!" and immediately communicated with the San Antonio Airbase in Havana and the Santiago de Cuba base. He discovered out that they had also been attacked and responded to the aggression in a similar way. One of the two bombers attacking Ciudad Libertad in the capital was hit by the firing.

Aware that any invasion is always preceded by an air attack with the marked objective of destroying existing aircraft and given that the country had very few B-26s, jets or Sea-Furys, the comandante had ordered the planes to be dispersed and their protection reinforced. Therefore, at the three airports, only two fighter planes- one used for transport and the other for passengers - and several small civil aircraft were destroyed. The enemy used six fighter jets in its surprise aggression, two per base. Nevertheless, the Cuban artillerymen –aged

from 15 to 20—like the pilots, responded with a tremendous combative disposition.

The response was so rapid and resounding that the enemy planes did not return. Fidel immediately wrote a communique for the people, informing them of what had happened. "...All Cubans should occupy their corresponding posts in military units and workplaces without interrupting production, the literacy campaign or any revolutionary task. The homeland will calmly and steadfastly resist any enemy attack, convinced of its victory. Patria o Muerte! Venceremos!"

The Commander in Chief visited the airports that had been attacked. In each place he issued instructions in the event of fresh attacks. On Sunday, April 16, 1961, addressing the people from an improvised stage on 23rd and 12th Streets on one side of Colon Caffiety, Fidel proclaimed the socialist character of the Cuban Revolution to a huge gathering of mostly rebel soldiers and militamen with their weapons held high.

Pearl Harbor (7/12/41) reminds the US people of villainy, cowardliness and felony; ...it was an act that US history and opinion anathematize as an outrageous act, as a treacherous act, as a cowardly act... Yesterday's crime, however, was the crime of imperialist exploiters against a people who wish to free themselves from exploitation, against a people that wants to institute justice."

The central aspect of that speech corresponded to the system of government that Cuba would adopt: "...This is what they cannot forgive, that we are there under their noses, and that we have made a socialist Revolution under the nose of the United States...!"

"This is a socialist and democratic Revolution of the humble, by the humble, and for the humble. And for this Revolution of the humble, by the humble, and for the humble we are willing to give our lives..."

Immediately after the bombardment on April 15, hundreds of thousands of armed men were in their combat positions and ready to face the aggressors, although the enemy's landing point was unknown. That same day, the mercenary brigade that would land in Cuba was transferred from Retalhuleu, Guatemala to Nicaragua, where they boarded vessels moored at Puerto Cabezas.

Fidel studied the distinct parts of the puzzle. There was a suspicious presence of boats quite a distance away, to the north of Oriente, Camaguey and Havana, although they showed no signs of heading toward the shore. At 12:15 a.m. news arrived from Punta Perdiz, in the Bay of Pigs, of large black shapes approaching the shore. Seconds later, they informed that they were shelling.

From his command post at dawn on the Monday, Fidel asked for verification of that news and was informed that the enemy had heavily shelled the coasts of Playa Giron and Playa Larga and then disembarked, and that the squadron guarding this area was resisting valiantly. A little later the paratroopers parachuted in, confirming that this area would be the main landing point. Fidel ordered the first reinforcement units to move toward that zone.

The entire armed forces were put on alert, especially the Air Force. A battalion from the Australia sugar complex, another from Cienfuegos, and one from the Militia School in Matanzas were sent into the combat zone. At the same time he ordered the battalions in the capital, among them the Special Troop Battalion of the Rebel Army, to be ready for action.

He also ordered a squadron of B-26 bombers in San Antonio to dispatch three fighter jets at 05:20 to attack enemy planes, boats and trucks.

Instructions to send troops to towns in the vicinity of the landing area were given to the military leadership in the former province of Las Villas. One of the battalions fought the enemy and impeded the landing of more units. The Cuban Air Force attacked enemy vessels to avoid more mercenaries coming ashore or to frighten them off. It also attacked aircraft firing on the Cuban troops that had to hold the territory of the Australia sugar complex at all costs, and take Palpite.

Aware of the US plans, Fidel directed every aspect of the operations to confront and destroy the invaders. He had to avoid by any means their taking possession of the beachhead, an action that would allow them to proclaim a "government in arms."

Next he ordered the advance on and capture of Playa Largo and wrote another communique to inform the people of what was happening. In the final part he affirmed: "Onward Cubans, everyone to their command posts and workplaces! Onward Cubans, this Revolution is invincible and against it and against the heroic people that defend it all enemies will be crushed....!"

News from the foreign press of landings in Guantanamo was refuted by Commander Raul Castro, who was in charge of the eastern territory. Engaging in those deceptive maneuvers was part of the plan of attack. The vessels remained in sight of the northern coasts of Oriente, Camaguey and Havana, and all possible landing points were reinforced. A reserve command post was created in the capital, Havana. With the help of the CDRs, the security agencies neutralized all possible fifth columns throughout the country.

Having taken every measure to repel other possible landings in various parts of the country, Fidel moved toward the disembarkation point. Arriving in Jovellanos, he met the five tanks sent there and ordered their commander to advance to Palpite and coordinate with the troops there the capture of Playa Larga, which had already begun.

Shortly after his arrival at the Australia mill, the commander in chief was informed of the current situation. He placed his command post there and left for Palpite, coordinating the Playa Larga attack. Even though Palpite was coming under fire from the enemy artillery, he did not leave until he had organized the actions. He then returned to the command post, the only place from which he could communicate with his chief of staff in the capital and be informed about everything that was occurring throughout the country.

Early in the morning of the 18th, Fidel informed Cuba and the world of the development of events in his Communique No 2. The offensive started at dawn on the 18th. He was kept abreast of everything that was occurring and gave orders to send in more troops, stating that they should advance toward Playa Giron. The role of the air force was vital. With all of that force, possessed by a patriotic love and a reason for fighting, their advance was unstoppable. In the face of that advance, the aggressors, without offering any resistance, abandoned the key position of the plan in desperation. Playa Larga was taken at 10:30 a.m. on April 18.

The leader of the Revolution ordered them to continue the offensive toward Playa Giron. He continued giving instruction for more troops to advance to the battlefield. Despite seeking to liquidate the mercenary force as quickly as possible, he did not display impatience. He communicated again with Almeida

in the Las Villas capital. The latter explained the movement of the troops that had been sent from the east to the southern coast. Fidel indicated with detail what they should do and where they should place themselves to avoid being confused with those advancing from other directions.

Although the action of six B-26's, two of which were piloted by US citizens authorized by the CIA, halted the offensive from Playa Larga to Giron, causing heavy troop casualties, the advance was reinitiated. It was clear to Fidel that the mercenaries would not achieve their objective, but he wanted to avoid them re-boarding their vessels at all costs.

Before dawn on April 19, the mercenaries' despair was total. Fidel ordered the Cuban fighter planes to remain in the territory. From beginning their mission, they had brought down five enemy aircraft and before 8:00 a.m. they had destroyed two more.

Fidel wrote the April 19 No 3 communique, laying out evidence of the participation of US pilots: "...Of course, this entire battle was fought in the full view of the Yanki squadron and Yanki aircraft carrier. Nobody knew what they were going to do or what they might do; but nobody was frightened of that..."

Fidel remained on course to San Blase. He stopped in the town of Helechal where he found several tanks. He was informed of the developments of the offensive, and he specified instructions for troop commanders present there. He told the commander of the tank regiment to advance without stopping to Giron and to wait for him there. He got into the third tank, prompting the opposition of various revolutionary guards. His energetic response, was more or less: "I'm the chief of the Revolution and, as chief of the Revolution, I have the right to fight and to enter Playa Giron, just as the other compafieros are going to do..."

Around 5:30 p.m., the revolutionary troops were at the gates of Playa Giron. The enemy resisted strongly, but faced with the tremendous valor of the revolutionary troops, multiplied by the personal example of the commander in chief, which converted them into an uncontrollable iron fist, the mercenaries were seized with panic. Some of them managed to re-board their vessels via the small boats on the beach. A little later, Fidel wrote a communique informing everyone of the revolutionary triumph: "Forces of the Rebel Army and the National Revolutionary Militias took by assault the last positions occupied by the invading mercenary forces on national territory. Playa Giron, which was the last point of the mercenaries, fell at 5:30 in the afternoon." He added: "The Revolution has been victorious, while paying a high cost in lives of valiant combatants... who confronted the invaders and attacked them incessantly without any respite, destroying, in less than 72 hours, the army organized over many months by the imperialist US government..."

History has engraved the event forever as "the first major defeat of US imperialism in America". □□□

[Source : Granma International]