

Preface

This year after some serious soul searching, I decided to make a small contribution to the historical study of events related to Cuba and the JFK assassination. In 2000 I found some information on-line about my father's presumed role in a summary of the 1999 JFK Lancer NID conference from a presentation given by Larry Hancock entitled "Keys to the Conspiracy". I saw in Larry's work a journalist with a passion for the truth and an even handed style. Since that time I have spoken with Larry on numerous occasions and appreciate his continuing work on a painful but important chapter in recent American History.

My objective is neither to condone nor justify the actions of those misguided "November Patriots", but rather to help provide some context so that historians and other interested parties may better understand the "why" of the events of that saddest day in American history in my lifetime. I will seek to confine my account to events that I directly witnessed. I have no written records of conversations or events. I am not a journalist, but have always had a good memory for details.

It is my sincerest hope that any perspective I can help provide will aid historical interpretations. If I am in some small way successful perhaps my witness will help us all heal the still open wounds that were burned into our collective psyche that fateful November day in Dallas.

Jan 1959 –After the Castro take over

- I was supposed to go to Cuba with Mom and Dad that year for Christmas, but I got sick in mid-December and missed the trip. I'd be 13 in February 1959 and the trip would have been an early present. Mom and I watched the news as Castro's rebels took over and Bastista fled. Dad was stuck in Havana's Deauville Hotel for almost two weeks after the coup but he called to let us know he was ok.
- After Dad got home, he told us that there was a lot of anti-American sentiment in Cuba as soon as the rebels took over. My Dad and his friends, Alan and Marian Roth stayed inside the hotel as it was not safe on the streets until things calmed down.
- At that time there was a local talk radio program run by Alan Courtney. Dad made several anonymous calls describing the post coup chaos and the anti-American attitudes he had witnessed. At that time, the American press was very pro-Castro, but Dad saw some signs of things to come and reported them as he saw them. If memory serves me correctly Dad reported seeing some anti-American graffiti in the form of "Yankee Go Home".

July23-28 1959 “My Italian Bar Mitzvah”

- **Quick trip to Havana**

After my Mom, brother, sister and I returned from a family vacation to NJ, my Dad, John Martino, was preparing for short trip back to Havana. I had been promised a trip to Cuba the Christmas before, but I contracted pneumonia in mid-December that year and Dad gave me a rain check. The stated purpose of the trip was to determine if the casinos would be able to reopen soon along with a radio paging service my Dad was hoping to start.

So, on one day's notice, I packed an overnight bag and we flew to Cuba via Cubana Air the afternoon of July 23rd. We passed customs with no problems. My Dad's friend Rafael, a greyhound trainer, met us at the airport and drove us to the Hotel Continental. After dinner, my Dad excused himself saying he had to go see someone to deliver a message. He did not elaborate and took a cab to this meeting. Rafael and I went to the dog track for a short time and returned to the hotel at about 9PM to wait for my Dad's return.

- **Hotel room arrest**

Time passed slowly that evening and sometime after midnight, there was a thud on the door. I was still awake waiting for Dad when a group of 5 or 6 men entered the room, some bearded and dressed in khaki, the Castro Revolutionary uniform, several clean shaven and wearing plain clothes. All were armed and the men in khaki held .45 submachine guns.

Needless to say we offered no resistance. There was no physical mistreatment, but the weapons were pointed directly at us. I could not understand the Spanish conversation but Rafael explained that there was a problem and that we were going to be taken to police headquarters.

We were driven downtown and I was placed outside the Chief of Police's Office at what I later learned was the Central Division (main police headquarters). This smallish castle was across to Malecon from La Cabana Fortress in Havana. I think I dozed until dawn on a chair located on the wide staircase outside the Chief's outer office which was enclosed in glass. My Dad was being "interviewed" inside the inner office behind a wooden door and at one point he was brought downstairs past me, but we were not permitted to speak to each other.

- **AM chance meeting with American Embassy Official Gilchrist**

There were others on the staircase, a woman with 2 or 3 small children and some other people who I did not know. I spoke little Spanish at this time, so I was confused and remained quiet. One of the arresting officers had asked in the car me through Rafael about the “private plane” we had entered Cuba on. Rafael had given them my return ticket and tourist visa in the hotel room but they seemed convinced that my Dad and I had entered the country illegally.

Sometime after 8AM, I saw 2 men who looked American coming up the stairs. I called out to them. One, I learned later was the American vice Counsel, a Mr. Gilchrist. I told him I was American, that my Dad and I had been arrested, and that I did not understand what was happening. He said he’d look into the matter and then went upstairs to the Police Chief’s office. I had no further contact with Mr. Gilchrist or anyone else from the American Embassy until I was released 5 days later to my Mom who flew to Havana to bring me home. See more on that part below.

- **Speaking with my Dad from outside his holding cell**

Later that morning I was taken outside to the court yard where the holding cells were located. My Dad was in a cell with a number of other men. He looked haggard but otherwise unharmed. We spoke for a few minutes with him whispering in my ear. “They think we came down via private plane to get some people out”, he said. “I was delivering a message to a friend of a friend and we were all arrested.” “I was in the wrong place at the wrong time”. I told him they had said the same thing to me through Rafael about the private plane. He told me not to worry. I told him about the chance meeting with Mr. Gilchrist and he said it was good that I had identified myself. He said that it was a misunderstanding and that we’d be ok; we had our tickets and entry visas and that he had done nothing other than deliver the message.

- **Seeing the wreckage of the plane in the court yard**

After that I was taken back up stairs. On leaving the courtyard, I saw what looked like a tail section of a small plane that was just being moved inside the gates. I am not sure what this meant, except that the police placed it in clear view of the prisoners in the holding cell.

- **Hanging out in the detectives anteroom**

For the next two days nothing much happened. I was kept in the outside office of the detective group that had arrested us. They did not question me or try to converse with me. I knew little Spanish at that time and they did not speak English. They gave me a few magazines to read and just let me hang out. I was not under close guard but could not leave the floor. At night there was a small cot to sleep on in a room nearby. For breakfast, they served Cuban bread and café con leche. Lunch and dinner was rice and beans which I did not like and ate little of. Once, one detective showed me his nickel plated automatic, removed the clip, cleared the chamber and let me hold it. He was Black and seemed quite proud of his sidearm. Another time, a woman who looked like a hooker came in and spent an hour or so behind closed doors with 3 or 4 of the detectives. Afterward, they all seemed happy as they laughed and joked among themselves.

- **A Cuban sandwich**

On the third day, they taking me to a sandwich shop across the street for lunch and dinner for either a Cuban sandwich or Arroz con Pollo; a treat after the beans and rice.

- **July 26th tour while Castro Spoke**

The next day was July 26th a day apparently important to the revolution. Around 5 in the afternoon, some of the detectives and a woman who spoke English gave me an auto tour of the city. They pointed out the new sports palace claiming that the revolution had built it. I later learned that the Bastista government had actually built it. Castro was speaking in the square after dark and we stopped for awhile to hear him rant. Their mood was festive and I was glad to get out of the police station and see some of the city.

- **July 27th or 28th Mom comes to get me**

I am not sure after all these years if my Mom came for me on the 27th or the 28th. I remember us going to the home of Mr. Hugh Kessler, the American Council in Havana, who had a son a few years younger than me. I was very happy to see Mom and to get a hot shower and some clean clothes. Mom was upset about Dad but happy that I was out of jail.

- **A night in a hotel with a “bug” in the room**

Mr. Kessler then drove us to a hotel, The Tropicana, I think. We ate and watched part of the show. I guess Mom wanted me to unwind a little. There were few if any tourists there and the meal was strange somehow. The hotel atmosphere seemed a little unreal after the experience of the last 5 days. Later that night before we slept, I noticed a grill under the mattress near the head board. Underneath the grill was a barely visible microphone. Apparently the room was “bugged” which after all that had happened, did not surprise me. I asked about Dad and Mom said that Mr. Kessler was working on getting him out, not to worry that it was a mistake.

- **Home to Miami Beach**

The next day, we flew back to Miami and I started to think more about what was going to happen to my Dad. In hindsight I was in shock at that point but did not realize it until later.

- **Reflections of my experiences on Alan Courtney’s talk radio**

A few days later I recounted my experiences on a local talk radio program. (See above in the Jan. 1959, section for more on Alan Courtney.) I was certainly glad to be home, but I was worried about my Dad and still trying to make some sense out of the experience.

Sept. - Nov 1962

- **Dad is released after 39 months a changed man**

In early October 1962, my father was released from his Cuban prison as part of an exchange. I remember seeing him for the first time. He looked very thin with a short beard and veins protruding on his forehead. The years in jail had aged my Dad dramatically. As time went on, I'd understand just how much his ordeal had changed him.

Over the next few days Dad was de-briefed by several government officials. I recall one name, Rip, who Dad seemed to like, and who he continued to speak with in future.

- **Meeting with members of the Brigade 2506**

Within a week of Dad's release, an attorney named James Donovan was successful in negotiating with Castro for the release of the survivors of the ill fated Bay of Pigs invasion. I went with Dad to a meeting with several members of the Brigade at the Flagler Hotel in downtown Miami. I don't recall names, but I do recall that Dad was proud to be part of "la causa". He had made many friends while a political prisoner in Cuba, a number who were executed by Castro. From this point forward he sought to help the anti-Castro exiles attain their goal of a free Cuba.

- **Nathaniel Weyl and "I Was Castro's Prisoner"**

Through some family friends my Dad met Mr. Weyl, an author who had previously written a book about Fidel Castro's communist leanings entitled "Red Star Over Cuba". Dad dictated over 40 hours of source material which Mr. Weyl used to develop the manuscript for the book, "I Was Castro's Prisoner". I was present during some of the recordings, which have since been lost. Suffice it to say that Dad's experiences with his fellow political prisoners radicalized him dramatically. Before then, he was not interested in politics and to the best of my knowledge never voted.

For much of Dad's stay in Castro's jails he was confined in La Cabana Fortress where many of the most highly valued political prisoners were kept. I am not sure of the exact number of executions via firing squad that occurred during his imprisonment but there were many.

My father was "The American" for those prisoners. Many implored him to help their cause and tell their story upon his release. One priest gave him a silver Eucharist medal and chain that he always wore and was buried with. Another priest gave him a Bible that I have kept to this day.

Events I witnessed July 1959 through November 1963

That fall Dad and Mr. Weyl collaborated on his book which was published in June, 1963. After the publication, Dad began to speak all around the country before ultra-conservative groups such as the John Birch Society. He did not make much money during this period and the book had only a small printing, but he was determined to do his part to help "la causa". His health was not good, but he traveled a lot and had a lot of energy considering what he had been through.

June-July 1963

- **Dinner table discussion about the "Russian defector wannabes"**

Now let's fast forward to early summer of 1963. Anti-Castro Cubans seemed to trust my father due to his former political prisoner status. Often they would bring rumors or "bolas" to him. I do not recall where this one came from, but there was a dinner table discussion about some Russians who wanted to defect to the US. After the "Missiles of October" crisis in 1962 some exiles thought that Castro still had nuclear weapons. The rumor that came to Dad was that some Russian missile officers had proof that these weapons did indeed exist in Cuba. Their hope was that an "extraction" of these Russians along with some publicity provided by national media could prove that Castro and the Russians had broken the agreement made between JFK and Khrushchev to remove offensive nuclear weapons. This proof would then pave the way to more military action against the Castro regime. I recall the name Richard Billings, who was a photo-journalist for Life Magazine. Additionally, William Pawley, a local businessman and arch conservative was mentioned as possible sponsor for such a mission. I do not recall the exact context of how these ideas were developed, but they led to the next step.

- **Meeting with Dad and William Pawley at his house on Sunset Island**

Mr. Pawley's home was on one of the Sunset Islands off the western side of Miami Beach several blocks from our home on Alton Road. I attended an initial meeting there with my Dad and Mr. Pawley during which they discussed the rumor of the Russian wannabe defectors. As I recall, Mr. Pawley had a picture of Richard Billings in his study so they were acquainted. Mr. Pawley had a yacht that was to be used as the staging vessel for a group that was to go on-shore in Cuba to extract the Russians.

I was not involved in any subsequent meetings with my Dad and Mr. Pawley. To the best of my knowledge, the plan was put into play over the next 6 weeks or so.

- **Introduction to “Gerry Patrick” and “Bayo” at dinner**

Soon after that initial meeting my Dad had two military types over to our house for dinner. Gerry Patrick (Hemming) and (Eddie) Bayo, Gerry was a very imposing, 6’ 4” persona who wore camo fatigues. Bayo was slightly built and rather dark skinned. Bayo spoke no English but was quietly very intense. I understood that Jerry was to be the team trainer and that Bayo was the team lead for the expedition, often named in print the “Bayo-Pawley” affair. I only saw one other member of the group, another thin, dark skinned man called Virgilio.

- **More dinner table discussions of the plans**

During the next month or so, Jerry and Bayo visited my Dad on numerous occasions. The training was conducted in the everglades and there was a team of 16 or so members who were getting ready to execute the extraction. The exiles were very concerned about two things: 1) that Life Magazine was on-board for the needed publicity and 2) that the CIA (who they called “the company”) was not involved with the mission.

- **Dad and team leave for the mission**

One night in July, I was told to stay out with my friends a little past my midnight curfew. That night the team was to meet at the house next door to my Dad’s (2337 Alton which belonged to a friend and was vacant at the time). I saw a bus come and park inside the large yard as I was on my way out for the evening. It was a weekend but I am not sure of the exact date or night. The plan was for Dad and the *Life Magazine* people to fly down on a seaplane and rendezvous with the team who were motoring down on Pawley’s yacht.

- **Dad returns with some bad news**

Several days later Dad returned saying that the “boys” had launched via raft heading toward the Cuban coast, but were not heard from again and may have been lost at sea. He also said that “the company” had air cover in place and a mother ship to coordinate the mission along with heavier armament for the team. Apparently, the exiles were not informed of the CIA involvement until they were underway. I have no independent verification of these facts, but Dad was disheartened with the events. He mentioned that Rip had been involved and he feared what had become of the team.

Sept. - Nov 1963

- **JFK's Orange Bowl "Free Cuba" speech.**

Many exiles were unhappy with the speech that JFK made in the Orange Bowl that September. He promised a free Cuba, but the exile community did not believe him. They had seen the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the deal with Khrushchev, and the numerous apparent disruptions of exile plans by the CIA earlier in the year such as the Bayo-Pawley affair.

The tone around our house was very negative regarding the President. My Dad and his exile friends were very unhappy with JFK and there were some heated discussions during this period. My Mom was a staunch supporter of the President and she defended him on more than one occasion. I also thought the Cubans were being a little hasty and my Dad and I argued about this several times.

- **The "If he goes to Dallas..." from Dad**

We watched the evening news at the dinner table in those days with a TV in the dining room. A few days before the trip to Dallas, there was a news cast talking about the trip; that some Texans were not fond of JFK and that Dallas was very conservative and clearly JBJ country. At one point Dad said "If he goes to Dallas they are going to kill him".

Little did I know then that this statement was a harbinger of the horror to come. Mom fretted about JFK's closeness to the crowds and his preference for an opened limo. At the time, I just shrugged off Dad's words. Surely they'd protect the President. JFK was not perfect, but he was special for many of us, myself included.

- **Staying home from school on 11/22**

The morning of Nov. 22, 1963, Dad made a strange request of me. As I was getting up he came into my room and said. "I don't think you are feeling well today, Edward, I think you should stay home from school and rest". Since Dad was not one to give free stay home passes and I was a senior that year, I said sure. Then he told me that he was planning to do some painting in the garage and that I should watch TV and come get him if there was any important news. I did as I was told but was a little puzzled by Dad's requests.

- **Hearing the bulletin, then seeing Cronkite give the sad news on TV**

The actual motorcade was not on live TV although I have seen it many times since that fateful day. Shortly after 1PM, there was that famous bulletin with Walter Cronkite giving us all the terrible news that JFK had been shot and had died.

- **Running to tell Dad as instructed**

I dashed out back and told him what had happened to JFK. He did not say anything but simply shook his head. I could not read his emotions or thoughts at all then. He was stern faced and stopped his painting, going back to the main house and heading straight to the phone.

- **Seeing the phone frenzy that lasted for hrs**

During the afternoon, I watched TV; Mom came home and was shocked as everyone else was or seemed to be. Dad was on the phone all afternoon. The new “bola” was that Castro had killed JFK and that was the topic of his conversations with friends and media people he knew.

- **Seeing Ruby kill Oswald on TV**

Like most Americans I was in a daze the next few days watching the funeral, John-John’s salute, the carriage, LBJ all the turmoil. I also watched as Ruby shot Oswald on live TV. I still can see those images in my head when I reflect on them.

- **Hearing Dad say “Oswald was the patsy”**

After Oswald was killed, Dad said that he had been the “patsy”. On a trip to New Orleans, Dad claimed he witnessed Oswald giving out brochures for the “Fair Play for Cuba Committee”. The Castro killed JFK cover story was talked up numerous times. Dad would remind people of the coffin that was apparently displayed in Havana before the assassination with the words “Here lies JFK” inscribed on it.

Post Script

It has taken me a long time to get some perspective and clarity about these events. South Florida in the early 60s was a place of much intrigue with many groups of Cuban exiles seeking to somehow overthrow Castro on one hand and agencies like the CIA that seemed to have a different agenda. My father's role in these matters was complex and is a disturbing legacy to be sure.

I graduated Miami Beach High in June of 1964. At my 30th reunion in 1994 I noticed two things that were, for me, quite significant:

1) I was surprised with the number of my classmates that had become helpers: medical doctors, psychologists, social workers, and teachers. There were surprisingly few lawyers and business people, fewer than I expected. Moreover, several of the physicians were not wealthy plastic surgeons, but were in research instead.

2) At the end of the evening a multi-media montage of events from our senior year was shown. 60s music, and school scenes interspersed with a number of JFK images, including his funeral. Almost as soon as the lights came back up, the room cleared out. People seemed to want to move on past those memories very quickly. Our senior year was alas, very bitter sweet. It started with a great deal of enthusiasm and hope for a better world. It ended with the memories of our lost hero and feelings of uncertainty about our future.

Commentary

Now we have just had a significant election with a major turn over in congress. Democracy is a fragile and inefficient form of government fraught with divisions and clumsy at best. At the same time when it functions as our Founding Fathers intended, we can measure our progress by the results of a fair election sometimes hoping to chart a new direction, instead of by the tyranny that stems from the barrel of a gun.