THE BETRAYAL OF THE EAGLE

BATTLE DIARY OF THE BAY OF PIGS
GIRON

THE TRUE STORY

OF THREE DAYS

OF BLOODY COMBAT

BY

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A CUBAN ARMY PARAMEDIC
PROLOGUE

This is my story . . . a simple one, born during my five years of paramedic in the Cuban Army, in that tragic year of 1961 when the landing of the Bay of Pigs occurred.

You will share my bedside post in hospitals and ambulances, when I treated and evacuated the thousands of wounded his forces suffered in three bloody days of fighting.

The reader will see firsthand how the invading brigade, composed of 1543 men only, inflicted grievous losses to the 60,000 men who faced them on the battle field, thus the incredible ratio of 60 to one.

How really was the fighting? It was brave on both sides, although when the Brigade 2506, sent by the USA, surrendered out of ammunition on the beach, the Cuban media portrayed them as motley crew of cowards who hardly had the courage to do any fighting, was that true or not, it can be easily seen; after you go with me together, through the pages of this book.

Castro's forces suffered well more than four thousand casualties, caused by a small force "who hardly had the guts to do any fighting," you will agree with me, that although they were physically beaten on the battlefield, by an army incredible superior in men and weapons, the Brigade, as we will call them from now on, achieved a moral victory.

The Author
SIXTY TO ONE

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY OF THE BAY OF PIGS INVASION

THE COMBAT BEHIND THE LINES OF CASTRO'S FORCES.

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CHAPTER 1

IN CUBA BEFORE AND AFTER THE ATTACK

(HAVANA, JANUARY 15, 1966)

The rapid growth and availability of heavy weapons and weapons of all calibers created both opportunities and problems for the Cuban Armed Forces. Although several headquarters were located throughout the largest cities in Cuba, their distribution network was very poor. They were very logically still operating under the principle followed by the Batista government. Everything was stored in Havana in major military warehouses and in small cities around the capital. At San Antonio de los Baños, a sizable military airport, large quantities of ammunition were vulnerable to sabotage and air raids; both were expected at that time.

The civil engineers working for the Castro regime stumbled upon a solution to this problem: the creation of enormous underground ammo dumps underneath the concrete strips of the two military airports, Columbia Military Airport and San Antonio de los Baños Airport. Crews got to work and began digging under the airstrips, and the necessary storage under the airstrips was separately formed by members of artillery and mortar staffs. Heavy excavators and tractors began working twenty four hours a day. They worked under the utmost security.

Work continued unabated during the last days of November, 1960. Under the heavy cover of the concrete airstrips, the Cuban command stored more than five hundred tons of ammunition for immediate use.

In January, 1961, these tunnel constructions afforded all types of protection against air raids. All tram car rails discarded by the Batista government served as tunnel roofs. The entrances were almost impossible to detect. The only explanation given to the men building the tunnels was that they were to be used only on a temporary basis to store ammunition received from the Soviet Union. In those days the Cuban Armed Forces did not trust their own men.

There I was in the office of the Army Reserve Battalion, waiting nervously, where all Cuban males from 27 to 45 years old had been assigned on an obligatory basis.

I was presenting my resignation to my position of Paramedic. The army sergeant in charge of the office came back from his office flipping and reading the pages of my personal file. His face changed as he read the reports and notes about my previous years of service, specially about the long and special training as a male nurse, and I assumed that he must have reached the part of evacuation of Castro's Armed Forces wounded, because in that part in front of the other men waiting in there, he said with an air of reproach:

"I cannot believe that a veteran like you is going to the United States, to join forces with our enemies." That was not a question or mere remark, it was a clear-cut statement, which was followed by an assorted collection of the most obscene names and expressions that any human being has ever been called, ranging from "You dirty sons of a bitch" to "Rotten Traitor."

He was screaming all those insults and at the same time I could not fail to notice that he was giving side glances to the two soldier clerks who were sitting at the main office desks, pretending to be working although it was more than obvious that they were listening to each one of his words.

"Let's go to my office, you a lousy traitor and mother fucker," all of you people who are leaving our island are just a bunch of cock suckers.

My eardrums ached painfully after hearing those hideous insults but, having a family behind me, it put me in a situation more or less like a man who has both hands tied behind his back and could not do anything about it.
I swallowed my pride and kept a blank stare on my face in front of the still screaming and insulting sergeant.

Finally, we entered his office, and as soon as he closed the door, he patted my back with a friendly gesture that got me completely by surprise, and in whispers told me:

-Please forgive me for all of that crap I told you, but I did not have any other choice, those two stool pigeons sitting at the office will squeal on me if I behave differently.

Now it was my turn to wonder, what was he meaning by that? I did not have to wait for long, my sergeant went again through the pages of my personal file, closed it and put it on his desk, he said with a loud sigh.

-So you are going away, one more of the many thousands who have left Cuba, since that Son of a Bitch, pointing at the ever present portrait of Castro hanging on the wall, offered "Complete and absolute guarantees of safety to all Cuban citizens who want to leave the country to reunite with the families in the U.S.A." his last words were said with a studied tone of irony.

Do you people want to leave us all alone with those fucking communists?

-Don't you have any balls left and why don’t you do what the Hungarian did in their country in 1956 and start a revolt, maybe we would succeed?

Oh good God, what a relief, after all the man that was supposed to chew me in pieces for my "Titorous" behavior was opening his heart to me, and what I had seen so far I liked very much. He kept on talking, "I want you to know that we have similar backgrounds, and we all know that every Cuban with a little bit of common sense or intelligence has already arrived at the end of his rope and no matter how many knots we all tied we all have reached the limit of our patience."

I wish I were in your shoes, and I can assure you that I would resign to this damn position of sergeant, but you will have to understand, that if I only dare for a second to fill in an application to depart from the country, just as a joke, they will crush me like a bug.

I was looking at the man without making any comments. After all the communists all over the world have always gained quite a reputation for trickery and just in case I did not want to jeopardize my family trip to freedom and happiness in the United States, which in spite of been only 90 miles away from Cuba, seemed to us at that point as far as the moon, and maybe further away.

-You do not believe me, I don't blame you, he said, and still in whispers he said "here, let me show you one more thing." He opened his wallet and removed a wrinkled photo of several young men in military uniforms; they all had American-made weapons in their hands. I instantly recognized the sergeant among them, but I did not fail to notice that the happy smile on his face was no longer in the face of the figure in front of me.

And for the first time I said:

-Who are those men?

He answered back with an expression of sadness in his face "They were my buddies in our time in the mountains, when we were fighting for Castro that was the time before we were betrayed to the communist by that fucking bastard.

He was watching my expression of wonder to his words, and continued the conversation.

-My friends are all dead, they were caught by Castro's Secret Service, the famous G-2, as soon as they started to conspire and they had mock trials where their own defense attorneys requested for them a firing squad, and needless to say that the judge gave them exactly that. A firing squad, and were shot the following morning after their trial.
The eyes of that man became wet with tears, of sorrow and rage, a rage of impotence of not being able to do anything for his comrades. -If somebody was caught in Cuba conspiring in any manner against the communist regime, and you tried to take sides with him on a trial, chances are that you will suffer his same fate. They will catch you just for association with an enemy of the state. -There are a lot of unrest and discontent among the high echelons of our armed forces, and many of the high brasses had defected, people who had Castro's confidence and are now well beyond the 90 miles and with the Americans.

I could assure you if we only had another invasion like in The Bay of Pigs, the results would be very much different, thousands of men will join the invaders and that would be the end of this. Well, my friend, I think that is all. I have nothing else to tell you, let me have your ID card, and sign here. -He gave me a strong hand shake and accompanied me to the door of his office and when he opened it, yelled from there at the top of his voice. -You son of a bitch, Traitor, I want you to go to U.S.A. and tell everybody there, to the Cubans and to the Americans how we feel about this Revolution and about our great leader. Tell them that if they ever dare to send another invasion to our shores, we will be ready for them, we will receive them much better than the last time; remember that now we really know how it really is all about.

He slammed the door really hard behind me, and I walked slowly by the small corridor, until I arrived at the office where all the clerks and military personnel had gathered around and were making comments about what was going on, and pointing me with their fingers and calling me names, -I could not fail to notice they approved every word their officer told me.

-They only knew half of the words. If they only knew the whole thing?

Right there at the door of the Military Unit, I made up my mind. I had to tell to my fellow Cubans and to the Americans in the United States, the real situation in Cuba, and how my people really feel about it.

I left the military building walking very slowly, looking right and left and very nervous, many of my friends were waiving me good bye, in a very discreet and unnoticeable manner, they could not afford to be seen saying good bye to a person like me. One of them, approached me and said -Good Bye and Good luck, an expression that I will never forget in my life, since I heard it in one of my most difficult moments in life.

After I got my release from the military reserve, my problems were far from over, after all I still did not know for how long I had to wait for the departure, which may come at the least expected moment or maybe never, because that depended entirely on the whims of the immigration authorities in Cuba.

I will not describe in detail how my life was during the two and a half year that I had to wait for my departure, but to enlight the reader about my predicaments I can say that in order to support me and my family I worked as a truck driver for heavy loads, English Teacher, selling cakes door to door, cakes which were made by my friends who gave them to me on consignment basis, and I smuggled them out of my apartment everything I could sell, even my used shoes and clothing. The only thing that escaped was my wife wedding ring, mostly for its sentimental value.

February 6, 1968 - I woke up early as usual and went to the bakery to buy bread for home, it was 6:30 in the morning nevertheless, and there was a long line of men and women waiting for the shop to open at 8:00. Nobody said a word, our faces spoke for themselves, some people knew that I was leaving the country and asked me the usual question: -How it is going with immigration? -Any news from your family in the United States?

Finally the shop opened its door, and the line started to move, and when my turn came I bought four loaves of the only bread they had in stock, and walked back home.
The moment I was one city block away from my home, noticed many people looking through their doors, making comments, people walking at fast pace going in my direction, and I overheard the crowd saying . . . - Immigration is there, looking for somebody to leave the country! Gee, some people are lucky I thought, and kept on walking. The grocery next door was like a beehive, and they talked and looked at me.

I climbed the stairs to my apartment, and also noticed the people in the butcher shop were talking and looking at me, or so I thought.

Maybe I am imagining things and getting my keys started for the door and before I had time to open it, there was my wife, with an ashen white face and all trembling, she said in a whisper, "Immigration is here for the departure."

I was shocked and mentally I said to myself, "Thanks God, our wait of three years is over."

There he was, the army officer from Immigration, all dressed in green, already seated at the table and without any preambles asked me for the documents, which meticulous as I am, I had them all neatly for the three long years of waiting, where every time that Mr. Castro delivered his long speeches to the Cuban people we were afraid to death that he was going to close for good the departure of Cubans to the United States.

He checked all my documents carefully, even asked some questions about them, -When did you resign?, Was one of the questions, and I answered January 15, 1966 -When in fact I did not resign, I was fired out of my job when Castro sent orders to every corner of the country to fire everyone who had filed an application to depart from Cuba?

After all the preliminaries were over, he made me sign the forms where I surrendered to the Cuban State our furniture, the refrigerator and the kitchen cooking utensils, our clothing was the only thing we were allowed to take with us. After that moment, we went to the house of my wife's aunt to stay for the two to three weeks before leaving the country.

My problems were far from over, I had to settle my bank account, the electricity and phone bills, and then go to the offices of immigration for the final authorization.

So, at the bank I also surrendered our savings of $843.75. Then I left for the State Enterprise of Electricity where I paid my current bill and one month in advance, in spite of being scheduled to leave the country shortly.

When I was at the desk specially prepared for the departing Cubans, I saw a former co-worker of mine, his name was Carlos Fabar, and he was very active in all and every government political organizations and therefore was automatically considered a future member of the Communist Party. He did not know a thing about my situation and I did not want to tell him anything, therefore, I followed my own rule, -Never run away from a communist or even pretend that you are afraid of them, therefore, I went to meet him and saluted him the most friendly way I could think of, therefore, I said "Hello Carlos, how are you doing?" And we both shared the usual Cuban embrace of salute.

Right away he asked me the already expected question. "What are you doing here?" You are supposed to be working! Before answering him, I watched cautiously the woman clerk seated at the desk who was preparing my bill, you know I have been transferred to Communications overseas, and I will depart from the country very soon, although up to this moment I do not know where I will be going.

That woman stiffened her neck, while she was typing, she could not understand how a person leaving Cuba for political reasons had been transferred to Communications Overseas, but she kept on typing just the same and
luckily for me did not make any comments in front of my friend.

In the afternoon I made it to my final stop, the Office of Rationing, where many people were waiting for changes or cancellations, like me, I waited and waited, as a matter of fact, I was so used to wait for everything that it had become a habit in our lives, the unending waiting. Next, they shouted, Next! And there I went to the desk of the woman fixing my Ration Book.
-What do you want? She said, without even looking at my face.
-I am here to cancel my Rations Book.

Then she raised her eyes and looked at me -Do you want to cancel your Rations Book?
-Yes, was my triumphal reply, I won't be needing it any more where I am leaving.
-And where are you going?
-I am going to the United States. When the people around me heard me saying those words, they really stared like thinking. What a lucky guy, no more Rations Book for him.

February 9, 1968 - 2:00 in the afternoon

My appointment at the Immigration Office after I had settled all bills and affairs I got off the bus several blocks away from the headquarters of Immigration, my stomach more than my legs was shaking and making all kinds of funny noises, it has been more than twenty-four hours I had not taken any food, my stomach couldn't hold anything. I had vomited several times and I still did not know how I could make it.

I walked the blocks with fear, only God knew what was waiting for me in there. It was common knowledge of people who made it over there and at the last moment for any reason they had the trip to the United refused at the last moment, sometimes for the most stupid reasons in the world, I only hoped and prayed that mine was not going to be that case.

February 9, 1968, 2:15 in the afternoon
Inside the Headquarters of Immigration, where I found many men and women waiting for the departing papers, the men in charge called some few names, I was not one of those lucky souls, and when they finished at 2:30 in the afternoon, they shouted:
-Come back next Monday, you all may go now.

There I was back to our relative's house to spend the longest and most dreadful weekend in my life, my nerves were in the verge of collapse, I had not eaten and I could not eat anything, still I did not tell my wife I did not want to worry her, she had more than she could cope, she was leaving behind most of her dearest relatives who were coming to say good bye to us and wish us well in our new life.

Monday, February 12, 2:00 in the afternoon
Back again to immigration, another long wait, some few more names were called, and my name was not among them, I already was familiar with the men in charge, all of them dressed in green army fatigues with the ever present pistol at their sides and looking at us with a tough look, once again I heard the command: -Come back tomorrow.

Tuesday, February 13, 1968
What a day and date to go to the Immigration Headquarters, Tuesday 13 five days in a row that I could
hardly eat anything, I was only taking water and some oranges that miraculously arrived at the vegetable and fruits stand where my wife’s relatives shopped, this day I said to myself I hope today is the day, I only hoped for the best.

Today it was a week since we received the visit of the Inspector to affect the inventory at our apartment and to give us the appointment and we were still waiting once again I took the bus, and walked the blocks to the feared house, we have learned to live in fear, we feared our neighbors who might give us away to the feared Security Police also known as G-2, we feared our friends, since anyone or they might have been a Security Police, we feared to speak over the telephone since it might be bugged, we feared to speak at work and in the buses, since anybody might be listening, I understood how the people in the countries behind the Iron Curtain must feel about it.

My feet weighted like a ton, and when I arrived at the house of Immigration I was sweating profusely, from head to toes. That day I got the feeling that it was going to be my day. We were in the waiting crowd, silent, nobody was talking or making any comments, we were in the circle of fear.

A tall man arrived in the waiting room, in neat and creased army fatigues, passed through the crowd and showed three leaving papers to us all. A wave of disappointment swept us all, only three permits for a crowd of close to two hundred people.

He gave a strenuous yell, the name of a future to be free Cuban, second of the silence followed, broken immediately by a joyous cry of -Present. The lucky soul advanced to the table where the army man was seated and handed over his documents, and remained silent, afraid, waiting and waiting. Finally when all the documents were thoroughly checked, the man in command put them in a manila envelope, clipped the departure permit on top of the envelope and like a news broadcaster, yelled to the nervous man in front of him: -Tonight, at 8:00 at night at Varadero Airport.

The happy man did not dare to show his happiness and left the building walking very slowly, like measuring every step taken. The big brown door closed behind him and we remained quietly awaiting for the second call. This time it was the turn for a white haired old woman, and again -Tonight, at 8:00 at night at Varadero Airport.

Just one lonely telegram remained on top of that desk, and a hundred pairs of eyes were glued to it. One again the man in charge grabbed it calmly and ceremoniously and shouted a name. A name that sounded so strange . . . so unreal . . . so far away.

-It was my name!

My heart pounded furiously in my chest, my voice trembled out of control the moment I yelled: -Present!

Once again the officer checked all of my documents without saying a word, got them in the Manila envelope and said the words I been waiting for -Tonight at 8:00 at night at Varadero Airport.

Many years ago when we had American Movies in Cuba, I recalled how the hero after reaching something impossible, always felt bells ringing and all the trumpets of heavens blowing around him. I had in mind that it was only Hollywood stuff, no way, it was true all right, that was exactly how I felt, after the big door closed behind me.

I got in the streets, and I needed a taxi, something close too impossible to find in Havana at that time.
I run, and run toward the main Avenue where I might find a taxi or bus to take me home.

There it was coming, the expected taxi, Oh my goodness, it had two people inside; nevertheless I stopped it and talked to the driver.

-It is an emergency, I had my departure granted by Immigration, and I am leaving tonight at eight, and I need to go to my house to have everything ready.
-The driver looked at the two people seated behind, and asked. Is it all right with you if I take this man where he needs to go, right away?
-Those two good people most likely are very much sympathetic of my situation because they answered right away.
-Sure, drive him home first and taking their lives in their own hands, wished me the best of luck for my trip to freedom in the U.S.A. after all they did not know who I really was.

When I made it, home, it was quite a surprise to everybody, we did not expect so sudden a departure, but even though I helped my wife to prepare our luggage with the few clothes that we were allowed to keep after leaving our apartment, it was not much, but after all we did not know for sure how it was going to be in the States.

February 13, 1968, on the highway in an old car, low on gas and low in oil, with bald tires and faulty automatic transmission. It was an old 1956 Ford still running in spite of the years of no spare parts and little maintenance, we could not go more than 45 miles an hour because all of the already mentioned problems furthermore, the Highway Patrols, had the nasty habit of stopping and searching any car going at rate speed of more than 55 miles an hour and we did not want to take that chance.

We finally arrived at 7:00 we were the fourth car in line and we wondered if that was the right place, we did not have to wait for long, the ever present figure of an army patrol slowly approached the cars ahead of us and ordered to have the luggage ready for the people who were going to leave the country. Yes, that was the place all right. At 8:00 sharp the lights went up and the army type doors of the airport opened:

-The travelers must go inside - was ordered through the loudspeakers, we kissed and embraced our relatives and friends for the last time and went inside.

We stood in front of the desk where two army men, looked the already famous manila envelope and put the baggage away and motion we in a large waiting room where men, women and children were already seated. That was going to be a long night of waiting and fear, waiting because the first flight would be departing at 9:00 the following day in the morning, and of fear, because we did not know if something wrong might happen at the last minute.

Many people had lost their trip because of anything wrong at the last minute with their documents or simply because the G-2 discovered something, like in the case of a friend of mine, who worked for the Cuban National Bank, and her brother got her a visa to Mexico, and she was held at the last minute simply because they told her she knew too much about the Economic Planning of the Country. The poor woman had to wait for two years before they allowed her to depart for good.

It was 2:00 in the morning and we were called for the first checking of documents and our few possessions. Remove everything you have from your pockets and purses and put them on the table.

There were our poor stainless steel wrist watches, an engagement ring that did not catch the eyes of the Inspector, it was the fancy Sunglasses I had given to my wife, he had them in his hands and said, -and Since these are
not prescription glasses I confiscate them in the name of the Government.
We did not say anything, my wife looked at me like saying - He can keep them, there are many more like those and
better in the place where we are going.
We were allowed to go back to our seats, with the documents still in the envelope.

Four o'clock in the morning, I heard my name in the loudspeakers, Arnaldo Remigio, come to the office. My
wife was nervous and held my hands, I did not say anything to her, but my mind was going crazy. I went to the
office once again, always taking the documents with me. This time it was a breeze; they just got the documents, gave
them a quick look and dumped them in the trash can.

As explanation for this quick call, the man in charge just said - We forgot to get your documents the last time
we called you. I felt quite a relief, it was not any problem after all, and back to my seat and family I went.

Seven o'clock in the morning, the Swiss Consulate personnel arrived to verify the identity of all of those who were
going to fly. That was the second obstacle for the departing Cubans. Many a family ran through the Red Tape and
obstacles that Castro's bureaucracy had created only to be held at the last minute for error in name in the list of
persons that the Swiss Consulate brought with them. Eight o'clock in the morning of February 14, 1968, the Swiss
man in charge, called us four to his office, he read our names with a heavy accent, but luckily there were no problems
and we had our Passports from him.

There was only one catch, the Cuban Immigration Authorities, had stamped our Passports with a big "VOID"
stamp, therefore they did not consider us Cubans any more since the moment we had decided to leave the
Communist State for good.

It did not matter to us, you could have stamped our Passport, and you could never have taken away from us
our identities as Cubans.
Nine o'clock in the morning, a glorious day, we saw the parade of people taking the first flight, it was a four propelled
engine plane without pretensions of luxury or anything of the like, but it was a plane and that was the important
thing.
The plane got everybody inside and taxied to the runway, where the pilot revived the engines to full power and
slowly it moved, then faster and faster until it went airborne, I felt that I was inside that plane with my fellow Cubans,
now we had to wait for the plane to come back for us.

Eleven thirty the plane had landed and made it to the terminal, since we were the last group to go, they
wasted no time in sending us aboard. I was still afraid; I felt a bump in my stomach I had learned to distrust those
people until the last moment,

Luckily nothing happened, from the plane I saw a large portrait of Che Guevara, with the usual Propaganda
slogans, thanks Heavens I will not be seeing one of those even again, I thought for myself.
Twelve o'clock Noon, the stewardess closed the plane door and the sign of "Fasten Your Seat Belts" appeared in front of us. The stewardess said the same thing in Spanish for the benefit of those who did not understand any English.

I saw Cuba for the last time through the window, I should have been sad, maybe crying like many other people in the plane, but after all of my worrying and suffering I could be only swallowed in silence and cried inside of myself, and

I thought, if a fortune teller would tell me now: If you stay in Cuba you would live forever but if you go to the United States you would die in fifteen days, I would have told the fortune teller, -It is better to die in freedom than to live forever in oppression and slavery.

It was not a long flight, barely forty-five minutes and it may sound silly, but was a difference it was when we landed at the OpaLocka Airport, when we boarded the bus to the U.S. Immigration office and we went through their inspections and debriefing, their faces were friendly, their manners casuals, and I did not see any army men among them, we were so used to be mistreated in our own country for the mere crime of wanting to live in another country that we were used to that situation so for us it was like arriving in Heaven.

We stayed the whole day of February 14, 1968 in Miami, and that night we received a plane ticket to go to New York, where my family was waiting for me.

February 16, 1968 - Looking for a job, after getting my Social Security I did not know what to do, and the first thing I got was a job at Merrill Lynch, Pierce Fenner and Smith Inc. over there I met hundreds of my fellow Cubans at lunch time, they avidly asked me to tell them about the situation in the country, and how soon we could expect Castro to fall, many of them were of the opinion that everybody who stayed behind in Cuba was a strong supporter of Castro's policies and more or less a member of the Cuban Communist Party. I had many arguments about it, I told them openly that there were less real communist in Cuba than probably in the United States, and they laughed at me, many of them even told me:

-If you are so sure about the real political beliefs of our people in Cuba, you should let the whole world know about it!

They were Cubans all right the people telling me that, nevertheless I found the Americans to whom I talked at that company, most understanding, they knew that my people had only one way to survive, and that was to be with the regime, at least to pretend they were with it, without any if or buts.

Then and idea came to my mind, I should write a book about how it really was in Cuba, I even remembered the Sergeant in the Army Reserve Unit, who told me: Tell it to all the Cubans and Americans alike how it really is here, yes, in a way I considered myself as a modern crusader, I would fight the communism without any weapons, but with a typewriter, which in a way they are very much afraid of.

The days went by and finally I got myself an old typewriter and started little by little late at night when I came home back from work, and then I saw in front of me the faces and figures of the men who were with me in the medical training in the early month of January 1960 and so my second chapter of this book was written in the following pages.
CHAPTER 2

THE PARAMEDICS - JANUARY 1961

DEEP INLAND - TOWN OF SANTA MARIA DEL ROSARIO

When John F. Kennedy was sworn as a President of the United States in January 1961, the General Headquarters of the Cuban Armed Forces had arrived to the conclusion that there were no Paramedics for the Army nor the newly created People's Militia and that if the already awaited invasion ever arrived on Cuban Soil the casualties would be extremely high, most likely every man shot in combat would be dead in a matter of hours, since no medical treatment would be available in the battle field.

Then, a Crash Program was established to train personnel for that specialty of modern warfare and a quiet and efficient dragnet swept Cuba from one end to another, looking for individuals with advanced studies which would enable them to grasp the necessary training to handle wounded men in battle and to be able to give them medical treatment on the battlefields that Castro's forces would sustain repelling the incoming invasion.

I was chosen among others and without being told or informed about it, I found myself one day on a military truck going to the first Paramedics School in Cuba, it was located in the outskirts of Havana, near the town of Santa Maria del Rosario, with a capacity of 50 men and facilities for 10 Army doctors and nurses, who were in charge of conducting all medical training for the camp.

The center was located deep in the country side, few miles away from the U.S. Rubber Company, the manufacturers of the Keds sneakers in Cuba, and in the vicinity of Hatuey Beer Brewery in the nearby city of El Cotorro. The military camp was four miles away from the Central Highway, the main artery of land communicating in Cuba, in 1961.

There was a narrow road, negotiable only by jeeps or by four wheel drive military trucks, such road offered no concealment to any party who might have been a riding party and there were also plenty of itchy finger army sentries all over the place in small pill box type for the guards. The military engineers had removed all trees and bushes in the vicinity, and their message was clear, they were expecting commando attacks any moment.

There was also a six-foot stone fence with barbed wire on top with sentries pill boxes at intervals of one block and in the rear a small river, overlooked also by sentries all day and night long.

Our training started the following day right at six o'clock in the morning we were roughly awaken and taken to classes, the first thing in the morning was a long session of cross country running with knapsacks on our backs loaded with stones and a tough looking black sergeant veteran on Castro's days in the mountains who pushed us harder and harder, like horses, we had run, and crawl under his supervision through miles of country side and run through stone-covered roads without stopping ever for a brief break, at seven o'clock we had our breakfast of coffee with a piece of bread and then the medical training.

They wanted us to become familiar with bullet wounds, knife stabbing fractures, burns, and the overall killer in wars, the deadly shock. Day in and day out, we had to memorize all the human organs and what to do in every imaginable war wound for every part of the body.
The main issue was to train the paramedics how to give immediate medical attention to the casualties in the battle field and how to get them out of the enemy line of fire. The Army doctors always stressed the importance of time factor in taking care of the wounded. Improvisation to evacuation was given top priority, we had to go to the fields in the training area and had to improvise stretchers using whatever materials available, our shirts, and our belts, the very knapsacks which had to be emptied of the medical content and became impromptu stretchers.

**M41 WALKER TANK**

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An especially arduous training was the part where we also became stretcher bearers. Another army sergeant was in charge starting the whole month of February and March. He yelled his orders and he yelled all right and called us an assorted collection of obscenities, which of course Son of a Bitch was the one most commonly used by him.

**February 1961**, that month was entirely spent in the adjacent clinics in treatment to civilians, whom the poor creature did not have the slightest idea that the strange looking doctors giving them medical treatment, injections, and blood transfusions among many other things, were no more and no less than Army Paramedics practicing with them the theory received in classes.

**March 1961** that was a very special day. Our stretcher bearer trainer arrived very early in the compound driving a military ambulance, with the big Red Cross in a round white field on every side, even on the roof. It was an American-made Dodge with the solid olive green color and four wheels drive which enabled the vehicle to go practically everywhere.

We were assembled in groups of five men, and each one of us took a turn at the wheel, I had never driven any vehicle of any type before and I had a hard time with the clutch and the stick shift. I was yelled at by the sergeant, once again the words of stupid and Son of a Bitch ringed in my ears, through the days we mastered the fine arts of the clutch and stick shift, and then the orders took a turn to this:
- Drive faster, you are going too slow, stupid ass hole!
- Come on, the lives of many good men will depend on your good and fast driving!

Every time I sat behind the steering wheel of the ambulance my hand sweat profusely, my forehead, armpits, pants even the pant belt was wet with sweat, it was a scary experience and I let that man know how I felt about it, and in spite of his bluntness one day after finishing the driver training he called me aside and said
- Do you think you are the only one afraid to drive? Everybody is the problem is that we must control our fear. The best part of his speech came up immediately.
- There are no valiant men in wars. Everybody is scared, as a matter of fact; the difference between a hero and a coward is only where they run to. The heroes will run forward and the cowards will run to the rear, but I can assure that they are scared just the same. In the last days of March 1961, our ambulance training was over, and we were sent once again to the hospitals in Havana, to be in every ward and to take all what it takes to be a full-fledged male nurse.

**IN THE HOSPITALS, APRIL 1961**

Halfway during our training the high brass decided that we should get all the necessary contact with the most cases of people who resembled war casualties, and for that purposed we went to the emergency rooms of some hospitals in Havana, I was assigned to the Lady of Mercy all day long.

It was there in the emergency room, where I got my first taste of how was the life for a nurse and a doctor, it was no easy matter, luckily for me there was a head nurse, let us call her by her first name only, Nadia, she was all smiles and easy going when we first met, beautiful indeed and she made me her personal assistant.

We received at the emergency entrance people shot, burnt, poisoned, suicide, we always discovered that all suicides who did not kill themselves on the spot, always wanted to live afterward, right there in front of our eyes, in the emergency room, they begged us for their lives, we helped them in many cases, in others there was nothing else to do, but to help them to die with less sufferings.

In the two weeks that we worked together in the Emergency Room, Nadia, who had become my mentor,
trained me in medications, shock treatment and resuscitation of nearly dead people; she was there with me all the time. Since I had no place to go for lunch she took me with her to the Doctor's Lunch Room where I was treated the same way the doctors were, to a very nice lunch every day. At the end of each day an army truck took us all back to the Medical training center for more training.

Our doctors were more than stressing the importance of how to handle all types of medical equipment, of bandages and hemorrhage stopping, blood transfusions and Plasma. One point that never escaped my attention was their words, which they repeated constantly: -You must know what to do in every case of war wounds, remember, we are going to be invaded and when that happens, the life of many of our men will be completely in your hands.

No doubts, no ifs and buts, it was crystal clear, the high command of the Cuban Army, knew for sure that the invasion was imminent and we could feel the tension growing up in the air every day.

Our group of Paramedics fell into the category of Non-Combatant personnel and faithful to world known Red-Cross regulations, our doctors clarified to us we were never going to enter in a battle field carrying any weapon, since we were going to be there to save lives and not to do any killings.

In honor of truth and to our doctors, they always emphasized the point that we had to give medical treatment to every man we found wounded on a battle field, regardless of what uniform they wore. In short we were trained under one principle, on a battle field there were not our casualties or the enemies casualties, in combat we were going to meet only casualties and we should do our best for all of them.

Again back to our daily hospital routine. In spite of having been in the Emergency Room, my friend Nadia, decided on her own to bring me to the hardest to handle of all wards in a hospital, The Burnt Unit. She did not prepare me for that impression and I still remember up to this day my first day in the second week of April 1961 when I arrived at the fifth floor of the hospital and I was confronted by the sight of the patients in there.

The smell of burnt flesh, pus and human suffering permeated the heavy air-conditioned floor from one end to the other, thanks heavens I did not have any lunch yet, or most likely I would have thrown it out on the spot, the first patient I saw was a young men who had his upper body, face and everything else burnt like a crisp roasted pork. I was wearing the special gown to go through that ward and thinking I was a doctor, he asked me to remove some of the tissue which was peeling from the forehead and ears which were not bandaged. My arms were frozen at my sides and I just could not move and I could not even answer him back. Then out of heaven Nadia approached us and asked the man what he wanted. The poor soul repeated his request to her and she complied with it.

Facing me in hush voice she said
-That was nothing compare with what you will face someday if any invasion arrives here, you must behave better, and I will help you.

She fulfilled her promises to the hilt, for a solid week that I spent in that dreadful ward she trained me in practice and in theory and in honor of truth I can say that I survived thanks to her only, because I was falling to pieces at the terrible sight of the many patients so badly burnt, that in many cases I was removing bandages from hands and out came bandages and fingers inside the bandages as well, much to my horror.

The routine inside the hospital for those two weeks was more than I have ever seen in the movies; we entered at six o'clock in the morning and stayed close to nine o'clock in the evening.

I could here say that she brainwashed me. Gave me moral support and confidence in myself to sustain that career, and I was already thinking about becoming a doctor.
When I was a child, I was deadly afraid at the sight of blood in front of my eyes, it made me sick, and to make matters worse, I was twelve years old, when a man shot himself in front of the school that I attended in Havana, it was eleven fifteen in the morning I was on board the school bus, when we heard a muffled sound, like a shot when I looked across the street and I saw him with his head dumped to the left, blood pouring out and a revolver on the side next to the park bench where he shot himself to death.

I even confided my blood phobia to Nadia, and she answered me very easy. Death is the end of life, and blood is just another body fluid like urine, with the difference that it is red and urine is yellow, when you get all used to see blood in front of your eyes you will take it as calmly as you see urine.

She was right. Those two last weeks in the hospital enabled me to get used to see a lot of blood and more without a flinch of an eye.
CHAPTER 3
AIR RAID (THE LONE GUNNER)

It was April 15, 1961, at six o'clock in the morning of a beautiful and clear Saturday morning, the sun was shining and its rays of light reflected the shadows of many military planes parked on the sides of the runways. There were many military planes parked at the airport, making a tempting target for any would-be air raider who might attack and leave Castro's ground forces orphaned of air support.

But there were some little catches behind them, only a close inspection would have disclosed that the airplanes had all weapons removed. Visible essential parts had been cannibalized to enable other planes to fly. Nevertheless, all those planes were guarded by sentries to indicate their importance and readiness. That trick paid handsomely for Castro as we will see later in this Chapter.

Reveille sounded at 05:45 A.M., through the Camp's loudspeakers and awakened all the military personnel, an assorted motley crew composed of airmen, soldiers, artillery men, mortar men, anti-aircraft gunners, mechanics, and militiamen. In 15 minutes time, thousands and thousands of men were in Parade Drill, awaiting in attention, the camp bugler saluting the raising of the flag like every military camp does all over the world. Should the air raiders have arrived at that time, they would have found more than 5,000 men in formation, and casualties would have mounted to astronomical figures. Instead of the 500 plus casualties, it would probably have been 10 to 20 times more, and the fate of the invasion would have been different. Why? How do I dare to say that a few thousand men more or less on the battlefield would have made the difference between triumph and defeat for the invading Brigade 2506?

In this military airfield, known in Pre-Castro's time as Columbia Military Polygon, and renamed by Castro as "Ciudad Libertad" (Liberty City).

The best trained and experienced personnel for the Artillery, anti-aircraft and Mortar men were in Columbia and a high loss among them would have been totally irreplaceable. That is why I am saying here, the few well-trained men were worth their weight in gold in those faraway days of April 1961.

One more detail, in the military hangars in the distance, closed to the public view and under close surveillance, there were no planes inside, but ammunition of all types, boxes upon boxes of heavy 120 and 85mm for cannons, thousands of 120 and 82mm grenades for the mortars and millions of rounds of ammunition for the machine guns caliber 7.92, and also in the same rate of millions of rounds for the 7.62 F.A.L. (Light Automatic Rifles). But that was not all. Once there was no more space in the hangars, they resorted to dig underground ammo dumps in the very airstrips known only to the people working there.

Should that information had ever been known by the air raiders, the final results of the Air Raid, most likely, would have been different. They would have concentrated, and they fire on the hangars and the bombs on the ammo dumps, and needless to say, no more ammo for the men who would fight the invasion later on.

Continuing our survey of Castro's air force at the airport, we knew there were airworthy planes all right, but well beyond the airfield perimeter, well secluded and protected in areas next to civilian buildings around the camp. Over there in small hangars, the mechanics were giving exquisite maintenance to the three B-26’s and four British made "Sea Furies" turbo-planes heavily armed with two twenty-millimeter cannons and four machine guns. They also had an old army trainer T-33, which had one c fifty caliber machine gun fitted plus rocket launchers in the wings. Although it was much publicized that the air force was almost completely destroyed during the air raid, how come that the following day after the attack they all were fully prepared for combat - engines, weapons and crews? Were
those planes in those shops for repairs?

A close relative of my wife, an Artillery Commander based in that field, told me that something was definitely going on over there. Nobody, absolutely nobody had any access to the planes in the hangars and that nobody ever saw their engines disassembled inside the hangars. Remember the extreme hot weather in Cuba would have never allowed any mechanic to do any type of work inside a closed metallic hangar, ever.

The general consensus was very simple. The planes were there all right, but in a state of complete readiness and well protected from any air attack or sabotage.

As for the base, it was bristling with anti-aircraft batteries from one end to the other. Czech made four barreled, heavy machine guns, each one 7.92 caliber, with the combined fire of the four, would converge on the target with destructive results for any would-be air attacker.

Fortunately for the B-26's sent by the Brigade from Nicaragua to attack the airfield, all of the gunners were in pattern drills around the camp and well away from their guns. Other than that, a wall of fire and steel would have met the attackers. There were also two batteries of 37mm anti-aircraft cannons, with six cannons to the battery adding extra punch to the other weapons in the field.

Inside the field there were also two batteries of 85 millimeter cannons with special ammunition to use against tanks, with special shells fitted with tungsten heads, which did not explode on impact, but the retarded explosion fuse
would explode inside the tank, after the hard metal head perforated the armor of the tank.

As an additional measure against sabotage, or any commando attack, there were large Russian jeeps with heavy machine guns patrolling every corner of the airfield. Practically, all of the troops in the camp were on constant alert, on a 24-hour basis, since December 1960.

Castro's commanders were expecting the attack in such certainty that there was, and still is, a large military airfield in the center portion of Havana Province. It is at the airport of San Antonio de los Baños where six "Sea Furies" were hidden in civilian looking huts well away from the runways. This airport was also briefly attacked by the Brigade 25-06 airplanes, but since the Sea Furies were out of sight, they escaped any damage and were able to be in the air the day of the invasion to pounce the ships carrying supplies at the beach.

The fighter planes at San Antonio airfield were always kept in state of readiness. I do not mean that they had the pilots inside the cockpit with engines running ready to take off, but only to mean they had pilots always waiting, and mechanics with ready equipment for the planes to take off. Both air raids were simultaneously done, and caught the Cuban Air Force with their pants down. If the raid to the second airport would have been delayed by only 30 minutes, those fighter planes would have been up in the air and waiting for the attacking planes, and the worst would have happened.

The Cuban High Command did not want to be short of ammunition, and we had the case of a French vessel named "La Coubre," which was carrying a large supply of mortar grenades and ammunition for the F.A.L. rifles caliber 7.62. That vessel exploded in Havana Harbor in March 1960, giving Castro the best opportunity ever to create uproar over the sabotages to his war supplies and saying once again that the invasion was coming at any minute. Then the orders to check and recheck every shipment of war material were given and we had cases like the one I am going to relate which created a situation for Commander Universo Sanchez, a long time allied and comrade-in-arms of Castro.

In 1961, the shipments of ammunition and weapons were coming in constantly, at all times of day and night, to the Military Camp of Columbia to be stored in the underground ammo dumps or to be stored in the large empty hangars, and from there on, they would be distributed to other garrisons and ammo dumps in other cities of the island.

April 14, 1961, at one o'clock in the evening, three large tractor trailers arrived at Columbia Camp. It was hot and most of the men had been on heavy military training or unloading other tractor trailers like the three were talking about. There were no conveyor belts or forklifts, just mere human power unloading the heavy boxes. There was an Iron Rule rigidly enforced by the Commander of the Base, and that was to unload the ammo every time it arrived. But as we say in the United States, “there is a first time for everything,” and that night the rule was broken for the first time and now, let's see how it happened.

All throughout the day, those men were driven like beasts. Moving and unloading all types of military supplies, ranging from spare parts for tanks, for the old Sherman tanks still in service in Cuba, which parts were received directly from Canada, to heavy artillery shells, a long line of trailers under the scorching hot sun, making them sweat and curse with a high consumption of buckets of hot water to drink. There was no cold water at hand. It was long after ten when they finally finished the heavy task, and when the last empty trailer left the main gate, it was only then when those poor men, who were more than exhausted, were allowed to eat supper or take a shower or sleep. They chose the latter, and they fell in their bunkers like pieces of logs and fell asleep in seconds. And so, the night of April 14, 1961 was elapsing, hot and quiet.
Later during the night, sometime after one o’clock, three giant trailers made their appearance at the main gate, loaded with an important load of 7.62mm bullets for the army and militia, light automatic rifles, F.A.L., Belgium made weapons. Those bullets were purchased at the cost of six million dollars, bypassing the U.S.A. blockade of arms and bullets; therefore, the importance and the value. The sentries were under strict orders to inspect the tractor trailers from top to bottom, starting at the cabin for the driver, continuing with the big and bulky fuel deposit making sure that there were not any explosives attached anywhere.

Finally, after the all clear signal was given, the officer in charge of the night guard took the field telephone and rang the Camp Commander's office to notify him of the arrival of the ammo and requested his orders to call the military personnel to unload the vehicles.

-Comrade Commander! We have three trailers with ammunition to unload. Everything is in order. I request your permission to call the men.

-Three trailers, at this time of night? The Camp Commander was saying over the telephone amid uncontrollable yawning.

-I was informed they were on their way to the camp. He said all of that while looking at his watch’s luminous dial in the semi-darkness of his room. He was dead tired and had not even worked half of what all those men had worked during the day. Every bone and muscle in his body ached, after taking part in the unloading of the preceding trailers, just for the show of course. He just could not bear to awake his men for such untimely task, so he answered back to the main gate officer.

-We will unload them first thing in the morning, after Reveille. Let's give our people a break tonight. They deserve it.

Mr. Universo Sanchez was going to regret his words for the rest of his natural life, after I explain what happened to the three trailers.

The officer at the gate ordered the three trailers to park anywhere on the airport; therefore, the driver left them in the vicinity of the parked planes for the night. The hours passed by and so did the night. When the early morning formation and salute to the flag ceremony was over, some of the men were going home for the weekend; others were going home for good, never to return to the base, they were the dropouts.

There was on base an anti-aircraft gunner with a very different personal appearance from what any smart looking military personnel should look like. His boots were eternally muddy and dirty. There were missing buttons to his shirt, his pants were wrinkled and he wore his beret in the most unmilitary style, cocked to one side like a piece of garbage, but that was not the worst.

He had been caught sleeping while on guard next to his anti-aircraft piece. His sloppiness in fulfilling the orders he received and his lateness in arriving at the morning formations had earned him an inglorious reputation for being the worst of all of the anti-aircraft gunners. The only thing that had saved him was his good aim in target practice. He was the very best of all gunners in that. But everything has a limit. They were tired of him and of all his wrong doings, and even his good shooting had not saved him from receiving a final kick out of the service.

At such an early time in the day and without a single soul around him Gunner Alfredo Morales sat at the gunner seat of the gun he knew so well and commenced to follow the routine inspection of the gunner’s position:

-Ammo Drums, there was one drum of ammo for every barrel of the four barreled anti-aircraft weapon, Check.

-Safety catch off, Check.

-Barrels covers, Check.

-Bolts back check, although he did not pull the bolts back.

-Weapon Ready for Action, Check.
He rotated and depressed the four-barreled weapon aiming at the four cardinals points in the sky; all of his performance was affected in front of the eyes of the sentries posted at every weapon. That sentry did not know that this fellow was going home for good and could not understand how he was spending his remaining hours on the base seated at the gunner's position instead of taking time to pack his things for the end of the week furlough.

-That gunner must be crazy like most of them are.

Then, a distant airplanes drone in the air. Our gunner with quick reaction aimed his gun in the direction of the sound where planes should be coming. The time, 6:20 A.M., and he remained like a statue with his eyes glued through the crisscrossed sight, with a fast pulsating heart and a thought in his mind.

If those incoming planes had ever been enemy planes attacking the camp, and I could have an opportunity to demonstrate by abilities as a gunner, I would be saved and would remain in the corp. He gave the gun a last minute check and placed his finger on the trigger and sat motionless, tense, waiting, although not for long. The three planes passed over his head, and a wave of disappointment passed over his soul, those were not enemy planes, those were our own planes flying over the field to land, the well-known marking on the wings and tail were unmistakable. With swift and short turns in the air, the three planes separated and each one took a different way. One plane headed for the Field Control Tower and burst after burst of white tracers shot out from the machine guns on board, the "swoosh" sound of rockets flying in the air heading to the tower and close buildings setting fire and throwing chunks of masonry flying in the air the plane fire did not have any ending and so the airstrips of concrete received a long burst of caliber fifty slugs.

Our gunner did not understand what was going on. The base been attacked by our own planes? Are those pilots drunk? He did not have to wait too long for the answer. Another B-26 on his strafing headed straight for the three trailers and rocket after rocket flew from the plane and hit the parked vehicles which exploded one after the other, sending ammo boxes exploding in the air and fusillade of bullets also flying everywhere.

In the distance, the third plane was spraying with machine gun fire the heavy anti-aircraft emplacement, those for the 37mm cannons, and dedicated its fire to the parked planes on the strips.

The raiders turned their attention to the bait planes, which were nicely parked and round after round of their machine gun fire was spent, as well as the precious fuel they had in their tanks.

Oily flames were coming out of the fuselages of the planes hit by the bullets of the attackers. B-25's, T-33's and a couple of DC-3's, old and useless, were destroyed on the ground.

The air attackers believing they had destroyed all of Castro's air force on the ground did not press the attack on the right direction, the precious underground ammo dumps covering literally the whole camp, and the apparent empty hangars which were also used as storage facilities for ammo.

Also the airstrips remained virtually unscathed, the hard concrete having loss few chunks here and there did not have any damage, and Castro's real Air Force was able to fly in the air two days later.

During the time of the air attack against Columbia Airport, most of Castro's forces in the barracks, tried to leave their buildings at the sound of the first machine gun fire. No order or discipline followed the army personnel to escape the rain of caliber 50's sweeping the buildings and corpses started to pile up at the windows and doorways, some of them practically in pieces.

A gasoline gas tank used to supply the planes was thoroughly sprayed with gun fire and instead of blowing
up, its sides punctured had flaming gasoline escaping creating rivers of fire, its flames spread to nearby trenches trapping the men hiding in there and the human torches yelling and screaming left the apparent safety of the trenches to run through the airport, running and running, spreading a revolting smell of burnt flesh which rose above the smell of burnt powder of the machine gun fire.

The river of flames made it to a small dump of barrels with aviation gasoline and the barrels started to blow up in the air like giant rockets spreading more flaming gasoline in the area, and we had more men in flames running through the field.

Some of the men did not lose their heads when the flames hit them and they dropped to the ground where they rolled over the dry soil and extinguished the flames. Others not as cool in their thinking kept on running and burnt to cinders in front of the eyes of the men in the trenches.

Lakes of flaming gasoline spread to the few anti-aircraft sites still untouched, and the sandbags lit at the touch of the liquid gasoline making the use of those heavy weapons off-limits to the gunners who tried to put them in action.

The attackers shot every gasoline tank in sight, some ignited and exploded spilling more gas on fire to the camp under attack, in the north section of the camp where high octane aviation gas was stored, the attackers missed the biggest chance of all. All the gas for Castro's Air Force was there, and escaped destruction. Exploding bombs of fifty pounds apiece and streaks of machine gun fire marked the empty and destroyed sites of heavy anti-aircraft cannons whose broken barrels and twisted wreckage due to intense heat also caused the shells stored next to the guns to explode preventing that way an effective defense of the few untouched guns.

One lone gunner was lonelier than ever before, since the lapse of time of the first strafing run on the camp not a single shot came from the unmanned weapons.

His legs felt like pieces of rags, and his brain still doubted whether or not to give orders to his arms and hands to enter in action. He was in a deep emotional shock. He had seen too many of his comrades killed before his eyes. He witnessed how one plane flying very low had spread the wooden barracks where his friends of many years, were piled together like firewood, one over the other, dead, and bleeding, like cattle in a slaughterhouse. As a matter of fact, the blood was running from the barracks like rivers on fire. Corpses like charcoal pieces of burnt flesh, with no limbs, and also many human limbs littered the scenery, making the concrete landing strips marked with thick, heavy color red and deep black from so many burns.

Slowly, his hands regained some sensation. He could now feel his hot finger tips, pulsating blood. He had made up his mind. He would not shoot the first plane coming into his gun sight.

Although he had no gun servants with him to replenish his supply of ammo, it did not matter much now, he would shoot.

At last the moment of truth, a B-26 flying low and spitting fire from every angle cutting down anti-aircraft crews of the four-barreled machine guns like his, who were still in the process of making their pieces operational.

The front dome of the plane with its front gunner spread a murderous fire, the ammo boxes lying on the ground were hit, another explosion and the poor souls next to the ammo were killed right off.

There were more men coming from the barracks who thought they were safe in the open ground, more bullets and they fell to the ground, dead, and literally in pieces, any impact of a caliber 50 MG removed limbs from the human body or partially disintegrated bellies or chest, whichever part was hit.
The plane was converging in his gun sight. He started to fill the round spider web looking gun sight, and he pressed the trigger. A long and unending burst of tracers and steel slugs came out of the four barrels converging on the left engine, and bouncing off.

Ripping the armored engine cowling in pieces entering in the engine and starting a small fire, black, thick smoke pouring out of the stricken plane.

The propeller was turning in the air with no power from the engine. The bullets hit the sides of the plane entering inside without any more apparent damage. The plan continued flying like before but not for long. It almost dropped to the ground. It was then when the fact of the pilot briefly appeared over the side window surveying the damage done to his engine. The pilot gunned his remaining motor and climbed up in the sky out of reach of the gunner's machine gun, and headed up north. The gunner followed the plane's flight with his gun still shooting until the sound of the bolts hitting empty chambers awoke him into reality.

He remained at his post not moving a little bit, long after the attackers were long gone. He confided to his friend and a relative of mine that he could not stand up from his gun seat because he was sure his knees would not sustain him.

An eerie silence spread over the camp from one end to another, interrupted only by the yells and curses of the wounded and the squeaky sound of the oily flames, the smell of vomit mixed with the revolting chirping of human fat burning and so many corpses beyond recognition mixed in the ground. The wreckage of anti-aircraft batteries, ammo boxes and barrels of gas still on fire, exploding here and there. Several boxes of bullets still on the three trailers steel beds were going up in the air, shooting rounds of ammo like unmanned machine guns in a ghost battlefield.

This calm did not last for long, to anti-aircraft cannons caliber 37mm commenced a belated firing mission against the departed attackers still in sight in the air. The heavy and explosive shells flew in the air described a curved trajectory and got lost in the air, out of sight and in the general direction from where the air raiders departed. These inexperienced gunners did not set the shell fuses properly, and used contact fuses only, instead of altitude fuses, in other words. Heavy shells which should explode on contact with the target were flying in the air in a neighborhood with buildings filled with civilians. Those shells would explode all right, and they did, on contact with planes or with any building.

Columbia Avenue was littered with exploded grenades, and so the nearby buildings, many civilians, women and children among them, were seriously wounded. Cars and trucks parked next to the front end of the camp were hit by heavy cannon fire.

It was discovered later that civilians suffered many injuries, and that the most innocent people had to pay for the mistakes of untrained men, and those poor people were declared as civilian casualties shot by the attackers.

How come, in the name of common sense and logic, any air raider would ever dare to effect a direct attack on the civilian buildings and residences around the military camp, such an attack would have been tantamount for the least decided men in Castro's forces to mount a defense up to the last bullet since the already expected invasion landed on Cuban soil.

Nevertheless, the Cuban media published photographs of buildings and houses hit by enemy rockets and machine gun fire, when in reality my friends in the medical corp. confided in me that the civilian casualties caused by the apparent air attack were in fact originated by the inexperienced defenders of the camp, men who shot in and
around the camp without the slightest regard for civilian safety. Those 37mm cannon shells were portrayed as rockets fired from the B-26's.

One near catastrophe was miraculously averted during the air raid. It was due to an infantry lieutenant who approached a heavy cannon site where the gunners, green as they could be, were in the process of loading their pieces with intermarried shells, they type with the extra strong steel head, able to penetrate the strongest tank armor in existence at that time. Those gunners intended to use their slow flying shell against the fast-flying planes, needless to say that the shells would have gone through buildings and houses perforating walls and human beings in its way like a hot knife would go through butter.

Far in the distance, ambulance sirens could be heard approaching the airport. The unhurt personnel in the field dedicated themselves to the task of extinguishing fire on the wreckage of the planes and ammo dumps as well as the barrels of gas still on fire.

Others approached the wounded, and tried to stop horrendous blood hemorrhage. Some succeeded in their tasks; others were not so lucky and found themselves with bloody and lifeless corpses in their hands.

Any outsider would think that the airfield was licked for good. There were fires all over, exploding wreckage of planes, destroyed weapon sites and equipment.

The dead and nearly dead were strewn all over the field.

There were heaps of unrecognized corpses by the doors and windows of the army barracks. One hangar was smoking lazily in the air. It received a burst of machine gun fire early in the attack starting small fires inside, but that was all. That particular hangar was filled with stacks upon stacks of 85mm caliber shells for Castro to beef up his supply of ammo for his field artillery.

Other hangars loaded with mortar ammo also escaped destruction. The ever important underground ammo storage site did not receive a single hit during the attack. Once again, Castro's luck held.

The gunner to whom we would call Alfredo Morales was praised by the camp commander and by Castro himself as the only man who really inflicted any damage to the air raiders. Castro himself bestowed him with a new Czech made olive green beret and a Czech-made pistol caliber 7.65.

When that ceremony was over, Castro himself summoned Mr. Universo Sanchez to his presence and in front of other officers he insulted the man with these words, more or less.

-I heard that we lost three trailers loaded with ammo for the army and Militia FAL's.
-Our men told me the trailers were not unloaded and were parked in the open, in full sight of everybody.
-You stupid son of a bitch. I gave you standing orders to unload trailers into the underground ammo dumps to prevent cases like this. Why didn't you order the three damn trailers unloaded? Why didn't you have all the anti-aircraft crews in a 24-hour complete readiness, sleeping, eating and living next to their gun pits? You stupid ass, don't you know the high price in foreign currency we paid for those bullets? If I didn't know you from the years in combat we spent together in the mountains, I would shoot you here, on the spot for treason.

Commandant Sanchez's face was ash white after all those insults received in front of a crowd of other officers. The only thing that saved Commandant Sanchez was the fact that the Cuban media portrayed the air attack as a blood bath of the counter-Castro's forces, made a big emphasis in the hideous destruction of the three trailers loaded with ammo, the massacre of military personnel, the high loss of equipment, and above all, the machine gun strafing and rocket launching on the civilian buildings with the natural casualties.
At that time, we were still under the impression that Castro was only a nationalist leader and that the ties with the countries in the communist block was only a matter of survival and that without that Cuba could have never obtained any of the much needed weapons.

It was much to our surprise when on April 16, 1961, during the burial of the men killed in the air raid when he declared to the world his allegiance to communism and that he had made a Red Revolution at the doorsteps of the United States.

We did not have any choice but to continue with our training, although deep in our hearts we started to realize that we were wrong and the men in the already expected invasion were right all along the way.
CHAPTER 4

RED ALERT - APRIL 15, 16, 17, 1961

- CASTRO'S SECRET SERVICE IN ACTION -

The air attack against the three military airport of Castro's Air Force failed completely to destroy his planes or immobilize them in the bases due to no destruction of the air strips. It backfired for the attackers since it helped Castro and his Secret Service, the much feared G-2 more than the Cuban and the American people can ever imagine it.

Such attack gave absolute certainty that the invasion was at the doorsteps of the island, and its arrival was only a matter of hours. The feared possibility of internal uprisings and sabotages on the part of the several anti-Castro organizations existing in 1961 in Cuba made the G-2 to take extreme measures against all of the Cuban citizens who were under the slightest suspicion of not being in good terms with the new regime.

To begin with, the long delay of two days elapsed between the air raids at the airfields and the landing of the "Brigada 2506" gave Castro plenty of time to mobilize more than 200,000 men in active military service, no small feat for a so small country with limited capacity of transportation. It also expedited sending of reinforcements in men, weapons and ammunition to the army and militia garrisons in the most remote parts of the island.

Another important matter was the extreme surveillance for all key highway and railway junctions, under the control of reinforced infantry platoons, very well armed, including for the American standards. On the average they had two caliber 7.92 M.G. two heavy automatic rifles caliber 7.62 plus rocket launchers, which the latter were the equivalent of discarded American bazookas.

That was not all; they minded every entrance to highways, bridges and railways, with specific instructions to blow them in the event of an impending enemy take over, and to disregard any orders on the contrary no matter who issued them.

All of the garrisons in every beach in Cuba were immediately reinforced and it might seem a contradiction but the arrival of the invasion in the southern portion of Zapata swampland, which we know as the Bay of Pigs, caught the Cuban high command by surprise.

They could have never had imagined in their wildest dreams that the invaders could have ever chosen such a place to land. It was surrounded by marshes, and the rocky beaches in the vicinity with sharp jagged edged rocks, known as Dog's teeth could tear to shreds the bottoms of any landing craft not matter how shallow it might be.

Also for any defending forces, although the place was difficult to reach, it could be sealed in such a way that the invaders could have never deployed further than the five to six miles from the beach that the invaders occupied and kept for three days.

After April 15, 1961, the date of the air raid, all the military microwave transmitters were on the twenty-four hours alert with orders to report at certain times during the day. Any delay or failure to report, would have indicated problems in that station, creating an immediate alarm for all of the other operators in the communications net, and the problems in the microwave failing to report a jeep patrol with a mounted heavy machine gun would verify physically
if there were any problems or if on the contrary that everything was under control.

Under orders of the G-2, the army communications network took special precautions to prevent any enemy take over and to imitate the voices of the operators. Those specially trained micro-operators were under strict and precise orders to remain in front of their mikes 24 hours a day and to effect all their physiological needs inside their cabins or rooms to that effect.

They were in fact like members of a brotherhood, they knew each other very well, by first names, family relatives, current jokes and things of the like, and in other words, anybody could have imitated their voices but never their styles of talking.

Usually the micros were protected by two men besides the operator, immediately after the air raid, those sites were heavily reinforced, in some cases with whole infantry platoons and additional supplies of heavy weapons and plenty of ammunition in order to assure time for the operators to send the messages warning the army command of the arrival of attackers or of the expected invasion.

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**BASIC INFORMATION:**

- Designation: M-1 Garand
- Manufacturer: John C. Garand
- Country: United States
- Service Date
- Type: Combat Rifle
- Operation: Self-Loading
- Caliber: 7.62 mm

**DIMENSIONS:**

- Length: 43.6 inches
- Weight (Empty): 9.5 lb.
- Weight (Loaded): NA

**PERFORMANCE STATISTICS:**

- Rate of Fire: NA
- Rounds Per Clip: 8 round box
- Range: NA

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**BASIC INFORMATION:**

- Designation: M-1 Carbine
- Manufacturer: Winchester
- Country: United States
- Service Date: n/a
- Type: Operation: Gas
- Caliber: 7.62 mm

**DIMENSIONS:**

- Length: 35.6 inches
- Weight (Empty): 5.2 lbs
- Weight (Loaded): NA

**PERFORMANCE STATISTICS:**

- Rate of Fire: NA, Rounds Per Clip: 15 or 30 round box
- Range: 300 yds.
In some sites on the island, like in the southern portion of Havana, La Playa del Rosario, Rosario's Beach, it was so isolated the microwave emplaced there that their sole purpose was to send the landing alarm before the enemy killed them. Or if they wanted to survive to surrender immediately. Also, it is worth to note that the propaganda in Cuba in 1960 and 1961 was to the point that all of the men involved in the military were under the impression that whoever surrendered to the enemy would be killed on the spot by his captors.

All of the area around the site of the invasion was a big natural bay with no facilities, no docks, no warehouses, no cranes, and no nothing. The Bay of Pigs was located in the southern portion of the province of Matanzas in the southern coast of Cuba, although corresponding to the army jurisdictions of the Central Army, nevertheless many battalions corresponding to the Western Army were also engaged in the action, and therefore the Brigade faced in action two Army Corps, as we will see later on.

Since there were no facilities for any landing the invaders could ever land the total supply of ammunition on board the landing vessels and one of them, the HOUSTON was found at the end of the fighting by the frogmen of the Cuban navy with its whole load of ammo on board. Going back to the cities, a hunt at every corner of the country started after April 15, 1961, thousands of men and women were picked up at their homes, working places or in high schools.

The G-2 sent to prison with common criminals all people considered political troublesome, but pretty soon the prisons did not have enough room and Baseball Stadiums, University Campuses were overnight converted in concentration camps. People were sent there just for saying any joke of political implications.

There were not sufficient toilets and the people had to defecate and urinate in the concentration arenas, in front of everybody. The worst arrived for these people after the invasion was over, when the tribunals for political prisoners condemned those people to periods of prison from five to ten years for the sole crime of joking or talking against the political state.

Our doctors and nurses had to take care of those people mostly for ailments varying from dehydration to mental and physical fatigue. Sabotage was rampant in spite of the most savage’s reprisals; in that respect I will quote here an unpublished case that should have it ever succeeded the final results of the invasion would have been different. It happened in the Pump Room of the oil facilities of the former Shell Oil Company, in the very Havana Bay, where a foreman friend of mine, planted a powerful bomb in the room next to the pumping room from the processing refinery to the storage tanks.

The bomb exploded putting the whole place out of action for months to come, making the place unable to supply a drop of gasoline. That was not the important feat of this foreman, who we will call Mr. Hugo, that was not his only and most daring feat, he planted another bomb right next to an aviation gasoline tank, it is worth to know that at that time, Shell Oil and Esso Standard Oil Co. had been nationalized and their gasoline storage tanks were not separated at all and if the bomb would just have all the power it was intended to have its force would have perforated the steel sheets on the tank side and ignited the gas inside which a whole chain of gas tanks so close to one another, and with the safety areas around them would have never prevented the river of flaming gasoline from initiating a chain reaction of fire and explosions which would have wiped out refineries and with them the ever important gasoline facilities for the trucks for Castro's infantry, for the armored forces, for the air force, in other words should the whole impact of the explosion would have ever taken place the story of the Bay of Pigs would have finished different, since Castro forces could have never stopped all the planned landings.
But that was not only the case, the great deal of disorganization existing in both refineries, due to the men in charge of the Fire Departments fled the country and all that was left behind was an untrained crew without experience or know-how as fire fighters. In few words, most of them did not know the right hand from the left hand, at the best of cases for Castro's forces if he could have ever sent his infantry into action, that infantry would have found itself orphan of the air and artillery support with the obvious results. The date of my friend’s feat was April 10, 1961, a week before the landing.

Castro's G-2 captured almost to a member all of the resistance cells in sabotage and propaganda its members sent to prison for lengthy periods of time from ten to twenty years. In regard to the resistance leaders, for them Castro's henchmen had a better and more efficient treatment much better than a stinky prison. For them there were only firing squads, Castro himself knew from personal experience in his years of fighting against the previous government that natural born leaders are something to be afraid of and therefore had to be disposed of promptly and efficiently. I will bring into this chapter, the story of one resistance cell, which members were operating inside the biggest store in Havana, the former Sears, Roebuck and Company, located in the heart of the capital.

An old and very good friend of mine lets me call him by his first name, Reinaldo R., told me about this case, only after he knew I was fired from my job at the Cuban Foreign Trade Bank. He died of a heart attack in April 1967, but behind in Cuba still remains his wife and sons, so we can do with his first name only.

On Saturday, April 15, 1961 the G-2 captured a would be saboteur at the Sears store, the person was a woman in advanced state of pregnancy, and they caught her with a dozen of phosphorus homemade bombs, and she could not deny the implications.

As standard procedure they took her to Villa Marista, the Headquarters in Havana of the G-2, where the G-2 interrogated the Political prisoners, slapping in the face, yelling, insulting, long hours of standing on the floor in front of interrogators. The main questions were: Who are your accomplices?, What were your plans? And she pretended to answer the questions, but only to pretend she fainted at the last minute, and for a while she had the upper hand on Castro's mastiffs.

The last straw tilted the luck of the courageous young woman, it was Sunday, April 16, 1961 when those henchmen took her back to the cell, and she was merciless pushed to enter into the tiny room and fell to the floor hitting her belly. The jailers closed the door without paying attention to her cries for help. Late that night her cries brought the guardians to the cell door and much to the horror of the soldier he saw the woman half conscious and a bundle of blood and flesh lying motionless between her legs. They took her to the first aid station and there was nothing they could do for the baby boy, he was dead due to complications arising from the horrible conditions of the woman all alone in the cell. She was briefly cured and taken back to the cell.

On April 17, 1961, the fateful day of the invasion, she was taken again to the interrogation room for the last time. She was confronted with all her Resistance Cell members. The G-2 lieutenant in charge of the investigation, a typical Castro man in those days, had a dirty olive green uniform. A black beard and moustache, a Colt 45 pistol dangling in the holster and a long thick dark brown cigar with a white string of ashes dangling from his lips. He was all smiles. Ironic smiles to be more precise.

Sorry citizen, I am very sorry that you did not talk before, otherwise that handsome baby of yours would still be there, and he said pointing at the woman's belly.

The brave woman, with courage only typical of the women, whom in moments of truth are braver than men themselves, said to the lieutenant without flinching an eye, these words which resounded tragically in the room filled
with prisoners, men and women together.

I don't call you Son of a Bitch because you came from the womb of a woman like me, and I cannot offend her. But remember my words, never a tyrant had ever lasted forever in Cuba, it won't matter that you shoot people by the score, that you fill all the prisons and build thousands of more prisons, Castro will fall, sooner or later, and you and your kind will pay for all of this.

The bearded one shrugged his shoulders, motioned the soldiers around him to take the prisoners away, prisoners who were later condemned to the firing squad.

Of the woman she was sent to prison for ten years, and no matter how hard I questioned my friend, he never revealed her name to me.

I had in my mind to become a doctor, which was the reason which made me join the Paramedics, where the doctor in charge Dr. Francisco Fernandez, promised we would be trained as male nurses first, and once inside the hospital the next step would be to be a doctor.

So I was studying as hard as I could and the morning of April 15, 1961 was unforgettable for me. I still remember when I was talking with the sentry at the main gate and a big cloud of dust appeared on the road. We looked at each other in silence, he did not say anything else, put his rifle on his right shoulder and with his left hand motioned me to go away. I needed no more and split on the spot running back to the barracks, yelling to all of my fellow paramedics who were around.

Damned, some big shot is coming by the road; you guys better get on your feet and behave smartly if you don't want to lose your weekend pass.

We did not have to wait for long for it. It was an olive green military wagon, the vehicle stopped amid the sound of brakes hitting the road. A young infantry lieutenant, whom we knew by sight, jumped out of the vehicle yelling and gesticulating wildly with a Thompson submachine gun.

We stood at a safe distance away from the vehicle. We all knew from bitter experience in Cuba that those farmers who had become big wheels in the new army were very dangerous specially when they had two or three drinks. Many people had lost their lives due to drunkenness of these lieutenants when they shot their guns in the air to celebrate and also to targets of occasion, buses, cars, houses. What the heck, they had all the rights in the world. The rights of the guns.

The yelling of that man caused a great deal of alarm and concern to all of us. That bastard had attacked all of our military airports and had killed a lot of our people. They destroyed all of our air force on the ground. A thick silence followed his words and he ended it saying: There is no doubt about it, the invasion is coming! We had to run for the formation while the sergeants in charge of the camp gave us the news at least officially.

We were told more in detail that three B-26’s disguised with the markings of the Cuban Air Force had attacked the main military airport of Columbia, the casualties among the armed forces in there had been high and also the equipment and airplanes loss was something likes irreplaceable. Some warehouses stocked high with ammunition were heavily damaged. Pack all of your medical equipment in knapsacks and handbags and be ready to go at a moment’s notice that was the order and we had to rush.
While most of the guys rushed to pack medicines and medical equipment only, others with more vision of the future ahead, ran to the camp kitchen and small warehouse for food and got plenty of cans of condensed milk, meat, crackers and stocked everything inside the medic’s knapsack, together with the medical supplies. After all we did not know what would lie ahead and hunger was something that we did not like to share.

Hours later a whole caravan on heavy trucks arrived in the compound with big canvas covers and with the well visible red crosses on the white round field. We had to unload the equipment on board, in big heavy boxes. It was a field hospital with everything, including portable X Ray units. Four large Russian-made jeeps arrived bringing the expected army doctors and nurses.

We were worried, the whole thing was taking a turn for the worse, first we were there to learn medicine, and now it was looking that we would have to go on a battlefield.

Sunday, April 16, 1961, reveille sounded at five o’clock in the morning. We had an impromptu examination on plasma and blood transfusions. A young doctor with sunken dark circles around his eyes for lack of sleep was yelling at us. Come on, you guys better hurry with this, we don't have much time and you must learn how to use these in combat, if necessary. In Combat? Asked in low voice a fellow paramedic next to me. You think they intend to send us with the troops to the first line of combat?

And why do you think they brought us here in the first place, dummy? Interrupted us another fellow saying that. There was no time to waste and the doctors went straight to the point and made us to prepare bottle after bottle of stale plasma as practice, since when the plasma was prepared it must be used within hours or it would not be any good at all, it spoils very quickly. We spent six hours altogether practicing thoroughly what we already knew by heart.

Ten o’clock in the morning another convoy of trucks was moving in through the main gate, big and bulky, they were approaching slowly, we noticed they had sentries inside the driver cabin and we could see the barrels of the automatic rifles. Right after their arrival the sentries dismounted from the trucks and stood guard next to the trucks, and gave us evil looks. Maybe they imagined we were a legion of CIA Agents instead of peaceful paramedics.

Hey, you guys, come over here, we need to unload the trucks. Was the order and we had to follow it? And there we were sweating and puffing like old men carrying the heavy wooden boxes from the trucks to a small house, almost hidden by vegetation. A natural way to provide camouflage for the would be Micro-Wave Station which we did not know at that time was in the process of being emplaced.

Other soldiers putting aside their arsenal started to dig holes in the ground and prepared cement for the foundation of the antenna, which was unloaded in sections. Oh my God, we have a radio station here, if somebody knows about it we might be splashed in pieces by commandos or American bombers. Damned, those people are crazy, they should not mix communications with Paramedics, and it is a dangerous combination for us. One of my friends told in a very low voice. And he was right. But there was nothing we could do about it and we continued unloading the equipment like nothing was happening.

Finally the Radio Station was ready in the first hours of the afternoon of April 16, 1961. The small house where they installed the transmitter seemed to us like a small fortress, surrounded by men with Tommy guns and a somber look in their eyes. They seemed more gangsters than soldiers.
There was a saying: Curiosity killed the cat, and that was not an exception to us, that afternoon, two of my colleagues and me went to the microwave station for a visit we were aching to see it from the inside, and under the cover of our Red Cross bracelets we went to the main entrance of the perimeter the soldiers had made for the station, the sentry probably thinking that we were there for official business opened the door for us. And there we were inside the station. We saw the operator seated in front of the micro speaking a sort of special language that we did not understand.

Look at those Tommy-guns in racks, exclaimed one of my friends and we were more than admired of the profusion of automatic rifles, boxes of bullets and hand grenades, those guys must be expecting an attack at any moment. Next to the operator there was a 45-caliber pistol, with the hammer cocked all the way. He switched the transmitter and looking at us yelled. What the hell are you guys doing here? Stuttering all kind of silly excuse, we rushed to the door. We could not get away that easy, the operator got on our way and yelled.

-Damned, stupid fools, I don't want to see any of you ever again here. This place is off limits to all of you. We are fighters not nurses.
Thank heavens we got away without further problems or so I thought. Less than an hour after that incident we all were called to formation and in there we saw briefly the face of the Micro operator talking to the sergeant and pointing his finger to the three of us.

We received our punishment. We had to dig trenches together with the soldiers in the outskirts in the compound. Our curiosity was more than served that day.

Sunday, April 16, 1961 a long night settled over the camp, we were on alert for over thirty-six straight hours and were in groups with our medical bags, expecting to be called any moment.

It was there where I learned to sleep standing on my feet against a wall; like I was on guard duty and so many of did it that way.

It was seven o'clock in the morning of April 17, 1961, a slight fog involved the compound, all of the army sentries were inside the trenches dug the night before, while the sun slowly rises over the horizon in a ball of yellow and red, like blood and fire flashing over the sky.

There was something in the air that we could feel, and to make matters more complicated, we noticed all of the doctors, nurses and students of medicine accompanying them they all look dishevel like us but the look in their faces was something we did not like.

Even the soldiers on guard around the Micro carried the Tommy guns with an obvious attitude of readiness that we did not notice the night before. Hey . . . do you see what I see, said one of my friends, pointing his finger to heavy machine guns installed over the roof of the barracks? Heavy machine guns all over the place. When did they bring them? Maybe late throughout the night or maybe they had them when arrived and installed first thing in the morning before formation. What date is today I asked? Today, well today is Monday, April 17, 1961, and a beautiful morning indeed.

Answering back his remarks I told him, I got a feeling that this is a date we will never forget. I can feel it in my bones, and looking again at the faces of everybody around us I added. I bet my life on a nickel, that the invasion arrived during the night, the only questions is - where?
The sergeant in charge of the camp yelled - Attention! We all got into attention while a soldier was raising the flag that everybody outside the military formation was smartly saluting.

The army doctor in charge of the medical group, after watching the flag in the pole, turned around, facing us took a deep breath and said:

Comrades Paramedics! We exchanged glances of worry, this was the first time the big wheels addressed us so respectfully, definitely, and something must be going on very bad.

I have bad news for you. We were invaded last night. A large landing had been reported in the Bay of Pigs, which is in the southern part of Santa Clara Province, we assume that the garrison of the micro wave must have been killed in action because the message they sent was interrupted during its transmission.

We are expecting landings all over the island, including paratroopers, so, from this moment on, we must rush our preparation of the medical equipment and we will send you to the hospitals in the nearby areas of this invasion, so you will reinforce the medical staff which will be under the heaviest imaginable pressure.

I have something for you; he picked medical emblems for our cops and Red-Crosses arm bracelets, and handed them to us, repeating these words

Remember this, a wounded is a wounded, regardless of flag or whatever side he is, and your first duty is to try to save him.

As the saying went the Die is cast. The arrival of the invasion did not catch Castro's forces unprepared and the beaches undefended. The island was bristling with weapons from one end to another. The element of surprise was lost due to the long delay of two days between the air raid and the landing. It was something that was going to cost dearly to the invading Brigade.
CHAPTER 5

HOW THE INVASION WAS SEEN BY THE DEFENDERS EYES

It was April 17, 1961, at 3 o'clock in the morning when the small garrison of twelve men standing guard at the Micro in the perimeter of Giron beach on the left side of the Bay of Pigs, were enjoying the first night of sleep. They were on constant alert since the 15th and this time they could take it no more. They were on the routine called Cossack Guard, with four men on guard for two hours at a time when the others sleep.

No way, even those off duty could not sleep much, the air raids on the military airfields made the invasion sure to come. The mere thought of a commando knife across the throat or a swift stab in the lower back while a strong arm held your neck backwards was something that the tired men did not take lightly and they were fully awakened regardless of the hour in the night.

It was close to four in the morning when the sentries overheard noises coming from the nearby beach. It was not too hard for them to awake the already awaken men in a matter of seconds.
-Listen, listen, several seconds of silence followed the warnings of the guards, and strange muffled sounds came from the beach.
-I think somebody is over there.

Another man said maybe we have a sabotage party coming ashore. His last words were mere words of hope more than anything else. They looked at each other in silence, fearing that the worst feared invasion was already there.
-Maybe it is the invasion!
-Shut up, you stupid don't forget that the Americans always launch a strong artillery barrage before effecting any landings.
-Most likely that must be a commando party to destroy our radio station.

Our men were more trying to encourage themselves more than anything else, finding a logical way out for their predicaments. Knowing very well that if the invasion was at their doorsteps they were doomed to death.

The last remark had plenty of good sense, for them at least, that was the sure winner, and probably the only one our men wanted to hear. They knew damn well that if that was the invasion there was no way out for them.
-Come on let us go to the beach and see what is going on.

The patrol left two men inside the Micro with the operator seated in front of the transmitter, awaiting for confirmation of what was going on at the beach.

For a curious coincidence this outpost was still in the process of receiving heavy weapons with extra supply of ammo. All they had in hands to face the possible landing, were twelve semiautomatic rifles with four clips of ten bullets each per man. The micro operator was a little better fitted than them; he had a Tommy gun with 180 bullets, still a mere drop in the bucket in the event of any complications.

It was a short march to the beach, but it seemed to our men like the longest and most difficult of all marches they had ever performed. There were maybe three to four hundred yards to the shoreline, and the feet of each. One of them weighed a ton.
The air was blowing from the ocean and the sounds were clear and clear by the moment.

The patrol crawled when it was very close to the beach and took defensive positions. It was a dreadful sight for them, mother vessels in the bay with search lights showing the way to black rubber boats with outboard noiseless engines making no sound. The more serious part to consider was the uniform of the men in the incoming boats, they all wore the well-known camouflage uniform of the U.S. Marines an instant thought came into their minds.

- The marines are coming! And they looked at each other in utter disbelief, but it was there all right, no doubts about it, the Marines with the well-earned reputation of the best fighters in the world had landed on Cuban soil.

The patrol was under the impression that the whole U. S. Navy was in the bay and that the landing party were Americans, therefore, they worried. They expected to tackle a party of Cubans coming ashore but never Americans.

They sent one runner back to the Station to notify the operator to send the warning signal that the Invasion was there already. And they did the most foolish thing of all.

In spite of the obvious identity of the men wading ashore, busily unloading wooden crates and the high beam of the reflectors in the bay they followed the rules on which they were trained for months on end and the patrol leader yelled:

- We are the beach patrol, who are you?

Several seconds passed with no reply on the part of the arriving forces whose members were probable amazed in regard to the identification request.

The warning was repeated once again, this time it was followed by a warning shot in the air, and it was promptly answered by a voice saying

- We are Brigade 2506 we came to liberate you. Join us/

The patrol was shocked to hear that -Joint Us. They could have never thought of that possibility of joining ranks with the men they were supposed to fight to the death.

As a comment to that situation, Castro still had the image of the modern Robin Hood, the non-Communist and Nationalist leader and for many Cubans he was still the Mountain Hero. That was why no one joined ranks with the invaders. Should that invasion had ever taken place a couple of years later, thousands and thousands of men would have joined ranks with the invaders, like me and most of the men in my wife's family, whom we can say here, most of them are in the United States.

We will not join you, Fatherland or Death. These last words were followed by the light voices of their R-2 rifles, spitting a burst of bullets to the enemy.

The explosion of the bullets fired by the patrol was promptly drowned by the powerful bangs of the American Garand’s and M-3 Tommy Guns. A brief fight started with bullets flying both sides, the fire of the beach patrol decreased considerably, they were down to less than ten bullets per man. On the other side the fire did not decrease and geysers of sand hit the faces of the men in the patrol. They were not wiped out to the man due to darkness although their position was untenable and more dangerous by the minute.
Two of those ten men lost their nerves and stood up to escape and were shot dead while still in the process of standing from the ground. Their corpses were hit by tracers and caught fire still in the air. The brief pools of fire in their corpses helped the enemy improve their aim, wounded two more men in quick succession reducing their ranks to only five. Realizing there was nothing else to do on the beach, the survivors retreated back to the micro where they expected to make a last stand, although without any hopes.

Our survivors make it to the micro; over there they were confronted by a nervous operator who had not sent any warning message yet in spite of the fact of having received a hysterical runner, yelling at the top of his lungs:
- The Americans are here, the marines are here, the whole American navy is inside the bay. There are thousands of men landing, send the warning message right away.

The operator of the station acting on the best of logic did not want to send such a message and held his ground in spite of the soldier who tried to grab the mike away from him and send it himself, and was stopped cold by the operator who said.
- If you just try to use that mike I am going to shoot you dead, you Son of a Bitch. Do you think I am going to put our troops on a wild goose chase? What about if the whole thing is just a small commando party and you coward faggots mistook it for the whole US Army?

Our operator had not seen the ships in the bay and had not been shot at by the invaders, that's why he was so cool, but the moment the retreating soldiers made it to the cabin, and he saw two of them covered with blood, sand and powder darkened faces after shooting their guns like crazy, he asked for no more details and reassurances. He sat in front of his mike, put his Tommy gun at his side and yelled the words that were going to complete the Red Alert on which Castro's armies were all over the country since two days before:
- This is Giron beachhead, we have been invaded. We will fight to the last bullet. Send us reinforcement. Fatherland or death.

He did not have more time to repeat the message; one well-aimed hand grenade hurled by the approaching party of invaders destroyed the Antenna putting the station out of service for good.

In the meantime, our men had closed the wooden door and barricaded behind every window and shot sparingly against the incoming camouflage figures. The two wounded men laying on the floor were slowly dying for severe blood hemorrhage. With the station out of service, the operator grabbed his Tommy gun and rushed to a window and from there he kept of firing in bursts of two to three bullets.

With no retreat and no reinforcements the resisting soldiers shot the few remaining bullets very sparingly for two more hours in spite of the hopeless situation and the continue offers of surrendering with honors.

They did not surrender, it was only after one of their men raised his head for the fraction of a second to watch the enemy outside, he received a direct hit in his forehead, his head exploded in pieces and chunks of his brain mixed with blood splashed the men around him. Another man yelled.
- I can't take it no more, walked out the door with the rifle well above in signal of surrendering and yelled to the enemy outside
- Don't shoot, don't shoot, I surrender.
- What about your buddies inside, are they going to surrender too? He knew his comrades were out of bullets, so turning around said
- Come out you stupid ass holes, you are going to get killed for nothing, these guys are going to storm the station if you don't make up your mind right away.
After that, all the other men, walked out carrying their wounded with them threw their rifles to the ground and entered captivity at the hands of the brigade.

They lived through the remaining three days, suffered no harms or mistreatment in spite of Castro's propaganda saying any invader would kill any of our men who surrendered to them.

The brief and lack of information radio message alerted all of the micro waves through the island, some of the closest ones in Cienfuegos and Jaguey Grande requested confirmation, there was no one to give any, and the station was out. Just the mere fact that the Bay of Pig station did not transmit anymore its hourly reports was confirmation enough the whole thing was true and not a fake as many of the high commands in Castro’s forces believed. The initial small opposition met by the brigade during the landing in the early hours of April 17, was so significant that few invasions had ever landed so easily, but the main point was they lost the element of surprise all that remained now for them to dig to await for reinforcements as promised, or to advanced deep island to obtain people to join them before Castro could seal them since there was only one drivable road and marshes around.

All B-26's planes in Castro's Air Force, as well as the Sea Furies and T-33 jet trainers were operational and in the air the following day with the first light of dawn.

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**Browning .50 cal machine gun**

Designation: Browning M2HB 12.7 m
Caliber: .50 cal (12.7 mm)-
Rate of Fire: 450 - 575 rounds per minute
Rounds Per Clip: 110 round metal link belt

All the advantages were on Castro's side. His planes were loaded with extra ammo, anti-personnel bombs and rockets, very light gasoline, after all there was only one short flight from the airports in Havana and Santa Clara for strafing and bombing runs of the beachhead or at the worst to find the enemy planes in the area which would be so heavily loaded with gas that they could not take any evasive maneuvers and could be as easily shot down as to shoot ducks in a barrel. After finishing the supply of ammo Castro's planes flew to Santa Clara Airport some eighty miles away replenished ammo and fuel and back in the air in no time to keep hammering the brigade positions.

From source in the Brigade, we had the story about most of the events that happened between the time of their landing and the early hours of the day, when Castro's first planes arrived overhead.
Unfortunately for the Brigade, it was too dark for them to land all of the equipment and ammo on board the vessels. Nevertheless they managed somehow to land the heavy artillery of 75mm cannons and 57mm recoilless rifles, six heavy Patton tanks, mortars and Heavy machine guns that was great, but the winning factor in war besides man power and weapons is ammo, and that was their Achilles talon less than the five percent of the ammo was landed by them. Later reports from them confirmed what was said at our medical corp.

-It was Castro's Air Force which pound them with everything they had, forcing the vessels in the bay to abandon anchorage and set away to open seas to prevent an early sinking.

They could not land extra gasoline supply for the mobile equipment and their small armored forces only had whatever gas supply was inside their gas tanks, which prevented further mobility on their part.

It was not Castro's Army or Air Force the one who made the second contact with the Brigade. It was the Cuban Navy. In the pre hours of dawn a PT. boat of the Cuban Navy patrolled the area and entered the bay for the usual visual inspection before going away to open seas to continue for the long wait for any incoming party, the craft was cruising at low speed came headlong into the brigade vessels still laying at anchor inside the bay. Surprise was great on board the navy boat, they were never expecting to find so many large vessels transporting men and equipment, and there was not the slightest chance to think those men could be their own.

The PT. captain sounded alarm, sending all men on deck. The twin machine gunners commenced fire on the spot. All other personnel including marine reinforcements grabbed all available weapons and joined in action, the second part was more psychological than material, if the craft twin fifties could have never sunk the enemy vessels let alone those heavy automatic rifles could never accomplish any real damage.

All vessels in the bay concentrated fire on the PT. boat, which was straddled several times by close cannon shots it kept on firing and advancing taking no evasive maneuvers, the captain was apparently too much concerned about the fighting that he forgot to steer his vessel away from enemy fire.
All bullets hit the small craft time after time.

The PT. board two twin fifties fired unending bursts of fire against every ship on sight there had no hope to destroy them but they were trying to do the job for which they were trained for months on end.

Bullets of every caliber swept the decks of the attacking craft killing the caliber fifty gunners simultaneously, both sailors crumpled dead in their seats hit by 20 millimeters slugs. The same caliber weapons hit the gun wales were the other sailors fired the heavy automatic rifles and threw them dead to the seas. Large splashes of blood stained the decks, it was sticky with the heavy red liquid, and extra slippery after mixing with sea water which splashed everything.

The rain of bullets cleared the gun wales of defenders, some fell to the sea where they drowned others fell of the deck where their comrades put rifles aside and got hold of them to prevent from falling into the sea.

With upper deck torn to pieces, windshield slashed by flying shrapnel and radio antenna dismantled the craft was getting closer and closer to the vessels in the bay. Then three rapid bangs hit the craft engulfing it in flames and smoke, three large ugly holes appeared in the hull barely over the water line, the rudder could hardly steer the vessel and the speed slowed down, with damage to the engines inside the enemy gunners aim was easier and easier another noisy bang this time the bow disappeared in flames and jagged pieces of wood and metal was all which was left of the knifed bow.

There was nothing else to do and the captain knew it. He made a 45 degrees turn in the sea and headed straight for the rocky shore. He expected to sharp rocks below to tear to pieces the bottom of his craft. He kept a straight rudder trying to save the remaining of his crew.

Noticing for the first time that both fifties were silent and not a single man remained at the gun wales he yelled at the crew. Grab our wounded. We are going to hit shore. It was not as bad as they expected it, with the craft heavy by the bow they hit a shallow sandy bottom as the craft made to the very shoreline.

All men went down to the beach, did not lose a second, got the rifles in bandolier and one by one lowered the wounded, in horse fashion, those unconscious were lowered held by the armpits and taken to shore.

With heavy heart they made it to the beach and the sandy shore and much to their surprise heard a pair of fifties coming back to life and commenced to spit fire toward the enemy vessels on the other side of the bay. There was a strong and swift reply two cannon shots rang muffled by the distance, one grenade fell in the sea spraying with foam the halfway sunken craft which MG kept on firing furiously. The second air whiz sounded up in the air and the survivors scrambled in the beach looking for cover, only the captain knew better than that, he saw his ship hit square almost dead center sending big chunks of the craft in the air and killed the last of the gunners in action.

They could not wait no more and help the walking wounded toward the bushes, stayed in hiding until the end of the day when forward elements of the army reached their positions and took them back to the rear guard. Four more men died of wounds suffered. One survivor had to go for psychiatric treatment for many years afterwards, the poor thing dreamed every night with the action awaking screaming and yelling in the middle of his dreams waking up of his relatives in the house. He was assigned to the Cuban Merchant Marine and I met him at the Naval Hospital where he was interned for several months. His name was Luis Barreras, he got a severe psychological problem after seeing all his friends killed before his very eyes. Although this naval engagement was not the biggest in the world, let us remember that certain people cannot take mental pressure and in cases like that they collapsed...
mentally, in many cases forever.

Although not much in detail was ever said about the ordeal of the PT. boat and the destruction of the garrison in the bay, there was a lot of talking about it basically, there were two reasons pushing these conversations going on in hush-hush, and they confided them to very close friends or relatives.

The first one was referring of course to the soldiers in the beach patrol, who put a brave resistance and surrendered only when they ran out of ammo. Castro's media leaning heavily on one side only, spoke highly of the dead and wounded in the beach, but had no words of praise for those braves' men who were held prisoners by the Brigade. Those men were treated well and the wounded duly taken care of by the Brigade Paramedics whom Castro's henchmen portrayed as an unruly mob of killers and assassins, If the invaders had not been gentlemen soldiers they would have killed their enemies at the beach.

On the other hand, the valiant but unsuccessful attempt of the PT. boat to attack single handed all the invasion vessels in the bay will speak highly if the courage of our navy men, but will say little about the minimum of naval tactics since the only logical action for the attacking draft would have been to retreat on the spot shadowing the invading force and to relay to Navy Headquarters as much information as possible. Making an estimated guessing of the number of men brought ashore, quantity of armored equipment landed and tried to obtain information about artillery and if more vessels were coming into the area.

These two small action staged by the defending forces in the island must have tipped off the brigade personnel about the excellent fighting qualities of the men in the island. Lots of guts maybe too much for their own sake, but absolute lacking of military tactics.

The brigade could have used to its best advantage that firsthand experience of the banzai type of men they were going to face on the battlefield. A type of soldier who would charge head on, the firing muzzle of a machine gun yelling words of praise for Castro and the Fatherland before going to hell blown up in pieces by the brigade gunners.
CHAPTER 6

THE 339TH MILITIA'S INFANTRY - DOOMED BATTALION

April 17, 1961 One O’clock P.M.

The fateful message sent by the radio station in The Bay of Pigs was a great help for the Cuban armed forces, but it involved at the same token a problem of fantastic proportions.

The content of the melodramatic message only indicated that the garrison was more than willing to fight till the end and nothing else.

It contained no information about the number of invaders, heavy weapons with them, armored forces if any but above all the main point was missing. Were there Americans troops among the invaders?

Just to think about the possibility sent chills of worry up the spine of all commanders in the High Command. Maybe the Americans were trying to trick them into sending the bulk of the heavy equipment and troops to the landing site, well away of many major arteries of communications and in the meantime the main body of the invasion might be sneaking into another place more suitable for an operation of this type.

That important fact received the most important consideration and nobody among the elite of Castro's Commanders dared to take any decision.

Mr. Fidel Castro himself finally arranged for a meeting with his military command, all of those men wore the star of mayor on their shoulders and theoretically they had the same rank of mayor as Castro had, but only in theory, he was the only one making any decisions.

All of them talked to each other, among the jokes the most heard of was. Where is Fidel? - Is he late as usual?

The first thing any outsider would have noticed on the spot was that all of the military men around the table carried no hand guns in their holsters, since the early stages anyone approaching Castro for a meeting was carefully frisked and any hand gun removed.

One of the participants in the important meeting, Dr. Figueredo wearing his ever clean olive fatigue uniform was between them and he confided me how the thing started and finished that day.

Castro arrived at two fifteen carrying with him a 9mm Tommy gun which he kept next to him, even in those early days Castro was not taking any chances with the men working with him.

He lit a long and thick Havana Cigar after spitting the top part of the cigar, the spit with brownish saliva and the cigar slit felt on the arm rest of a chair occupied by an army mayor, the man jumped in the air like a wild horse trying to remove the rider and after washing away the spit from his uniform with a handkerchief which he discarded under the chair. What the fuck is going on with you? Yelled Castro at the man. Some soldier you are what about if that were a piece of gut of a dying man or better yet, what would you have done if that man vomited blood on you?

The officer remained silent, his ashen white face was more than sufficient to express his sentiments toward
the bearded bully in front of him, a man who was taking advantage of his higher rank and above all, of the healthy company of his twenty bodyguards, heavily armed who filled the room in every angle.

Then after the preliminary verbal abuse and banging the table with the butt of his Tommy gun, Castro ordered silence, and theatrically addressed them with the most obscene words and manners that would put to shame the most fouled mouth army sergeant in the U.S. armed forces.

You bunch of stupid ass holes. I had to order this meeting to see how we solve this problem of the invasion that the Americans had sent us. - You are good for nothing, and I have to solve everything every time. You never take the right decision and that is why we are here today, to see what are we going to do.

My friend, the doctor, assured me that he saw more than one surging to the pistol holster only to find it empty.

If I make it through this invasion, and I assure you I will, I will demote you all to the rank of buck privates and be thankful that I only do that.

I want no questions. I want answers and fast.
He was addressing the abused men in the room and without any answers. I still remember those fucking planes attacking our airport, how they wrecked three trailers loaded with ammunition, Dammit!

Fidel, one voice dared to speak bow; it was Mayor Juan Almeida, the only black man in Castro's High Command.
- I heard we suffered heavy in troops and that they only destroyed planes out of commission which were on the airstrips?
- To hell with the dead troops, and what concern the planes out of commission destroyed on the airfield, don't go around spreading those rumors.
- If Universo Sanchez had only been a little less stupid he would have the men in constant alert, always next to their gun sites, most likely the catastrophe of the troops and the ammo trailers would have never happened in the first place.
- As for the planes destroyed, let the Americans and everybody else to think that our air force was dead in action. They will receive the shock of their lives when they see the sky over their heads spitting bullets, bombs and rockets.

Fidel, was saying the doctor for the first time, if the air attack was so imminent, why didn't you warned Universo, he would have never refused a direct order of yours requesting one hundred per cent alert next to the gun sites.

-Doctor, what gave you the right to speak in this soldier's meeting?

-Fidel, I do not need anybody to give me any rights, I take the rights since I am in charge of the medical treatment to the wounded we are going to have in the battlefields. Please bear in mind that if we are going to send our troops against any invaders since we do not know their size and weaponry, we better take good care in advance to make sure that we have Paramedics with our front line troops, other than that every time one of our men receive a bullet wound, even a slight one, he will bleed to dead if nobody is around to take care of him.
-OK Dr. Figueredo, don't take my words so seriously, I wish all of my commanders had your same guts, I would feel better in leaving then the task of fighting the invasion.

Castro overlook to recognize in this case, that all his commanders without any exception to the rule, could not and would not dare to take any important decision without the specific approval of Castro, other than that they risked all the cursed of the bearded one. And many good Commanders had finished in the worst parts of Cuba.

Castro addressed Almeida, the black commander.
-What the fuck you think is going on in The Bay of Pigs. Don you think that is the real thing? They crushed the balls of the 12 men garrison and destroyed a PT. boat, but that could be a trick only. If we commit all the armor, artillery and infantry in that Goddam place, and it is not the real invasion, we are risking that if it happens in some other beach, we would never be able to stop them on time. Almeida answered Castro words with measure and logic.

-We cannot be seated here without doing anything, so I think we should send some troops to stop their advance, to test the weaponry and if our men succeed in destroying the invader then we will have one good one over the Americans.
-That is a good idea, answered Castro, but what sort of military unit we should send.

At that moment the commander of the Central Armies, said, I think that I have what we need, one of our Militia Battalions, the 339th, recently finished its training and they are in the neighboring zone of the landing, as a matter of fact, they call that battalion The Cienfuegos Battalion.
-Good for you, said Castro for the last time let send one militia battalion against all of those men trained by the Americans and we will show them and the world how good we are.

The orders were given for the 339th Militia Battalion to go against the Brigade, and the fate of 1,200 men was sealed irrevocably for the worst.

The Cuban military command in charge of the southern central part of the island was not much of an experienced group of officers. They were mostly farmers whom by accident of life had become soldiers. They had a very narrow concept of military strategy and that was, to attack the enemy headlong with all guns in hand blazing away until the last opponent was killed in action.

The 339th Militia Battalion, with a regular number of 1,000 men, plus two reinforcement companies, had recently finished the military training school. A simple basic fifteen days, during which short period of time their instructors taught them how to use the Czech made semiautomatic rifles, known as R-2, similar in a way to the American made M-1, with the exception it carried an outside clip for bullets, instead of inserting the bullets inside the rifle.

Another weapon taught was the Czech-made Tommy gun, 9mm very fast firing weapon and light, it carried a short magazine of twenty bullets or the long one of forty, definitively that was too fast for the green troops that were going to use it in action.

Basically their training was copied from the American army. After the usual close order drills, and weapons assembly and disassembly, they had to cross the infiltration camp, which was a field of the size of a city square block where the instructors set three light machine guns, caliber 7.92 with an elevation for fire of 18 inches above ground level.
They fired a burst of three to four bullets over the heads of the men who had to crawl over the field, as a small addition the Czech. Instructors who had that chore had planted powder mines at random in the field and exploded them among the crawling men.

Once they crawled from one end to another of the field they were considered graduated in the difficult and dangerous game of war. And as graduated they received an olive green beret made of Czech wool, very hot for the hot climate in Cuba but it was a sort of Status Quo, among them.

The commanding officers of those units, lieutenants, sergeants and corporals were chosen for that task on these grounds more or less:
1. A good command voice,
2. Well-liked by the men in the unit,
3. To have a good revolutionary attitude.

The requirement for commanding officers was so stupid that we could consider them as plainly ridiculous. The command voice simply meant that person could yell louder than other men in the unit. To be well liked by the men in the unit was in a way similar to the American Buddy System, which has been liberally applied in business, which involved only money; in that case it involved human lives which are not as easily replaceable, up to a point, as money.

The last of them, to have a good revolutionary attitude in front of any situation was understood as the man who heard all of Castro’s political speeches and could quote him, almost to the letter.

Then, the commanding officers who led the 339th into action, were sort of shepherd taking the sheep to a slaughterhouse and did not stand the slightest chance against the well-trained men of the Brigade.

But orders are orders and the 339th was taken on a rush basis to meet the enemy which had already advanced over the St. Blas road and was at the doorsteps of Australia Sugar Mill an overall junction for roads in the area.

With many versions going around of how that doomed battalion met its face, I could not claim that mine is the most accurate of all, although but the simple fact that I got it from the lips of the survivors of that battalion in Cienfuegos Hospital, I could claim a fifty per cent of accuracy at least.

In spite of the fact that the battalion personnel had the psychological advantage of knowing the terrain, and to be able to retreat in case of any enforceable situation, and to receive reinforcements in men, guns, ammunition, our battalion was so poorly armed and so poorly lead during the action, that the whole thing seemed like a Mack Sennet classic slapstick comedy of the silent movies, if we were not talking about human lives lost.

Those men were not supplied with any heavy machine guns for fire cover for the simple reason they did not have any man in their ranks who knew how to use them. The same went for mortars or rocket launchers. They had ten clips of ammo per rifle plus whatever spare bullet they could carry with them in old socks that was forty or fifty bullets at the most.

The weapons issued for officers and noncommissioned officer was the Czech. Tommy guns, with four long clips of 40 bullets each, plus one short with 20, plus also the spare bullets in the usual old socks.
The road leading from the city of Cienfuegos to the Australia Sugar Mill was more than congested although the drivers for the trucks managed to go at a considerable rate of speed, in order to deliver them to the destination as fast as possible.

The trucks passed the Australia Sugar Mill and drove by the St. Blas Road, a place of tragic memory for Castro's forces; more than thousand men were killed in that road alone.

They dismounted few miles after leaving the Australia, and no sooner they had left the trucks, that the drivers of the vehicles stamped by sheer fear, and left the unit abandoned to its fate.

A wounded survivor of the 339th told me in the Cienfuegos Hospital, his name was Carmelo Suarez that they expected a small party of two hundred men at the most armed with rifles and some Tommy guns but that was all that was to it. They never thought in their wildest dreams to find 1,500 well equipped, well entrenched and willing to fight men to face them, in what concerns enemy artillery, mortars or even tanks, never was a word said about it.

I did not know that they had ever knew the real strength of their enemy if they had gone so happily to face it.

His story started like this, the moment our men left the trucks, we were completely cut off from the rearguard, since we did not have any portable radios or field telephones made out unit as isolated from other friendly troops in the areas as coffee in a thermos bottle.

We only had runners as source of communications with our rearguard. Unbelievable as it may seem, the fate of 1,200 men in the 20th Century was in the hands of runners, and let's take into consideration that the runners cannot be considered as the most reliable source of communications in wars. They never make it to their destination most of the times, since any experienced eyes on the other side would not fail to notice one lone soldier running back to the rearguard, not precisely escaping from the battlefield, therefore that soldier must be carrying with him request for reinforcements, more ammunition, or given enemy positions to the artillery in the rear for fire missions. Therefore, that man must be stopped at whichever cost necessary, and the runners were stopped dead most of the times.

Out of ten runners sent to our rearguard, only one made it safely, and precisely at the moment another military unit was arriving in the battlefield to relieve our annihilated battalion.

Our force did not launch any preliminary artillery barrage, we had none, we did not have any machine guns to give us fire cover, we had no mortars in short we had our rifles and Tommy guns only, and our guts.

The man was complaining to me of how stupidly they went into action. Maybe the high command had a wrong idea about the invaders and wanted to show the whole world how one single and simple infantry battalion like ours could have disposed of the invaders in one, two and three. That we had to pay with our lives for their stupidity and short sight that was too bad, it was our lives and not of the men in the high brass.

Our militiamen wore light-blue denim shirts, same as used by the workers, with the disadvantage that its light blue color contrasted vividly against the dark green color of the ever existing tropical vegetation in Cuba, and the moment we were in the battlefield, we became walking targets. Those shirts had a fluorescent glowing when exposed to the sun light, giving the poorest marksman in the brigade the best opportunity to score bull's eye with every bullet shot.

To top all of the long chain of error, and to make matters worse for our unfortunate battalion we did not have well-trained Paramedic, we only had four semi-trained men, for 1,200 men giving our wounded in action slim chances.
to survive due to the incredible high ratio of men to Paramedics.

This man continued his story like this:
We advanced in parade fashion, after we left the trucks, with a long easy step, then the heat of the day, it was close to three in the afternoon, the difficult terrain forced our men to break that formation and to advance in groups picnic style they were even saying jokes and speculating about the prisoners they were going to take.

That crazy advance was not preceded by any reconnaissance patrol or scouts or anything with any resemblance to an army unit in action.

We finally made it to the marshes which were on either side, by the road, the terrain in that part of the island had a typical look of wooden roots protruding from the ground with different shades of colors varying from light green to yellowish brown, with dark spots where small pools of fetid water filled with stinky green slime.

With the road up front and the marshes soft shoulders, half filled with water, half way filled with bushes, growing with a dark green color, stained by the sun light seeping through the vegetation. Small and thin trees were in abundant number with trunks covered by the brownish parasite foliage.

Our men were walking straight to a gigantic death trap.

It was a perfect set up for ambushes, the long dangling branches from trees coming down all the way to the ground, natural deep ditches at right and left covered with thick bushes, and they had the sun on top of them drenching their ranks with light and heat the worst combination for an advancing force into enemy territory.

Silence, a deadly silence permeated our ranks, no one was doing any talking now you could only hear hard breathing and see a copious perspiration showing on the back and chest of the light-blue denim shirt of the advancing troops.

Slowly but steadily the oldest and the weakest were getting behind, and all the Gun-Ho type guys were still marching up with the same long stride.

For how long more do we still have to march to find the enemy? That silly question was repeated over and over again, without realizing that the best thing that could happen to them was never to find the enemy.

Don't worry about finding the enemy, they will find us all right and sooner than you think.

Fatigue and fear were taking a heavy toll on the sweating figures. Here and there our men slipped on the muddy soil falling to the filthy terrain, uniforms and weapons already covered by the stinky green slime.

This is terrible! Was the general cry, but no way the terrible thing was about to arrive? One straggler came running to join them at double time, yelling "The army has discovered parachutes behind our lines."
- How many?
- I don't know maybe five hundred of them!

Rumors went wild and all of that frenzy because one battalion straggler had met army patrols in the area busily carrying away abandoned parachutes in a very quiet manner, sort of sneaky, so as to avoid causing any alarm to our men.
Then the advanced stopped all together, all eyes were fixed in the bushes, on trees and rocks, even in ditches, but above all on the clear blue sky above, it did not matter at all when the sergeants said.
- If paratroopers ever come our way, we will hear their planes first!

Our men legs were heavy as cast iron, not it was plain fear and the agitated sound of respiration was all over, wet hands held weapons covered with sweat, they all sweat so much that the light blue shirts acquired a dark blue color contrasting more than ever against the green background.
- Oh God, where is the enemy? Said our troops like a chant.

A deafening cannon report shook the ground, sending birds flying hurriedly in the air, that grave sound was promptly echoed the grave voice of multiple machine guns caliber fifty and to continue the deadly staccato, the light pitch sound of the caliber 30 MG sounded strangely light among the other deafening sounds.

Good God! Our force was supposed to do the attacking and it had happened completely the opposite, they became the attacked instead of the attackers.

Yells of pain and anger resounded among all other sounds, including the gunfire.
Enemy phosphorous tracers trailing smoke started small fires on the high and dry grass.

Our troops hit the ground, reaching for safety, No way; the enemy machine gun fire was set at less than eight inches over the ground. That was ten inches less than the maximum easy height of 18 inches they were trained before.
- Run for cover, we all are going to get killed here.

Many unfortunate young men followed that stupid advice and raised from the ground up looking for a safer place to go and fell back in place shot-dead.

We already had many casualties, horribly desfigurated when the deadly low flying bullets hit them in chins, jaws, ears, shoulders and when moved spasmodically hit again and again.

"Thud!" "Thud!" the peculiar muffled sound of mortars, we could not hide from that weapon, there was no place to go or trench sufficiently deep to hide, the curved trajectory of its grenade, plus the flat falling gave no quarter to our infantry caught in the open by mortar fire.

High explosive shells from far away artillery pieces fell among our ranks, blowing trees, rocks, mud and men altogether, blended in bloody pieces like forming part of the landscape.

More and more artillery shells fell on our positions covering every inch of the ground. Machine gun fire combed every log, every tree every indentation in the ground where our beleaguered troops took refuge.

At last our men fired back, incredible as it sounds, nobody ever thought of using the guns during the first fifteen minutes or so after the sudden attack, they were only thinking about hiding themselves from the incoming wall of rife sweeping our ranks.

Fire, Fire you fooled, sons of bitches!, yelled our sergeants from left to right and back again.
-I cannot see any enemy, nevertheless following the orders they fired all right, emptying magazine after magazine on an unseen enemy, who was shooting back like hell.
More cannon fire and more geyser of muddy water went up in the air putting more and more men out of action.

The long expected yells of
-Medics, help, my buddy is dying.
-Where the hell are you, Dam Medics. If my buddy dies I'll kill you all.

Names with the most obscene adjectives came out the mouth of dying men who were not receiving any medical assistance. Our four Paramedics ran all over the field not knowing exactly what to do they had only four knapsacks with corresponding handbags and soon they ran out of everything, no gaze, no bandages, no adhesive tape, no sedatives and no more dam tourniquets, so liberally applied and so little watched afterward. The yells of medics was heard no more, they understood but another more urgent and almost as desperate, “Ammo,” “Ammo,” “Ammo,” riflesmen and Tommy gunners in the same boat, after exhausting the supply in the clips of ammo, and the reserves in the old socks were defenseless in a battlefield under a possible counterattack any minute.

As always happened in every army in the world, the sergeants ordered
The men - Take the spare clips of ammo and the spare bullets in the socks from the dead, pass the order!

It was passed from mouth to mouth, very soon everybody was prying on the bodies of our dead comrades, many of our men had tears in the eyes, after all those dead men were close buddies, neighbors and sometimes relatives, who were with them few minutes ago and were now dead in front of their eyes.

Once they replenished the ammo supply, some stupid officer yelled a senseless order.
-Attack! Attack!

Instead of realizing the hopeless situation the stupid bastard who gave that order were taking our men to an unnecessary death.

Just like in World War I, our men raised from the ground and charged the invisible enemy, and just in World War I they were slaughtered by the score by burst of caliber 50 and 30.

Even the walking casualties raised from the slimy terrain and advanced with the unit, to be promptly cut to pieces by the enemy machine guns whose gunners as violin virtuosos squeezed burst of fire of two to three rounds at the time.

If the situation was bad before now it turned to desperate, our men had given away the apparent safety of their untenable positions and were in open ground, covered by cross fire, enemy machine guns at every side of the road and air bombardment.

Suddenly there was midair explosions, shrapnel rained down on the low-lying men. Air bursts, the worst enemy of the infantry, perhaps worse than mortar fire, whenever a grenade with the special altitude fuse exploded causing more dead and wounded.

The invisible foe was decimating their ranks, and they hid in fetid pools of water and blood, sometimes with detached human limbs. They even hid under the corpses.

Finally their charge came to a stalemate, having exhausted every bullet available, and exhausted themselves.
in the try they threw themselves to the ground.

I helped our nurses in the hospital of Cienfuegos, doing my best and in between shifts, I visited many wards where they had many wounded and I heard so many stories that if I were going to print them all the remaining of this book would be dedicated entirely to cover the ordeal of the Battalion 339th.

I will only print two stories that I considered the touchiest of them all, and if I am not mistaken the first one will bring tears to the parents of any member of the U. S. Armed Forces who had been killed in action.

We had the story of a father and son in a company of riflemen. They were very close together, they boy was a tall handsome blond young man of 21 years old, the pride of the father who was always saying his grandchildren would be blond like his handsome son. These two men were so close to each other that the day the son enlisted in the Militia Corp., his father also enlisted, just to be with his son militia training school without any word of complaint on his part, after all he knew that if he failed that test he would never have the chance to be together with his son during the militia guards. Many Sundays when the father was on guard duty, his son spent his free afternoon with him and vice-versa, when the son was on guard it was the father the one accompanying him.

When they went with their Battalion 339 to the Bay of Pigs, and all the men in their company started to go heavily for the water canteens, the father did not touch his scarce supply; he was saving it for his son, whom in turn was saving his water for his father.

Finally when the first artillery grenades started to fall into the battalion ranks the son was one of the first men to be badly wounded. I do not have words sufficient expressive enough to describe the anguish and pain of the father seeing his only son dying in front of his eyes and not being able to help him at all. Witness to that unfortunate event, told us, even with tears in their eyes, how the father was yelling and crying while holding the bleeding young man in his arms. The wounded was in terrible pain because of deep abdominal wounds with external and internal bleeding. The father cries for Medics. Medics echoed by the combatants next to him, to no avail, nobody knew where the dam paramedics were at that time.

They tried harder to comfort the grief-stricken father telling him.
-Our Paramedics will be here soon.
The wounded men, opened his eyes and stared at his father and said
-Don't worry about me dad, I am all right. You better take care of yourself. The father remained there oblivious of everything else going on around him. No bullet or mortar or artillery grenade in the world would have forced him to abandon his dying son. The agony of death was coming fast, the ashen white forehead of the young man covered with sweat, respiration fast barely noticeable with the front of his shirt and pants covered with thick red blood. Several spasmodic moves shook the body of the wounded man, his hands grabbed his father by an arm and with an agonizing sight, he looked at the old man face that was almost as white as his, and said
-Good by Dad, I love you . . .
He closed his eyes and died.
The father did not want to acknowledge what he knew, and kept on cuddling the corpse in his arms, his chest sobbed uncontrollable and an unending stream of tears came down his eyes running freely and falling on the dead man face.

When our battalion retreated back to our lines after the terrible carnage, suffered in mere three hours on the battlefield some friends of that man came to the grenade crater where he had taken refuge with his son body and tried
to take the old man with them.

- I am staying here with my son, don’t you understand, I cannot leave him alone.

They realized all right how the father felt about it, but strings of friendship with both of them, the friends said
-Pedro, we understand that you don’t want to leave your son alone but for Heaven’s sake, who is going to tell
his mother.
-If you die here, nobody is going to tell her, not us for sure, one death in the family is a tragedy, but two in the
same family at the same time will be the same as if you were killing your wife too.

The father came to his senses after listening to the crushing logic and resting his son on the ground, covered
the boy’s face with his beret and told him:
-Good by my son, I will come back for you, your father will not leave you here alone.

Giving long stares to the beloved dead he left behind, the father retreated with the other personnel back to our
lines with the battalion survivors and all of our wounded whom they did not leave behind.

The second part of this chapter I got if from one of our Paramedics in that battalion wounded in action and a
curious strike of coincidence was brought to the same ward where I was giving treatment to our casualties

He commenced his story with vacillant words, with an air of ever expression of horror all over his face. His
hands sweat so heavily he stained the hospital white sheets over him. Many times we tried to prevent him from
saying his story but time after time he continued

When our attack started, we took care of our first casualties, some were light wounded, some were real bad,
others were beyond any hope, but I can assure you we tried very hard.

It was a hectic assignment, very soon we had our hands more than full with more casualties than we could
physically able to cope with the best we could do in some cases was to put them inside grenade craters and left them
there to die peacefully.

Finally we ran out of all types of medicines, and could do nothing else, then things really went from bad to
worse, I still can hear the cries of Medics, Medics, Help for Heaven’s Sake.

He continued his story in front of the horrified eyes of nurses and orderlies who had congregated around his
bed, even a couple of army doctor who approached his bed to dissolve the group remained there just like all of us,
listening in silence.

I made it to a crater where I saw four of our men reclined on the edges aiming the rifles at the enemy
positions, I noticed how strangely still they were and they were not firing the rifles.

But just the same I got in the crater for a brief minute of rest,
-Give me room you fellows lets me rest here for a while, before I continue my rounds.

They did not answer my words, then I leaned over the four of them and I will never forget the way their eyes
bulged out of the sockets, and thick strings of blood came down from noses, mouths and ears. The doctor entered the
conversation saying:
-Most likely they most have been killed by an exploding grenade in front of them the mere concussion did all of that.

Our positions were strangely silent. There was no more ammunition. We got ourselves on the ground as flat as we could and hoped for the worst or best, I still did not know. The orders were save two or three bullets in case the enemy sends a man to man counterattack.

One orderly asked.
-Did the enemy ever launch the expected counterattack?
-Thanks Heavens they never did it, otherwise we all would be killed by now.

A slight breeze blew from the ocean, covering our positions with smoke of the exploding grenades of the artillery, concealing our positions from the brigade gunners.

We ran out of everything, including water, all of our canteens emptied long ago. It was then when our wounded begged for water and our survivors hiding in the same craters with the wounded, could not take that. They said their saliva was as thick as a white tasteless meringue.

As the last resource, we all started to drink the fetish stinky slimy liquid oozing from the ground that some optimistic minded dared to call it Water, to quench the thirst of our wounded, they dipped handkerchiefs in the fetid liquid and squeezed the green liquid inside the mouths of the desperate wounded.

On a common accord they crawled back to our rearguard, even still within firing range of the brigade positions, which had stopped shelling. The invaders held their fire and gave us a chance to live a chance to escape death.

We crawled back and on our way to our lines we made sure to take our wounded back with us and we did not leave a single one of them on the battlefield.

After considering themselves out of range of enemy guns, they raised from the ground and started the march back to our lines. What a sorrowful look offered the defeated battalion. Men limping painfully with blood soaked field dressings, improperly applied, falling to the ground, some fainted due to loss of blood, other made the way back leaning on the shoulders of friends as battled dazed like them.

Those who had the courage to look behind said:
-It was an unforgettable sight, there were corpses in every crater and human limbs strewn everywhere like a crop of gigantic white asparagus.

They kept on walking hoping to make it. Otherwise, many more men would die for sure, some of the most serious cases were carried held by arms and legs, and improvised stretcher bearers sometimes also wounded themselves.

A sound of engines in the distance cut off abruptly the reverie of the retreating battalion. Some took cover behind the road bushes, others just kept on walking like nothing happened. After the ordeal they have been through, nothing else would matter much.

Far in the horizon in the general direction of the Australia sugar mill, they distinguished the silhouettes of big
trucks; hopes of living again, of an imminent rescue rose in the heart of our men, after all their prayers had not been left unanswered by the almighty. Ten minutes later the incoming vehicle reached their positions. It was reinforcement or relieving force either way.

With the incoming trucks still in motion, the new comers jumped to the ground and assisted the retreating force.

-Water!, Water!, Water!, Was the common cry.

After quenching the thirst of the wounded, the survivors of the 339th battalion asked for medical supplies for our wounded, negative replies everywhere, there were no paramedics or medicines of any kind among the new comers.

An error that was going to cost dearly to the newly arrived unit on the battlefield.

The survivors of our 339th climbed on board the trucks on the way to the rearguard. There was no need for any questions. The deplorable physical situation of the departing force as well as the battlefield in the distance strewn with corpses was self-explanatory.

It was in the hospital on May 1, 1961, when Castro declared to the world that our forces has suffered a hundred casualties when the nurses and doctors heard him say that atrocity we could not believe our ears, after all that hospital among others, was full to the rim, in all wards, in the halls, including the rooms of the resident doctors, even ordered all civilians out of the hospital in order to accommodate the greater possible number of our wounded.

Another event which came out of that battle was many young men lost their limbs unnecessarily, in such a manner that our doctors became enraged. It was that simple, once a man was wounded in arms or legs, he could kiss his limb good bye, those men received untrained help on the battlefield and what help tight tourniquets applied early in the morning were left locked and unattended sometimes until late in the afternoon once the limb blackened from lack of oxygen and blood, amputation was the only alternative for the doctors, and Mr. Castro never bothered with such details for the Cuban people.

As for the father who left behind the corpse of his son, he was with the first units of the Cuban Red Cross arriving at the battlefield to retrieve personally the corpse of the young man.
CHAPTER 7

MY FIRST WOUNDED

April 17, 1961, nine O’clock in the evening after more than twelve hours of our last solid meal.

Four military ambulances entered followed by four station wagons, two men were assigned to each one of them, the wagons did not have any Red Cross markings and we used pieces of canvas on the sides and rear doors after dying it with white paint and with red paint created the Red Cross emblem that I still love up to this day.

We left by the main highway and found on our way convoys of military trucks carrying troops and in several occasions civilian buses carrying more military personnel. It was a general mobilization with more and more troops going to meet the invaders.

Our Red Cross vehicles received right of way at every intersection, where army police stopped all traffic and waved us to go on, and the doctors seated next to the driver rushed them to go as fast as possible. We left Havana and entered the Province of Matanzas by the north highways, we found huge concentrations of aircraft batteries in the outskirts of the city of Matanzas well emplaced and covered by camouflage nets.

We did not fail to see them because they were next to the highway and every time the high beams of our vehicles reflected on those gun emplacements the military personnel emplaced there called us all type of obscene names, we heard the same thing so many times that our drivers got the message and when they approached any military emplacement they always dimmed the front lights beams, and we could drive in peace.

Ten thirty in the night, our stomachs made all type of crazy noise protesting for the lack of food. The army doctors seated next to us smiled and patted our shoulders reassuringly and pointing at our stomachs they said our predicaments will finish shortly.

Less than ten minutes later our vehicles took a turn from the main road and entered a nice Restaurant, well-dressed people having a late supper looked inquiringly our vehicles and they imagined that the whole Cuban Red Cross was there. Just imagine eight vehicles and a whole crowd of men with Red Cross arm bands.

Several waiters approached our tables and said:
What will the doctors have?
We exchanged glances of intelligence, it was the first time that somebody called us doctors and frankly we liked it a lot.

They only had steaks, French fries, rice and salad, and that was exactly what we wanted, that was the biggest of all of the steaks I have ever eaten in my life and also the tastiest of them all.

It was eleven, we finished our supper, we were so hungry that we even ate all the bread they put at each table and were back on the road again, this time no more stops, and drove straight by the highway going south, our next stop was the city of Jovellanos, very late at night.

We found troops in the park on the outskirts of the town, nervous sentries with a finger on the trigger and the sight of people scared like hell.
They ordered us to continue our trip with the lights on inside the vehicles. They informed us on unofficial
basis that several military vehicles had been shot at by the trigger-happy sentries who shot first and questioned later.
Right at the entrance of the town we found a company of Militia women of the corp. known as “Lydia Doce”
and they stopped us for identification once again.

A beautiful woman with the stripes of sergeant followed by a platoon of women approached the stopped
vehicles on the road, the beam of our headlights illuminated them from head to toes, and they really look very nice in
the tight fitted fatigue pants clinging very close to their bodies, and so the military cut thigh length blouse, she
inspected each vehicle at the time, and when she made it to ours, and we were the last vehicle in the convoy she took
her time, she was very well built for the Cuban standards long hair shoulder length, which was held by a pony tail
under her green beret, her smile was contagious and I could distinguish the singing tone of the people living in the
eastern province of Cuba, she approached at our vehicle and inspected everything in sight, we noticed the nice
looking breast clearly marked on the blouse upper pockets and slim waist was continued by nice rounded and fat
buttocks, like a sort of a guitar, a type of body very much admired by the Cubans. Her steps were slow and we
admired her hips moving from left to right and back again.

She pointed her Tommy gun at us, and we barely noticed, we all were fascinated by this woman, and her
companions behind.
- Who are you? There was the singing accent so sweet and attractive.
- We are Red Cross Paramedics going to the hospital in Jovellanos, was our head doctor reply.

Her dark eyes scrutinized everybody on board, I was seated next to the driver on the right side of the wagon,
and she said to me.
- We don’t have any Paramedics with us. Would you like to stay here and help us in case that we have to do
any fighting?

It caught me by surprise but nevertheless I answered her, she was real close to me that I did not fail to notice
the attractive smell of that woman, it was something like sweat, woman’s perfume and the fragrance of the night. I
knew very well that the eyes of all my companions were fixed on me I told her.
If it were for me, I would remain here with you, and your infantry company, with war or not, but in any case if you or any of your girls here have any respiratory problems I can give you all mouth to mouth resuscitation.
- She smiled broadly and I could admire once again the white and even teeth in her beautiful mouth.

Get rid of that engagement ring, she said pointing at the ring in my finger, and I will be the one giving you mouth to mouth resuscitation from head to toes, and everything else in between, if you know what I mean.
- I did not know what to say, never in my life any woman has addressed to me like that and the shock left me speechless.

She motioned the driver to go on, a waved good bye and threw me a kiss.

All of my friends laugh at my embarrassment, they even said
- We will have to watch you closely in Jovellanos, because if we don't see you at the hospital we already know where to find you.

One thirty in the morning, we finally made to Jovellanos Hospital. Immediately without anybody telling me anything I knew why we went there and how the fighting was going on.

Ambulances, small trucks, army vehicles of all types, arrived by the minute a top speed at the hospital and left casualties by the score and went back the road to look for more.

A tall nurse welcomed us among the excitements of so many casualties.
- We are only receiving walking casualties the most serious cases were being treated at Jaguey Grande and Cienfuegos Hospitals closer to the battlefield than this one.

I looked at the nurse straight to her face and said without thinking it twice:
- You mean those poor wretched wounded are the walking casualties.
- Yes and don't be surprised those are the easy ones, you should see the real serious ones, for the people who handled the evacuation of our casualties everybody except the dead is a walking casualty.
- Please get into these gowns and come with me to the Emergency Room which was the place of entrance of the incoming wounded.

I was worried of how I was going to react when I was in front of a really serious war wounded. I had been in hospitals before assisting nurses and doctors but never in a situation like this.

It is said that you will never forget your first love, your first kiss, and your first date, neither a doctor nor a nurse ever forget a first patient. The doors of the emergency room opened suddenly and two militiamen brought a walking casualty. The poor creature had an ugly gash on his forehead running from temple to temple right under the hairline, making the skin of his forehead to fall over his eyes like a woman old stockings. His face was ashen white, almost the color of the bone that I could see.

One of the men who brought him in told me.
- Where do we put him doctor?
- Right here son, put him on this stretcher and I will take care of him.

There I was taking care of my first war casualty, with trembling hands and knees and trembling perhaps all inside of myself.
I cut his uniform and boot laces with my surgical scissors and checked the man from head to toes making sure that his head wound was the only one, which I knew later on got it on a collision on board his jeep where the windshield received a direct hit and sent pieces of glass flying in the air like missiles and it cut him to the bone.

I gave him a sedative to relax the man, and stitched his head with curved thin needles for face stitching, and took my time making a perfect job since I knew I was closely watched by the nurse and a civilian doctor who was also in the room.

When it was over, we put him on an army cot in the hall, since his head wound was not serious and would be released the following day. The doctor and the nurse congratulated me for the good job done. Those words made me very happy maybe after all I could be a doctor in the near future.

Then the hours elapsed and we had an unending stream of walking casualties each one worse than the previous before.

We saw the first lights of dawn in the emergency room.

An army doctor of our group approached us and with a blood stained gown sunken eyes and with the hair coming out the sides of his surgical cap told us:

- We have bad news; we are running short of medical supplies therefore, we will have to cut our treatment as much as we can. Second this hospital as well as the nearby clubs which were converted into Field Hospitals are more than full, we have casualties everywhere, and we have ordered the civilian patients who can walk to go home, we will have to tell the next convoy of wounded which make it here to continue driving up to Matanzas in that city the hospital is much bigger than this and they have also many private clinics which can be used for our casualties.
- Is the situation for our casualties very bad?
- We don't have any additional place in this hospital for a fly. So, see if you can take a seat somewhere and sleep a little you will need it you are going to Cienfuegos, they are short of personnel over there and are receiving the casualties by the truck load. With nothing else for the time being, I walked around the halls and wards of the hospital and I was shocked at the sight of so many men laying there, some dying, some beyond help. I found my friends in different wards and they all agreed with me, if these were the walking casualties, then the serious ones how could they be. Yells down the hall brought me to reality.
- A convoy of wounded is coming, a convoy of wounded is coming.

Dammit, dammit, I ran to the main entrance where the military trucks stopped and the drivers with the able bodies inside started to unload the cargo of wounded, and still they yelled for more stretcher bearers to expedite unloading.

Our doctors knew dam well that if they had ever tried to stop that convoy from leaving the wretched cargo, they were going to have a mutiny in hands, therefore, they passed the buck to an army captain who had briefly stopped at the hospital for a minor treatment, and he was about to go away when the convoy arrived.

The doctors explained the situation to him and it did not matter how hard they tried to convince him, he answered flatly that he did not want to handle that situation.
- I am sorry I was here on my way to the front to fight and not to get involved in problems like this.
- Captain if you do not perform your duty and handle this matter we will complaint directly to your
headquarters, and we will go all the way to the top, we hope you know what we mean by that.

The captain turned around got his company of soldiers behind him and went to the military convoy parked outside the hospital. Her begged with the truck driver more than ordered. I saw many angry faces and heard many obscene names called to the doctors and the nurses and to their mothers and fathers as well.

Finally they embarked back the wounded men and the convoy started on its way to Matanzas, some sixty miles away, where they would receive all the necessary medical treatment.

So far I had counted all the casualties in the hospital and they numbered well over three hundred, not including those who had died already, and those in the local clubs in the area helped by Red Cross volunteers.

With the situation well in control in Jovellanos, it was clear to me that they did not need us there anymore and I sat on a bench next to the entrance where I dozed for close to an hour. I was rudely awakened by a colleague of mine who told me.

It is six thirty in the morning, better get your stuff ready because I overheard that we are going to Cienfuegos on board the same vehicles of that convoy that these guys sent to Matanzas, and they are right there outside the hospital.

They were there all right the same military trucks and a leading jeep. I recalled the same angry faces I had seen hours ago on their way to Matanzas and were back with the same tired crews on board.

I had my entire gear ready, when the expected order arrived.
- You are leaving for Cienfuegos on that convoy, they are also overloaded over there and had to evacuate many more men, some will also go to Matanzas others will have to go to Havana.

There was quite a large hospital in Cienfuegos, another fairly large in Jaguey Grande, and I had also heard that our casualties were going to Santa Clara’s Hospital, some hundred miles away from the battlefield. The whole thing must be going pretty bad for our troops.

The moment we entered in the trucks, we realized the atrocious smell of urine, shit and the smell of death. Yes, I could say from that moment on that death has its own particular smell.

April 18, 1961, early in the morning, on our way to Cienfuegos by the southern circuit highways we passed by Jaguey Grande, it was a brief stop, and noticed that even funeral parlors had been used as morgues for the military dead.

We passed by the hospital and it was like a giant anthill with long strings of vehicles of all types coming and leaving casualties, some lay on stretchers until the nurses and orderlies had time to get them in, others, well, for others, was only a matter of covered them with white sheets because they did not make it to the hospital.

It was crazy everything going on everywhere, the men told us that also in Jaguey Grande; they evacuated all civilians from the hospital and converted the social clubs in field hospitals.

We continued on our way south approaching the battlefield. We had the idea that probably we were going to be sent right there to help the army with all the wounded, but a doctor going with us, told us sort of confidentially.
We have few well-trained paramedics like you guys and cannot risk you for any reason, you are at the same level as nurses therefore, and you are more useful in the hospitals as male nurses than field paramedics.

My friends in the truck felt very much relieved, after all we had seen first-hand the effect of the battle going on and knew very well that bullets were not very picky, they entered into the bodies of soldiers and paramedics alike, without any distinction.

We had to stop several occasions to give a helping hand to the poor wounded on board the incoming convoys, we took a truck at the time and we checked and opened tourniquets, tightened bandages, gave water and helped the poor men inside to relieve themselves of the need to take a leak. And those who were in Coma, were the worse, we stopped our vehicles and assisted them.

I personally closed the eyes of more than ten men, and I was shocked as were my friends, those walking casualties could not even stand on their feet, wound dressings deeply soaked in blood, they had no one else on board except the drivers.

Our wounded asked for their beloved ones, I knew they were not completely in their minds, and then to make things easier for them I lied and told them things like this
- Your mother is about to arrive any moment now.
- Your wife and kids are around the corner.
- Your sweetheart will arrive within an hour.

I knew they were going to die somewhat relieved thinking perhaps that their beloved one would be with them before they went to the world of no return that was why I felt better after all.

On the outskirts of the city of Cienfuegos, an Army Jeep Patrol stopped us for the last time, all men on board were somber and sad, they told us how the things were going, whole battalions wiped out, six tanks up to that moment destroyed by the enemy in action, of many more landings all through the island, and paratroopers arriving by the hundreds, and what sounded incredible that all the troops facing the invaders so far, were heavily outnumbered by them, by at least five to one.

We drove the main avenue with palm trees at either side. Cienfuegos was at its best with beautiful houses, wide streets and the famous bay in the distance.

Groups of soldiers at every intersection waved good bye to our Red Cross vehicles. It was early in the morning when we arrived at the emergency rear entrance of the hospital located on a hilly street.

We admired the city from that place, but not for long, the receiving crews of the hospital greeted us with blood soaked stretchers even with tiny clots of blood dangling from the side. They had no time to wash them. It was that bad and more.

They did not leave us in peace for a second, and questioned us of how everything was going on.
- Had you seen any bridges blown away?
- Is that true that there are snipers on the highway shooting everybody?
Questions and more questions, our colleagues in Cienfuegos Hospital talked a lot, but they did more than that, they took us for a tour through the hospital morgue. It was there where I saw for the first time in my life the effects of a caliber 50 machine gun on a human body. One of our soldiers laid dead on a morgue stretcher with a hole in his chest the size of a man fist, and through it you could see heart, lungs, ribs, but what impressed me the most above everything else was the face of the dead man it showed no signs of pain or anguish. I was sure death came for him so swiftly that he felt no pain at all.

That soldier arrived in a truck with other casualties from the Bay of Pigs; he was obviously dead since hit by the 50 although the confusion in the front line or hospital centers evacuated dead men together with our slightly wounded.

In those days, dying men received all type of medical treatment while other men with much better possibilities to make it waited for hours on end.

One more time we were told that the medical supplies were coming down to a dangerous low point, plasma, blood, penicillin and bandages and X Rays film were almost gone, should be the situation continued at the same rate, in a matter of days we would have nothing left.

We were going to see more action than ever before, our doctors intended to use us as relief force for the civilian medical personnel who were in the hospital without going home since the air raid on April 15, 1961. It was a lucky break for us that those courageous nurses, orderlies and doctors refused to leave their post not even for a minute, other than that I don't know what would have become of us when we started to receive the burned casualties of our battalions 111 and 123 caught in the open highway and clobbered by Napalm, anti-personnel bombs and machine gun fire.

Those cases ranged from burned hands to charred casualties in full shock, unable to feel any pain due to the high intensity of the burns. Sometimes they brought us charred corpses beyond any recognition, and we had to stow them away in the hospital morgue until somebody had the time and occasion to identify them.
The following day the army sent an urgent request for volunteer Paramedics for the battlefield, the reasons were so obvious that they did not have to say anything, our troops had suffered so high number of casualties and so many had died unnecessarily basically for lack of proper medical attention right on the field after wounded in action that the tragic situation caught the eyes of the high brass in the Medical Corp.

Many of us volunteered for such assignment, and fate did not want me to go there, several days later, we knew how one of our Paramedics got killed in the front lines, his name was Pedro Luis Borras Astorga, the only Paramedic who died in action. He was with a front line patrol mopping the flanks of enemies and was surprised, sustaining quite a large number of casualties who piled up like matches. Our men tried several times to break the ring of fire and steel and had to retreat again and again with heavy casualties.

Our former colleague with complete disregard for his life remained behind with the wounded when the main body retreated.

Many men behind, in spite of being grievously wounded kept on firing and when the Brigade retaliated sending a volley of hand grenades against their positions our Paramedic was killed in the action.

There is a pediatric hospital in Havana with the name of that brave young man, he was an advanced student of medicine and his only ambition was to become a doctor, although for any clarifications he was a total democrat and wanted Cuba to be free of any dictators, from the right or from the left.
CHAPTER 8

ELITE BATTALION - SAN BLAS ROAD - THE ROAD TO HELL

It was a cold December 1963, I was with some male nurses in my group attending a conference about medications and treatment to In-Patients in hospitals, most of the men in my group had left the organization for joining hospital in Havana in active as male nurses, and I was considering joining the staff of Our Lady of the Mercy which Hospital I had many years of association in every ward, to whom the Head of the Burn Unit, I was deeply indebted for his invaluable training and advise, his name was Nelson Gonzalez.

It was one in the afternoon when I saw a Pontiac 1955 coming to the hospital and doctors and nurses went to greet the driver with great deference about him.

The first thing I noticed about the driver was an striking resemblance to the Italian movie actor, Rossano Brazzi, the second thing I noticed the folded wheel chair they got from the car, and then the doctors opened the door for the driver and he sat on the wheel chair, Lieutenant Roger Lima was a remarkable young man, he drove his car through the streets in Havana using hand controls.

He was a tall and handsome man in his early twenties, wore a fatigue army uniform with the stripes of first lieutenant over his shoulders. He entered the building to get extra supplies of medicine and a massage for his legs.

I was about to go away when the other Doctors in the conference room called me, the one who called me was Dr. Jesus Caballero, one of the nicest person in medicine I had ever known, we gave me a warm embrace and invited me to the room where they were going to hear the story of the Elite Battalion, the second of the forces which faced the Brigade on April 17, 1961.

When we entered the treatment room the lieutenant was already on the large stretcher and was receiving a session of hot massages to stimulate the blood circulation in thighs and legs.

My friend Dr. Caballero took me aside and said close to my ears - That man you see on that stretcher was the survivor of one of the best military units we sent against the Brigade in the Bay of Pigs.

He was shot and wounded in the spine and became a paraplegic for the rest of his life, all of that within a month after his marriage when he was barely 21 years old.

I shivered inside of myself, and thought Jesus that could have happened to me.

The long session of stimulating massages for the young man lasted about an hour, after that we helped him to get dressed again and the doctor in charge came from the doctor’s lunch room all smiles and with a steaming mug of black coffee.

- Do you see what I have here for you guys? This event calls for a big celebration. Roger is going to tell us the story of his military unit in the Bay of Pigs.

With a severe rationing of coffee in Cuba, that large quantity of black coffee was indeed a big celebration.

He told the young man on the stretcher.
- We have here two veterans of the Bay of Pigs. You and this man over here pointing at me.

A silent hero whose mission was to save the men you guys shot to pieces. His most powerful weapon was a hypodermic syringe in one hand and a bottle of plasma in the other, instead of any weapon.

The patient -still lying on the stretcher, offered me his hand
- I am glad to meet one of the many men to whom I owe my life, please sit with us and I will tell you all the story of my unit, while we enjoy this tasty coffee.
- I bet you guys in the medical corp. have more knowledge about the three days of fighting than us who were there.
- Thanks lieutenant for your compliments, you are the first person to say such commendable words about the Red Cross the corp. I am proud to belong.

The lieutenant continued
- To shoot a gun in combat is a heroic deed but it requires more guts to take care of wounded men on a battlefield or under the constant threats of air or commando attacks, especially when you had to go into action without any gun at your side, and depended only on that Red Cross and that you did not know if the enemy is going to respect.

I looked at my watch, it was 2:00 in the afternoon, and when that man finished it was past 7:30 in the evening.

Our lieutenant was not smiling, he was not making any funny remarks Hollywood style, that we were so used to see in the movies. Remembering the subject of the conversation was not bringing him any good memories.
- Our battalion was formed by the best trained men in the whole country, we all were from different infantry units, and we were hand-picked. For your information once we had completed our military training, we would have received the command of a full battalion, with all auxiliaries’ weapons and the rank of Captain.

Our training school was located in the outskirts of the city of Matanzas, where there was a large military complex with facilities for antitank tactics, demolitions, land mines, mortar and artillery. Due to the Bay of Matanzas, which you all know is in the northern coast of Cuba. We also received anti landings tactics. The main emphasis of the training was to destroy the enemy at the beaches and to prevent him from deploying deep inland.

Our lieutenant looked at me straight in my eyes and said
- I could bet my life on a nickel that you must know a lot more than me about the way our troops fought to defeat the invasion, mostly because you Paramedics are everywhere like God, and you acted like Confession Priests, getting secrets from everybody specially of dying or badly wounded men. I know it well, when you are on board an ambulance you always tell it like it was and the only person to talk is the one next to you giving medical treatment.

I said; you are right. There are no closed doors or mouths for us the Paramedics.
- Our battalion radio station got word of the invasion almost to the minute it happened and we were immediately mobilized and taken to the battlefield on board heavy Russian-made trucks.

One doctor, whom we will call Dr. Frank Vega, asked
- I heard a lot about your battalion. Could you tell us how you managed to take with your men the mortars and the artillery?
- We did not take any artillery or mortars with us.
A deep silence permeated the room, to take into action such strong and highly specialized outfit without any artillery or mortars, Unbelievable!
Another voice in the room questioned this time with more cautious tone.
- Don't tell me that you did not bring any heavy machine guns with you either!

Another negative reply on the part of the lieutenant
- We did not bring any heavy machine guns with us either.

We all looked at each other in utter disbelief.
I risked another question, knowing the answer well in advance.
- Did you bring any Paramedics in your ranks?

The lieutenant swallowing hard replied to me
- We did not have any Paramedics with us.

Dr. Vega spoke very acidly - To go into action against an unknown enemy without artillery, mortars or heavy machine guns to cover the advance was sheer madness, but to go without any medical assistance it would be like pulling the trigger of a pistol aimed at the head of any of your men wounded in action.
- Lieutenant, we understand that your battalion followed orders but who gave such orders?
- If you want to hear the story of my battalion, don't interrupt me again. We relieved the 339th infantry battalion who preceded us. There were dead militiamen all over the battlefield, plenty of abandoned weapons and empty clips of ammo all over. My men checked every corpse we wound on the field to make sure they were dead.
- And what would you have done if any of them had been wounded instead of dead? - Would you had shot them in the head like they shoot the horses with broken legs? - In any manner you could have not done anything for them.
- Well, we had two trucks still awaiting for that possibility, since all the other vehicles took to the rearguard the 339th.
- At least you shown some common sense, much more than your high command. Said Dr. Vega.

- I was excited for plain fear, you know I was in charge of a company, some one hundred fifty men, and we had to wait for the order to advance, which was to be given as a whistle. We advanced, getting deeper and deeper into enemy lines, it was not easy, we had left the terrain next to the St. Blas Road and got into the clear sections of the swamp, it was so extremely silent, the stillness of the air, the wind had died on us and not even the leaves of the tree branches were moving. Then, the unmistakable sound of the whistle in the middle of the deadly silence and a thousand throats gave in unison the cry of - Attack! Charge!
- I ran forward with my platoon, our men held their fire since there was nothing in sight, and so nothing came from the enemy lines. We ran and jumped over grenade craters and corpses; over tree trunks on the ground in fact our attack became a running marathon. Then I heard the voice of my second in command
- When are those fucking guys going to fire?
-Don't say it too loud, they might hear you and get the idea, you fool.

Everything was going fine. Our plan was to reach the forward enemy position and take them, preventing that way their fire on us for fear of hitting their own men. Once inside their lines, we would have course, shoot everyone in sight.
I heard a joyous cry of my sergeant.
- We made it lieutenant, we made it, they haven't fired yet and we are too close for any artillery fire.

Suddenly we heard the sound of a big engine up front and the huge powerful silhouette of a Sherman tank appeared out of nowhere.
- Where was that fucking tank hiding all this time?

We saw the tank and the enemy which was coming from well camouflage trenches, covered with branches and leaves; they were completely invisible from where we started the assault. We saw their machine guns barrels, which seemed gigantic from our side, the receiving end.

It was a trap, a deadly trap for the whole battalion, we had the enemy at front left and right, but that was not all, mortar crews in an unbelievable show calmly emplaced their short barreled weapons and started to pump shells away.

A chain of explosions of all caliber shells obliterated our companies ahead of us. - You see, the enemy shells hit the muddy ground and up went in the air, men, mud, water, trees, all mingled up. Limbs detached from human trunks still holding weapons, flying red-hot shrapnel killed and maimed our front line men.

So far my company was still behind, and we got into enemy range.

I saw men exploding like fire crackers when hit by mortar grenades and machine gun fire.

It was when I realized that my own company formed by strong men was reduced in a matter of seconds to a pitiful group of wounded and few unharmed men. I was still on my feet and charging. What was complicating the thing much more was the yelling of our wounded, to which nobody could give any helping hand. We were trained to kill only, not to save.

Dr. Vega looked reproaching at the young invalid and said.
- It was a pity indeed that you guys did not have any first aid training. I know well it is more good looking a man shooting a Tommy gun, than with a Red Cross pack in his hand and saving lives. That was absolutely crazy what your high command did with you.

The lieutenant turned in his chair to me - that was why we could have used men like you in our ranks, and many of our wounded would have survived that inferno.

I did not make any comments about it, but nobody could have ever survived that inferno, let alone an insignificant Paramedic like me, most likely I would have been seated in a chair like his.

Our few combatant so far unhurt, were in shock. They did not reconcile the idea of so many men killed and wounded in front of their eyes.

They remained almost motionless and standing upright on the deadly ground with rifles in aiming position, and all ammo in the clips already spent, not knowing that every second they remained like that chances of getting hit by the storm of fire sweeping our ranks was greater and greater.

We all listened in silence, nobody was making any comments, and you could hear the sound of the agitated
respiration of the lieutenant.

He was visible upset and with trembling hand took a sip of coffee it did not matter if it was cold or not, we all followed through.

- Believe it or not, when we first started the fight, I was a company Lieutenant, and in the space of less than one hour I became the battalion senior officer, all other senior officers killed or wounded. It was terrible. I did not know what to do. I called my platoon leader for a brief meeting with the few sergeants still on their feet whom had also became company officers, and they wanted to press the attack, I was for taking cover and to retreat right away. Obviously the enemy outnumbered us all along the line.
- What did you think after knowing that the men in front of you were a mere company of less than one hundred men? Said acidly our Dr. Vega. I saw the doctor face and noticed he was smiling as enjoying the expected answer.
- I was shocked when I knew the total strength of the invaders was no more than fifteen hundred men, I would have died swearing that they were fifteen thousand men!
- And they fought as fifteen thousand men indeed, was the doctor's triumphal reply.

The lieutenant continued his story without taking notice of the implications about the good fighting qualities of the men who faced his troops during the combat.

- Our meeting lasted for two minutes at the most, and then I saw one of my men, a professional photographer and cameraman, with a movie camera in his hands and his automatic rifle dangling in bandolier.
- Lieutenant, let me know when you guys are going to charge, I am going to take everything on film, and pointed at his camera several times.

Knowing that he wanted to take the coming action on film and that his safety was essential, I told him to get good cover and to go ahead.

My sergeants went around, rallying our men to charge the enemy lines once again, we kept next to the ground and crawled from man to man giving the orders. Once we knew they were ready, I stood up and yelled.

- Charge, let us avenge our friends, and you, addressing the cameraman, you better do a good job about it.

He certainly did it. It was shown all over Cuba, but only a small portion of that film, I still recalled, only the part where some men fall to the ground in the brief space of time that they rushed the machine gun emplacement, and how the tracers touched briefly the approaching figures and how they fell to the ground like bags of stone, not with the jumping motion in the air like we had in mind after seeing so many war movies. They just fold themselves like broken umbrellas and dropped the rifles and lay motionless.

Yes we saw that movie all right. The only thing was, that the G-2 or any other organization removed the first parts of the film when our company charged the machine gun nest and scores and scores of our men die, some sixty or seventy of them.

One of our men made it to an elevated spot, it appeared to be a broken tree on the ground and climbed over it and held his automatic rifle over his head and he shot the twenty bullets clip hitting the gunner and his comrade in the trench.

- So finally you took one enemy position, Hallelujah! Said Dr. Vega, the same one who had made so many wise remarks when we started the story.
- Fuck you doctor, if you interrupt me again, I swear to God that I won't say anything else!
- We took the trench and we found two dead invaders inside with camouflage uniforms, like the American marines wear in action.
- Only two dead men inside that machine gun nest after all of our casualties?

That was the unison question; it was an exchange of two enemy lives for heavens knows how many lives of our men, of lots and lots of wounded for the dubious tactic value of a trench.

After that momentarily small victory, I regrouped my men inside and took count of them and the ammo, there were not much of either one, out of a company of 147 men, remained only 50, and we were down to less than forty bullets per man, approximately two full clips of twenty rounds apiece.

Luckily for us all, we must have been real close to the enemy main lines since we took this forward position, there was no mortar artillery or mortar fire.

We left the safety of the trench and advanced further into enemy territory, we ran into a wall of fire and paid dearly, our advance cut short and we took cover in shell craters or in some cases my men hit the dirt as close as possible to the ground where we could not raise our heads other than that more than one got his head blown off.

The rain of enemy bullets was coming fast and low maybe not more than eight inches above ground.

I interrupted him to say - I heard at the Medical Corp. that the enemy machine guns-covered six to eight inches at the most above ground level.

-Honestly speaking I did not feel myself very happy at the sight of those camouflage uniforms, typical U.S. Marine gear and since dead men cannot give any information I had no means to know if they were Americans or Cubans.

We shot questions at the lieutenant with the speed of a rocket
- Why didn't he retreat with his few survivors after that?
- What did they do with all the wounded on the battlefield?
- Was that the only enemy position captured in action?

Ours was answered by him very simple
- We could not retreat, dammit, the enemy got us covered all over, and also the battalion still remaining few senior officers had not ordered the retreat. And for the wounded they had to take care of their wounds by themselves. There was no other way about it.

Our walking casualties helped those seriously wounded men.
- All the medical personnel in the room exchanged glances of intelligence. We all knew by experience the loose meaning the military applied to walking casualties, for them everything except a corpse, was a walking casualty. Also I remembered the words of our doctors in our medical training
The first fifteen minutes after a man is wounded in action are crucial to save his life, any help received after that most likely won't be sufficient to save him.

- Well, what did you do after that?
  I pressed the attack again, unfortunately?
  - Were you out of your mind, with what did you press the attack, you had a full company in your area, and there was nothing else in less than an hour, and you had the balls to press the attack?
  Lieutenant Lima, I think that the brain washing you received in your military training made you think that you and your men were sort of superman, once again talked Dr. Vega.

- As I was saying, the destruction of the first enemy position inspired my men and I did not have to press much to continue our attack, as a matter of fact, all I had in my hands was a blood thirsty mob of fifty men at the most, who wanted to revenge their dead friends behind!

- I know that the business of war is something impersonal; you cannot take it as personal as we had taken it, but what do you want? Remember the Cubans are like that. We are very emotional.
When the fighting began, it was an official business, now it was a personal matter.
- We emptied our few remaining clips of ammo, while charging, nobody was taking any evasive action, and once again our casualties mounted and piled on our way.
- My forward elements ran toward the enemy front lines and shot like hell until not a sound came from their rifles, when the firing was over I saw enemy soldiers advancing for the first time, and taking my forward elements prisoners of war.
- You even had your own people taken as prisoners, said sarcastically our Dr. Vega, frankly I do not recall much about reading that your battalion sustained any prisoners, could be you enlight us about it.
- I tried to free them and ordered our last charge.
- Lieutenant, do you really mean that you charged the enemy, Again after all the atrocious casualties that your battalion suffered in action?
- Doctor, we did not have any other choice, I could not leave my men like that, and we charged the enemy positions with blood and guts, and I can assure you that it requires a lot of balls to face so many heavy machine guns firing at you at the same time.
- Everybody rose from the ground on this last charge, even the walking casualties.
- You meant Walking Corpses, because we all doctors in this room know very well how you distinguished your walking casualties. Really when we received your walking casualties in the city hospitals we had to store them in the Morgues, because in many cases they died minutes after arrival.
- We advanced ten, twenty feet, maybe fifty at the most and the enemy positions became strangely silent.
- Probably they were replacing ammo belts for the M.G.,

- Suddenly an instant barrage of fire swept our ranks, this time I saw our men when hit, they exploded, literally speaking, when hit by the 50's, holes of the sizes of grapefruit appeared on chests and bellies, sometimes arms and legs severed at joints by bullets.

- Close to me I saw two men falling to the ground alive and apparently unharmed, I could see no wounds on them, and with expression of incredulity on their faces, I saw the legs but found no feet, they had their feet severed at the ankles by bullets.

I turned around to rally my few men left and a stupid thought came to my mind, Could I make it in one piece? My sergeant cut short my thoughts, yelling
- Lieutenant, we are out of ammo, and cannot advance no more.
- Sergeant, don't stop the charge, let's go even if we have to hit the enemy with our rifle butts or to use our bayonets.
- It was then when I understood our senseless attack, but had not time to change my mind, my men abandoned the ground and charged with fixed bayonets, and then the thing really started.
- What thing, I ventured to say.

The enemy fire, they were not saving any bullets it was a real curtain of steel, sweeping our ranks, leaving no one untouched, they threw hand grenades at us.

With tense nerves, he gesticulated widely looking at us without seeing us, he was charging again with his men.

- Enemy fire did not slack for a minute, I though jumping in a shallow water hole I felt a sting on fire on my back the moment I left that position, right here at the waist level, he said, showing us his scar.
- My sergeant rescued me from the low water; otherwise I could have drowned in inches of water like many of our wounded did.
- Do you consider that your battalions, as well as that company of you were defeated in action?
- I am not going to answer that stupid question of yours, said our Lieutenant Lima.
- Dear lieutenant, said our Dr. Vega, after all the casualties that special battalion of yours sustained in the first and only hour of attack, after running out of ammo in front of the enemy after they pinned down your few survivors, after being unable to press the attack, which I wonder with, and not to retreat since they would have cut you down to pieces, can you really tell us that you are not going to answer my question if your battalion was defeated in action or not. I could say more than. The enemy wiped you out.
- Doctor, if you put it that way, I have no other choice but to agree with you, we were defeated in action all right.

2 1/2 Army truck with a .50 mm Browning machine gun mounted in a tower on the passenger side of the truck

Once again Dr. Vega spoke, this time more dry than before.
- It was lucky for you guys that those invaders did not have enough men to spare for a decisive counterattack, other than that maybe you wouldn't even be here in the first place, and as far as I remember, there never was an official casualty report of your battalion war casualties. Could you say something about it?
- Doctor, you can go to hell, if you want to know about our War Casualties, as you say, you better go to the Army Headquarters and ask them about it.
- My son, I am not that crazy yet, if I only dared to do that, I would finish the same way many of our
countrymen did, in jail.

I could not believe my ears, the doctor had to be mad to make such statement in front of the lieutenant and all the other people in the room, whether doctors or not, and whom he had no way to know intimately, could be members of the G-2.

I felt telling the doctor to close his mouth but that would be like saying openly that there was no freedom of speech in Cuba, and I did not say anything.

Dr. Vega finished his speech saying
- If those men of the invading Brigade 2506 would have ever come here in sufficient number and received the military aid they were promised, they could have destroyed all and each one of those militia and army battalions that your boss could have ever sent against them. Not only that, I think that you all will agree with me, he gesticulated addressing to all of us in the room, that with the very limited means of combat at their disposal they did fantastically well in battle. I would say that I am not happy with the enormous number of dead and wounded they caused to your troops, I noticed and everybody else that the doctor did not say "our troops" but militarily speaking I could say they did their thing very well indeed.

The lieutenant, thinking perhaps, that the doctor was only speaking from the military viewpoint and not involving any politics, eased his face.
- Doctor, believe it or not, there was a rumor among the high echelons that if Castro ever had such group of men to fight Batista, like the brigade was, his fighting days in the mountain would have lasted a week only.

With these last words, he turned around in his wheel chair, and said good bye to us all, he shook the hands of the doctors in the room, and thanked me warmly for all the help I gave to our wounded in the Bay of Pigs and left the hospital in his car.

We all looked at Dr. Vega, who said
- My only regret is that I could never have the chance of saying the same speech to his Boss.

Dr. Vega left Cuba in June 1964 and I never heard about him again, Lieutenant Roger Lima, died in Cuba in 1976, from complications of his war wounds in the Bay of Pigs.
CHAPTER 9

“THE DECIMATED BATTALION.”

“CASTRO’S VETERANS FROM THE MOUNTAINS”

JULY 3, 1964, MORNING IN OUR LADY OF MERCY HOSPITAL

I remained for many years working in hospitals in Havana, long after the affair of the Bay of Pigs faded away in the mind of my fellow Cubans, as part of my advanced training as a doctor assistant, an optimistic way to call us, instead of male nurses, or simply nurses like some evil mind people called us.

I met with many members of the Cuban Armed Forces to whom, we gave medical treatment for every imaginable type of diseases, we cured pimples, ingrown nails, and administered shots for venereal diseases, on a daily and common basis. During one of those occasions, lets say a rare time of peace and quiet in the morning when I had few patients for medical treatment, there was a police sergeant with a severe pimple infection on his face, he was referred to me by the doctor on duty who prescribed penicillin, and there I was ordering the man to lower his pants and gave him the shots.

-Doctor, you have a professional way to prepare the injection, years ago we could have used a man of your experience in the Bay of Pigs, and maybe many lives of our men would have never been lost in the first place.
-I was over there my good man, with the evacuating parties and in hospitals doing my best for our thousands of casualties.
-Did you say thousands of casualties?
-Where you there? , I questioned him, because if you did you must remember seeing our Red Cross ambulances and trucks running back and forth bringing dead and wounded like there was no tomorrow.
-I was with the famous Police Brigade.
-You mean the brigade almost decimated to a man by the invaders.
-Yes doctor, that was the brigade with whom I was.  
It was almost lunch time, and I questioned him -Do you want to have lunch with us, courtesy of this hospital?
-Of course I do Doctor, was his immediate reply.

Very well, let’s go, and saying to Nurse Lourdes Martinez who was with me, we are going to have lunch at the cafeteria, if anybody needs me you know where I am going to be.

This policemen whom by struck of coincidence, his last name was Castro, accompanied me to the cafeteria reserved for the use of medical personnel only, but when we got there, all I had to say was - Dr. Alberto Fernandez wanted this patience to have lunch here so he could check his blood pressure while he is making his digestion. The door orderly was not fully convinced. Therefore, I ordered him to call Doctor Fernandez to his extension number, and that did it, he did not even bother calling the doctor to verify it.

In 1964 the food situation was at its worst in Cuba, therefore when we sat at the table and they brought us the plates of the day, ground beef on white rice, a bowl of black beans, green fried bananas, salad, hot Cuban bread, and rice pudding, the policeman was more than thrilled, he was superfast that us the doctors had it so well in the land of the food ration all over the country.
We were very hungry and ate very fast, that guy gulped his lunch like a hungry wolf, we left the cafeteria and had a seat at the doctor's lounge and in that place I heard the story of the Decimated Battalion, the one that suffered more casualties in proportion that all of the other military units facing the Brigade in those three days of combat.

-Doctor, I was at the Police Headquarters in the Avenida del Puerto, facing the Morro Castle at the entrance of the Bay. We received orders since the 15 of April to stay with all of our equipment ready to leave at a moment notice. I was a veteran of the time of Fidel in La Sierra, and all of us had taken two water canteens, a FAL, with double bandolier of ammo clips and extra bullets, hand grenades and a Colt 45 with spare clips, you know, we had a long combat experience and knew by first hand how hard is to get water and ammo on a battle field, and we were more than ready.

Our chief, Mayor Efigenio Almeijeiras, also a veteran of the days of Castro in the mountains, was on top a military truck with a caliber 50 on a rotating mount on the driver's cabin, and he sat there, without doing any conversation, lots and lots of trucks arrived to the parking lot in front of the military emplacement and we received the order to go on board, we still did not know where we were going, but we all supposed must be for the invasion site.

In spite of all our military preparations, I noticed that we only had FAL's with us, but no heavy machine guns or mortars, and I had bad feelings about it.

The trucks crossed the underground tunnel that goes under the Havana harbor from one side of the capital by the bay and got on the highway linking with the northern circuit of highways that go from Havana to the northern cities of the eastern provinces as well as the main cities on the southern part of the province of Matanzas, which southern circuit would take those trucks on a straight drive to the landing site. -We had plenty of lockouts on the trucks watching the skies for enemy planes, and our truckers had been warned with plenty of time in advance the at the first sight of planes to go for the highway shoulder to allow our men to take cover.

On our way to the front we found army patrols guarding highways and bridges against sabotages or commando raids. We had to take it easy because they had mined all entrances. In spite of that we were going very fast, remember doctor, we were traveling very light.

-Yes, too light for your own safety, by the way, how many Paramedics did you have in your ranks?
-I don't think we had any, he answered back.

April 18, 1961, at eleven in the morning, we entered the concentration area of all troops in the Area, the Australia Sugar Mill, and its overall important highway junction. There were many other battalions stationed in the area already, and plenty of anti-aircraft batteries emplaced, many more still attached to the trucks awaiting for final order about destination.

There were three tanks in the area, they were the best sight for an infantryman in wartime, specially after we knew they were to go with us as advanced unit.

The tanks, all Russian T-34 with 85 mm guns had the crew members outside and talking with all of our men. Each tank commander was seated casually on the turret, resting hands on the top hatch machine gun, while the other members of the crew had hatches opened and were also talking, not with humorous look on their faces, we had received news that two battalion had been destroyed, although our news were limited I could not fail to notice the worried look on their faces, the tankers I am talking about it.

Some of the tank crews knew our men and a sort of friendship developed briefly, and I was glad as hell for that sort of acquaintance, if the occasion ever arose most likely those men would do more for our safety than they had
ever to do under normal circumstances.

Call for formation. rang in the air, and we went to our platoons and companies, there were only riflemen with us. Our commander Mayor Almeijeiras gave us a long and fiery speech with deep emotional voice, it was more or less something like this:

"Men . . . we are going to crush the enemy with this, showing his automatic rifle in the air, and with those, pointing at the tanks. Lets show those fucking sons of bitches how we fight and how we will revenge all the dead in the air attacks and all of our casualties in the preceding battalions"

All I could think was to tell the man next to me:
- All of our casualties in the preceding battalions?
- How many casualties and how many battalions?

More than one face in the formation had frowns of worry on the forehead, we were not too happy with the speech. Although we all were veteran fighters with more than two years of combat behind us, but, one thing is to fight guerrilla warfare of hit and run, as that fellow was used to, and another story was to fight a frontal war against a well prepared and entrenched enemy, that might be expecting you to give you hell.

Needless to say that we did not have the trucks going with us and we started to march on the edges of the road and the three tanks far ahead of us, with the personnel, including the police chief in our ranks.
- Our march was no joke, we reached the battlefield where two other battalions had paid a high price in men, and the dead were all over, this time I saw Red Cross tents in the distance where they had established a first aid station, which was intended as I was informed to stopped hemorrhage and take care of men in deep shock, and to monitor the badly wounded men from those who could make it.
- A classification center that was, I said.
- Well whatever it was, we all saw plenty of red cross trucks and ambulances coming and going.

Very soon we received orders to go at double time since those big Russian engines fitted for the cold Russian weather overheated terribly if they had to go too slow.
- How could your tanks operate in such swampy area? I heard of places that a whole army could disappear without any further trace.
- They could not do much, they were there to protect us but in honor of truth there was not much they could do if attacked with heavy artillery.

To begin with the road was kind of narrow, and its not too wide shoulders with light gravel could not take for long the weight of a heavy tank like those
- What about if your group was going to be faced by antitank guns? What evasive actions could they had ever taken.

There was only one way out for them, to back up or to turn around on the road using its shoulders as additional room, if they had wondered too far away, the swamps would have swallowed them.
- Whose bright idea was to send your unit just like that?

That idea was the Chief of Police's idea. Probably he wanted to relive his days of fighting in the mountains, and that was something well away in the past, and besides the point, we all were a little bit older and a little bit fat,
and the enemy ahead was something quite different from the enemy we had faced years ago.

Years of soft city life had taken its toll on the advancing figures behind the tanks, we already had lots of stragglers unable to keep on going at a fast pace, and also many of our men took frequent sips of water from the canteens.

The sun bothered us a lot, but above all was the clanking sound of the tank threads on the hard concrete of the road, the sound of the big engines and the white puffs of smoke coming from the exhausts was giving us away for miles and if the enemy did not grasp it and attack us on the open road, where we cannot do anything to defend ourselves then they were as crazy as we were.

Our tank commanders rode in high spirits, seated inside the tank turrets with half body outside the top hatches while down there both pilot and copilots had open hatches to make it easier for them.

Many jokes went around, the usual cuban spirit of making jokes, even in hell.

Our tankers told the infantry, -when the fighting starts don't try to get into our tanks, we won't open the doors for you.
- It is going to be the other way around, you ass holes, when you see the anti tank shells beating the shit out of you, don't ask for room in our trenches, because we will give you a kick in your balls, and another in your ass to get you out.

The most accurate remark I heard from one of my comrades about the tanks was like this:
- Enemy artillery always pick on the tanks first, the infantry later.

A whispering sound of an approaching express train, sounded in the air, on the spot the leading tank commander turned his head around to the other two crews -In combat! and the three tanks in unison, closed the hatches with a metallic snap leaving us on the road without knowing what to do next, and as naked as bacon.

The experienced ear for cannon fire must have warned the tank group leader of incoming artillery bombardment, just seconds after the hatches closed big geysers of earth mud and water together went up in the air, the smoke and fire of an exploding enemy shell covered the leading element of our armored force.

Pheww!!, it was a near miss and we all sighted with relief.
After the first brief encounter with the enemy we could distinguish far in the distance cannon fire, and the deep voice of the enemy 50's.

A column of white smoke rose from the exhaust of the tanks as they increased speed forward, forcing our overtired infantry to stand a run at a double time. It was a marathon with everybody running the best they could, water canteens and pistol making noises when hit by the rifle butts, some of our men worried about he hand grenades they had attached to their chest, but they have no choice but to keep running or been run down by the men behind.

It came so suddenlyout giving any aid to the men inside, because whenever a tank receives a direct hit, there is nothing in the world that can save the men inside it.

More and more volleys of mortar grenades fell on our ranks, a reddish sticky slime covered the highway, it
was blood, human blood.

In the meantime our men had no other way to escape enemy fire than to lay as flat as possible on the ground, on the road shoulders camouflaged with the tall grass, we all had regular army green fatigues and were less visible than the regular militias with the blue and green uniforms.

- Sergeant, why didn't your people try to dig any trenches, after all you were trapped, then why not to take advantage of the soft ground to dig in?
- We did not have any shovels with us!
- You did not have any shovels with you, you must be crazy to tell me that, who would dare to take a whole brigade of men without at least some lousy shovel to dig trenches in events' like that?
- Our commander Almeijeiras, that's who.

Once again I wondered how stupid a commander might be to take a military unit of nine hundred men like that, into action.

- What happened to the leading tank? I was deeply interested how it was, many rumors went around in Cuba, and the story of that tank circulated through length and width of the island, it was even shown in newsreels where everybody could see the destroyed tank laying on the side of the highway after the whole thing was over.
- We came forward crawling and running to the stricken tank, to give a helping hand to the copilot if we could, to get into the tank.
- We saw a big hole about twelve inches in diameter and throughout it we saw the pilot and co-pilot both dead at the controls in the top seat the corpse of the tank commander smashed against the telescope where he was when the grenade struck the tank, the whole force went up and his body received it completely, he was in threads almost.

The copilot of the second tank yelled back to his commander
- Everybody is dead here, and I cannot get inside.

Another try and the second tank approached the stricken vehicle and pushed and pushed but no way the wreck did not budget an inch most, likely those men died so suddenly that the pilotames they received, specially cowards how do you explain the enormous number of casualties your unit sustained in action?

- Doctor, I never knew exactly how many casualties we had, as a matter of fact, I heard Fidel during his speech of May 1, 1961, that our troops sustained something like a hundred casualties all together.
- My son, I can tell you between you and me, with nobody else to know about it that I can estimate our casualties of well over two thousand men killed and another two thousand wounded.
- Doctor, are you sure about it? His face reflected a lot of interest about my remarks.
- Look here I said, our hospitals in Jaguey Grande, Cienfuegos, Santa Clara, Jovellanos, Matanzas and Havana overflowed with wounded, not counting the small city club that we confiscated and used them as field hospitals, plus the funeral parlors as field morgues.
- Doctor, then we lost more men in action than the total number of the invaders? Then, in a way we were defeated in action!
- No my son, we were not defeated, we won, I did not dare to mention the word defeat that would sound too strong and I did not know how that man was going to react about it.
- Some people said we won for sheer numerical superiority in men and weapons, others, our enemies, I ventured to say that in order to disguise my own personal feelings, might say that we were morally defeated or that we won a Pyrrhic victory.
- Doctor, what do you mean by a moral defeat and a Pyrrhic Victory?
- Well, if you lose close to four thousand men in order to defeat fifteen hundred, plus heavens know how much equipment, for instance I heard that we lost about twelve tanks in action.
- Twelve tanks, I never knew we lost so many tanks!
- My son, there are so many things that you don't know about the invasion that I could write a book about them.
- How about a Pyrrhic Victory?
- There was a Roman General, hundreds and hundreds of years ago, who fought the Carthaginians over the Italian Alps, with infantry only he faced an army mounted on elephants, the equivalent of armored forces at that time. After the fighting was over he had destroyed all of the enemy elephants and infantry, but as an army, he only had with him no more than two hundred men left, including his generals, whom of course always remained alive in combats, but as an army his force ceased to exist. That is why we call a Pyrrhic Victory, when you win but your own forces are so badly mauled by the enemy, that the difference between victory and defeat is so slim that sometimes you cannot distinguish one from the other.
- Doctor, I will continue as fast as I can, your lunch time is almost over and I don't want to keep you away from your duty.
- Next it was the turn for the tanks, a volley of antitank grenades falling between our three tanks seemed to had left untouched the leading one, we looked at it, it seemed so strange that it was still in one piece.

A deafening explosion followed by flames and pieces of armor coming from the leading vehicle made our men to shudder.
- What the hell is going to be next?

The stricken vehicle did not catch fire, only its long protruding cannon sunk from its elevation all the way down. Like a dead elephant moving its trunk between the tusks.

The second tank moved forward and tried to bypass the damaged vehicle, the moment it went through the soft shoulders of the road it leaned on its right thread, where the swamp and road met, it backed up and remained behind where it was before.

The tank commander of the second tank, opened his hatch tower, yelled orders to the copilot who left his position, we overheard:
- See if you can get inside that tank and move it away.

He did not even bother mentioning about giving any aid to the men inside, because whenever a tank receives a direct hit, there is nothing in the world that can save the men inside it.

More and more volleys of mortar grenades fell on our ranks, a reddish sticky slime covered the highway, it was blood, human blood.

In the meantime our men had no other way to escape enemy fire than to lay as flat as possible on the ground, on the road shoulders camouflaged with the tall grass, we all had regular army green fatigues and were less visible than the regular militias with the blue and green uniforms.

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brigade of men without at least some lousy shovel to dig trenches in events' like that?
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Once again I wondered how stupid a commander might be to take a military unit of nine hundred men like that, into action.
- What happened to the leading tank? I was deeply interested how it was, many rumors went around in Cuba, and the story of that tank circulated through length and width of the island, it was even shown in newsreels where everybody could see the destroyed tank laying on the side of the highway after the whole thing was over.
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The copilot of the second tank yelled back to his commander
- Everybody is dead here, and I cannot get inside.

Another try and the second tank approached the stricken vehicle and pushed and pushed but no way the wreck did not budget an inch most, likely those men died so suddenly that the pilot left the controls engaged with a dead engine, and it acted like a car more or less, you cannot move it if the gears are engaged.
- Doctor, don't get the wrong idea that everything was quiet in the meantime, it was terrible, and our commander was in our midst firing and yelling orders that nobody could comply with. Our men were searching for the ammo pouches of the dead, and kept on firing. Very soon we had a couple of bullet magazines at the most.

I was amazed, our men had no officers to control the fire, preventing situations like this, which had already happened to the two preceding battalion as I heard it from the lips of survivors, men firing weapons in action like possessed devils, with the additional disadvantage, they had no links with the rearguard for ammo supplies or evacuation of the casualties.

Even the two remaining tanks in action pumped shell after shell against the enemy positions. I give one point to our tankers, they could not advance although they did not retreat either not abandoning us to our fate.

In the middle of the fantastic dim the front tank wreck came to life, its engine roared puffing like a stricken bull and little by little like a crawling wounded it moved forward then side wise to the edge of the highway until finally it rested on the shoulders half way sunk in the swamp mud.
- But didn't all its crew members die when it got hit? I don't think that tank could have ever moved by itself.
- I was coming to that, the wrecked tank did not move by itself, and my platoon ran to it, in the middle of a rain of bullets that we dodged.

We were shocked when we saw the insides of the tank by the front hole, there was the pilot a young beardless boy not more than eighteen years old, with a sweaty white face, the big drops of sweat came down his helmet over the nose, forehead and temples, but that was not the worst, the poor boy had an ugly gash all the way down his chest and across the belly, through it a big grey mass of intestines and something more bulky that I supposed it was his stomach. Frankly speaking although I had seen many men die during my time in the mountains, when most of the
men of my brigade fought alongside Fidel, I had never seen a man so badly wounded like this one, and performing an incredible feat of moving a wrecked tank like he did it.

- Neither do I, but in wars sometimes the most unbelievable situations happens like in an everyday occurrence.

The boy opened the front hatch and it seemed strange doctor, but men do things for force of habit, Would you believe that after getting his tank out of the way he turned off the engine, and looking at us straight in the eyes, said:

-Give me water

The poor boy was in a hell of a situation, we could not remove him through his hatch, in his conditions, and all other hatches tightly shut from inside, there was nothing else for us to do for him.

-Couldn't you do something for him?

We could have helped him if he could just open the bottom hatch or the top hatch, and if he could have done all of that most likely he wouldn't have needed our help in the first place.

Also don't forget our position swept by enemy fire.

Our group received more bullets and our men scrambled for cover, just three of us remained there with him.

- Give me water, give me water and get the hell out of here.

-I'm through, nobody can help me.

My men still argued that give him. Water in his situation it would only worsen his situation.

- I told them loud and clear, you stupid fools, he is through, let's do the only decent thing we can do for him, let's give him water. I passed my water canteen, and he drank long sips.

- Thanks friends, thanks a lot, muttered almost unconscious.

- He is going fast, I thought to myself.

We stood by his side talking to him, in the midst of a rain of machine gun bullets, wiping his heavily sweat forehead, until it was over. Frankly speaking we did not have the nerve to leave the poor kid to die alone, after all he had done for us, moving away the tank blocking our way.

When we were with the dying tanker, two other tanks advanced forward with every cannon and machine gun blazing away, a column of white smoke rose from exhausts and once again our men advanced following real close.

They covered not more than half a block when an antitank shell hit the leading tank on its right thread, due to its forward motion it continues its march on the bared wheels leaving behind the damaged thread, it continued rolling after the wheels sank on the road concrete.

With only one tank in action, our force could not advance further. The two vehicles commenced a solid fire against the enemy, I wondered for how long since tanks carry inside sixty to eighty shells and they couldn't do much harm to the enemy if they exhausted the shells supply.

We held our fire, we did not know if the enemy was going to attack us, and our supply line was non existing.

At the mention of enemy attack, I thought that everybody was thinking the enemy to be invincible.

- Why do you think that the Police Brigade ran out of ammunition in the first hour of the combat?
- Because we all wanted to shoot, after so many years of inaction after our mountains time, and besides the point the FAL’S and Tommy Guns, fire so fast that they are a real dream to shoot with them.

Here we had a man saying that to shoot a fast firing weapon in battle was a dream. It was sickening to hear that.

- Well doctor, the truth of the matter was that we did not have any able officer on the battlefield to control our fire or to keep track of the ammo supplies. Then it was silence, at last a dreadful silence permeated the terrain, broken only by the yells of wounded and the sounds of agonizing men.
- By any chance in this world. Did your brigade carry any Paramedics in your ranks?
- Oh yes we did, he was an old man, he was a cook, and they assigned him a hand bag with Red Cross equipment and that was it.
- So your commanding officers considered and old cook as good to be a Paramedic, it sounds funny, I said.

Our wounded could not be helped right away on the battlefield, and had to wait for reinforcements or a relief force.

Then, once again I realized why so high the number of dead and amputees on Castro's forces, those men lacked the most elementary medical assistance and they died like sheep in a slaughterhouse. All of that because the high brass, wanted to compete with each other, they thought whoever made it to the battlefield would get the enemy in one, two's and three's and brag about it.

Once again we received orders to advance given personally by Mayor Almeijeiras, my nerves were on the breaking point, I did not think I could take it much longer, but I had no other choice and kept on going.

We advanced very slowly, expecting to find mines. Our men received ammunition brought by army trucks and replenished our exhausted supply, we discarded all equipment and took only all the ammo we could carry.

We had noticed where was the heavy machine gun fire coming before we stopped our advance and we rushed to that spot, fired long burst of rifle fire to the bushes around the silent enemy position, and run for the enemy trenches, and what we found inside?

Empty ammo boxes, of mortar and machine gun bullets, nobody else was inside. When I turned around I saw our positions in the distance, they got us well covered all right, and I suppose that if they only had more men could have wiped us to the last man.

We occupied the abandoned enemy trenches, the same trenches we fought for and that the enemy abandoned at its leisure. We cleaned our weapons in case of more fighting, we did not have to wait for long, an enemy cannon shot fired far away hit our trench squarely and four men killed in a second, I kept my life due to the good trench dug by the enemy in zigzag, it protected other men inside and only those in the place hit, got the chop all right.

Why the high brass did not combine the punch of the 339th militias infantry, the Special Battalion of Matanzas and the Police Brigade, plus adding artillery, mortars and tanks all together at the same time and sent a big thrust into enemy lines to dislodge their forward positions and advance to the beach, instead of sending each unit on a piecemeal basis.

Knowing the Mayor of the Police Force, Mr. Almeijeiras, he acted on his own, he imagined he could defeat the enemy without any problems, and we paid dearly for that. The 339th got the orders from Mayor Augusto Martinez...
Sanchez, he was another hot head and decided on his own to act as go between the main headquarters in Havana, and did not want to wait to have another unit prepared, he was the one that influenced Fidel Castro to send the 339th, he even told him, the less prepared the unit, the more merits we will have when we defeat them.

And for the Special Battalion from Matanzas, the province commander decided on his own to send them on a rush basis, thinking that such highly specialized unit must have the know how to destroy the enemy, as you see doctor, they all competed with each other, the only one who paid was the poor soldiers who died or maimed for life.

As an interested addition to this chapter, I could add, that many years later, in January 1978, I was in Puerto Rico on a business trip and over there I met one of the Brigade men, and when we talked about the Brigade engagement with the police force he said that their retreat was due to lack of ammunition, more than anything else. They got the police brigade covered and with some few more boxes of needed ammo they could have defeated them decisively that day.

What about if at that time a second large landing would, that ever taken place behind our lines of combat, what would had been the fate of the front line units?

Most likely they would not have any chances to make it through.

There was nothing else to talk about it, and the veteran policeman said Good by and his last words in our conversation were:

-Doctor, it was quite a fight for the Police Brigade, and I answered him.
-Yes my son, it was quite a fight on both sides, yours and theirs.
CHAPTER 10

HIGHWAY MASSACRE - BATTALION 111TH AND 123RD

APRIL 18, 1961

BLOODY NOON

When I was going through my basic training as a paramedic, our doctors warned us that we would deal with burns and plenty of them, since modern warfare involved Napalm bombs, phosphorus grenades, flame throwers and explosion and fires on the battlefield.

I spent many hours with Doctors and Nurses, specially with Nurse Nadia, in the burn unit of the Our Lady of Mercy in Havana, getting used to give medical treatment to our in patients and how to keep a poker face in front of the worst cases. The very special and peculiar smell in the treatment room and patient wards that in spite of heavy bandages and extremely cold air conditioning, that revolting smell spreads all over and could make your stomach sick.

When the hospital orderlies brought the in patients to the treatment room, yellow streaks of pus oozed through every wrinkle in the bandages and we used streams of sterilized water to separate bandages from flesh and the burnt crust of skin and pus. It was awful, men and women alike crying like babies, it was sickening to give the poor creatures antiseptic baths and to remove quelled tissues as much as possible, and we knew they were suffering like hell, but we had no other choice, our head doctor in charge warned us very clearly that for the best benefit of our patients we had to remove the quelled tissue no matter how much it hurt, if you wanted them to look pretty, they must suffer.

Those were hard days for me, at least that was what I thought, when I was going on a daily basis to that painful routine. I never dreamed that less than a month away I was going to see more burnt people that I could think could have ever survived those hideous napalm burns.

First of all, not all of the paramedics could take the training in the Burn Unit, for many of them, to enter in that unit of the hospital, was like going to another planet, where its inhabitants had a strange appearance and not everybody wanted to deal with them.

On April 19, 1961 in the first hours in the morning, two infantry battalions rushed to the scene of the landing on board white civilian buses on the road from Jaguey Grande to Australia Sugar Mill.

There was much saying about these two battalions and the enormous amount of burn casualties suffered, I was in the Cienfuegos Hospital where the bulk of them arrived on board anything that moved, civilian trucks, station wagons, cars, buses and military vehicles.

I was with the receiving crews in the burn unit. I had to remove burnt clothes, cleaning the burns with gauze, removing dirt, pieces of soil and above all, as much as possible of burnt skin.
The casualties I had to deal with, were in deep shock, and did not feel a thing at the moment of their arrival at the hospital, with second and third degree burns in 40 to 50 percent of their bodies, they were under deep shock and I could administer the initial treatment of cleaning and disinfecting their burns, the specialists took care of the hard process of hydration and plasma when necessary, and so our job was sort of easier.

It was another story for our poor nurses after these casualties spent five days in the hospital, at that time the skin nerves had recuperated the feelings and sent pain signals to the brain again and it was quite a different ball game, whom they had to keep under stretcher straps when orderlies brought them into the treatment room. Every now and then some of them got away from the treatment room, completely naked, half crazy of the horribly painful treatment.

We knew that the orderlies and the nurses did not strap them too tight for not hurting their painful wounds and that way they escaped, until they had two orderlies next to the treatment stretcher, to stop them from running away.

Ears and noses burnt beyond any hope of restoration fell to pieces at the slightest touch, making our patients faces cruel resemblances of half-finished masks.

I heard many stories in the hospital, plus having the visit of officers in charge of the two battalions and army officers who were always talking in whispers that we arrived to such a degree of perfection in trying to understand everything going on in there that I would not be exaggerating if I say here that I could read the lips of those officers.

We put two and two together and one more time I was amazed of the stupid and clumsy way those poor creatures were led to their deaths, mostly because the Cuban high command did not play by the war rules and secondly each of the big wheels wanted to make sure the people under its command beat the invaders before other military units, making a sort of unofficial competition of the battlefield.

It is not unusual in wars that sometimes the same action had more than one version, especially when these versions were given by people who were under heavy enemy attack, and were thinking on only one thing: Survival, I had two versions although in either one the results were the same, close to thousand men dead and wounded lots of buses and trucks destroyed, and ammo for the battlefield blown up on the highway.

The most irrational manner to transport a military unit in wartime and on a zone battled by enemy planes, was the one chosen for these two units, they had auxiliary weapons all right, heavy machine guns and mortars and plenty of extra ammo but that was all in what concerns strategy for the high brass.

Just imagine two thousand men, with all military equipment on board fifty large white civilian buses, with small windows crossed by metal bars, denying any emergency exit that way. Two pneumatic doors front and rear, which in many cases one of those doors was not working properly.

123rd battalion headquarters was in the city of El Cotorro, small, and unknown up that date, some twenty miles away from the capital, after organizing the bus convoy of twenty-five buses were to rendezvous with the other twenty five buses coming from the city of Regla, another small town on the opposite shore of the city of Havana, and on the same bay.

One thousand men on twenty-five buses was not that bad after all, there were 40 men to the bus, although there were several details not taken into consideration by the battalion commanders. The additional military
equipment they carried with them that third day of the fighting had already taught many lessons to Castro's inept commanders. and these two battalions carried with them an assorted supply of heavy equipment, composed of one heavy machine gun company, with twenty machine gun, a mortar company with another twenty mortars, plus the corresponding heavy quantity of ammo for all those pieces, and many boxes of spare ammo for the FAL, and Tommy guns, after all the predicaments of the other battalion which ran short of ammo in the middle of the battle, they started to do the things by the book for the first time.

All the extra equipment occupied a lot of space. Therefore, the only logical place for it was the standing passenger isle in each bus, so everybody was fine, the men had first class seats and the equipment was neatly stored in the isles, it was only one small detail of minor importance at the time of boarding the buses, there was no room for the men to walk out of the buses, and only after ammo and weapons were unloaded, they could have left the bus.

Then they started for the highway and both battalion buses met on the city of Matanzas, from where they took to the highway going real fast for the battlefield.

They were riding on white civilian buses easy to see from far away, and any enemy pilot flying in the area, had to be too dumb or too stupid in order not to notice those civilian buses heading straight to the battlefield, had to be transporting troops only.

The weather was gorgeous making it perfect for any air raid against ground troops. It was sad for me to listen to many of our dying men, when they told us how they boarded the buses in full confidence the Cuban Air Force had complete mastery of the air and that they would only find our planes flying over the combat area.

With so many assurances about the non-existing possibilities of enemy air attacks, the officers in charge of those battalions never bothered to emplace any lockouts for enemy planes, after all they were going to see only our planes.

Not long after leaving Matanzas, they found another convoy of trucks with more troops on board protected by three tanks, and that added extra strength to their already overconfidence.

I never had the chance of hearing the story in one complete sequence, our survivors said it to me in parts, in broken episodes, sometimes in coma situation, which it did not matter to them when I told them to keep quiet and to rest, they insisted in keeping on talking about it.

They were no more than ten miles away from the battlefield, even the tanks were going fast, and the sound of their heavy engines and the air going through the open windows did not allow them to hear the sound of airplanes flying overhead.

The attack started all the way at the front of the convoy where two B-26's started strafing rounds, and one after another, buses, trucks and tanks started to turn away from the highway to escape the attack, and received showers of anti-personnel fragmentation bombs and the deadly napalm bombs, first hits occurred on army trucks carrying several companies of soldiers, which received direct hits four in a row, all that remained of the trucks was the beds and wheel, all the rest went up in explosions. We never had the opportunity to identify the casualties on board the trucks which exploded like so many firecrackers, we assumed they had some type of high explosive on board, another big stupidity of the high command of getting infantry together with explosives. No survivors on any of the four military trucks, casualties some two hundred men who went up in smoke and flames.
By personal story of one survivor on board the civilian buses, I will try to describe in detail how it was on board the troop carriers. Let's picture for a second a regular urban bus full of troops, carrying long and heavy automatic rifles who were trying to get out over the cases of weapons and ammo on the isles, making impossible any prompt evacuation of the vehicle if you know that you are bombed and machine gunned, that your bus is already engulfed in flames and it can explode at any moment with you inside and that you cannot reach the doors and with everybody fighting madly to get out at the same time and when the man in front of you got his rifle entangled across the door, and when he tried to move it away, the crowd behind pushed him against the door and rifle and nobody can get out and when your friends were getting killed by bullets coming through the roof and ammo boxes started to go up, bullet by bullet and that you see men in front of you all in flames, with bombers strafing the convoy, over and over again, then we can call that sheer madness.

Two buses taking sharp turns away from the road, overturned on the ditch next to the road shoulders, trapping the men inside who could not get out because with the overturned door sides were blocked, with its large gas tanks punctured by bullets spilt gas on fire, it could not leave anybody safe.

Some men in the trapped buses broke the rear window glass with knives, with rifle butts and finished it with bare hands receiving long slashed on hands and arms, but it was far better than to be roasted alive inside the flaming buses.

Only twenty buses made it safely well away from the road, the drivers did not stop on the ditches or road shoulders they continued driving across country and could open its door to allow the men inside to make it to safety, abandoning all heavy equipment and rifles inside. Later on, these buses would receive machine gun fire and were set on fire, with heavy loss in equipment.

A splash of liquid fire involved the tanks, it did not matter its driver got them well away from the main road, the impact of napalm gelatinized gasoline did not miss the armored force attached to the convoy as escort, the crews escaped by the bottom hatches leaving the three tanks engulfed in flames and about to explode, just in the nick of time the three crews jumped in the slimmer side ditches littering the country sight and escaped unharmed.

We could not say the same for the men on board the buses, at this moment, there were no more battalion III or 123, there were only men trying to survive a sea of flames, machine gun fire and antipersonnel fragmentation bombs.

The blasted doors of the buses did not open, they knew in advance when they left the capital the wrecked situation of the buses they were riding on, but never in their lives they had the slightest idea of what was going to happen. The large ammo pouches on fire exploded, killing mercilessly the poor creatures, they ran and rolled by the green slippery ground extinguishing the fire, leaving uniforms and skin behind, many men extinguished their fire with their own hands. Those were the lucky ones.

After scores of buses were still on fire, others exploded with all the personnel inside, and others overturned trapping men inside, not a single shot came from the stricken battalion, the men just had one thought in mind, survival.

In these moments of tragedy human nature always came forward with the most daring acts of courage. Platoon sergeant, Eduardo Martinez put off the fire of many of his men inside a blazing bus, he removed shirts, ammo pouches on fire, straps and belts, in short he saved the lives of ten men, in spite of his bravery he took care of the evacuation of the worst cases of burnt, who were leaving on board the remaining ten buses in service. Due to the enormous losses in equipment that was weapons and ammo, they requisitioned the weapons of the wounded, to arm
those left unharmed. Another sergeant, going to Cienfuegos Hospital, badly burnt, refused to leave without his Tommy-gun, our sergeant Martinez wrestled it away from the sergeant’s hands. In the scuffle that followed our sergeant left the skin of his hands on the barrel of the gun, right when he had taken it away from the wounded. Needless to say that both men went together on board the same bus.

Another case, a bus drive, known only as “Cheo Melena” did not say he was wounded, applied bandages to the shrapnel wounds on his thighs and kept on driving to the hospital, he made it to Cienfuegos hospital on the verge of collapse for loss of blood, after parking his bus at the emergency entrance he collapsed at the wheel, and they took him in with the remaining of the men on board his bus. Our doctors explained that he did not collapse while driving the bus, mostly for the nervous tension and his sense of duty.

There is always a second opinion for every case, I will print here the second version, which was far more gruesome.

While some of our men were saying that the four military trucks going at the front of the convoy and behind the tanks, were full with soldiers, others told us the four trucks were full with militia women, of the corp. known as “Lydia Doce.” They were the first and only personnel to fire their guns at the planes on the first strafing run and although the tankers and personnel on the buses behind yelled to stop firing their guns, since the two planes flying over the convoy, were our own, the women kept on firing and firing until the first bombs came down on their trucks and blew the four trucks with the women inside because they carried mortar grenades and propellant charges. Not a single soul on board the four trucks remained alive.

In the second version, although the results were the same more or less, the men were under the impression that the attacking planes were of the Cuban Air Force and had attacked us due to the fire of the four trucks at the front, and those men delayed abandoning the buses up to the last minute and they waved and waved frantically to the attacking planes. Their smiles must have been frozen on their faces when the first bombs came on top of them bursting vehicles and men together. Out of these attacks was born a bitter feeling against the pilots of the B-26’s.

We heard many stories about B-26’s shot down over cuban soil, and their crews slaughtered after force landings. One thing was sure, there was not a single enemy pilot captured alive by Castro’s forces when the fighting was over and for what we heard unofficially there were close to twelve enemy planes shot down over land and sea.

Three weeks after the catastrophe of these two battalions, I was in Villa Laurel a widely known motel in Havana, which was confiscated as improvised medical headquarters for the battalions emplaced on the highway going to the Southern Circuit of Roads, actually there were two battalions 144 and 134. And they really had medical facilities just in case another fighting and landing ever took place in their combat area. A large military truck arrived and its crews started to unload a cargo of twisted and badly burnt barrels and Tommy guns. Nothing else remained of the weapons, heat and explosion of the bullets in the magazine most likely took care of the rest. Right away a small crowd of medical personnel gathered around the military personnel unloading the destroyed weapons, making questions from left to right.

I questioned the sergeant still in the cabin, where are those wrecked weapons coming from? The man looked at me straight in the eyes, watching for long time my Red Cross Cap. Doctor, what would you say if I tell you that those weapons part is all that remains of a whole infantry company of our battalion 123? You mean, I said, one of the two battalions that the brigade air force caught on the highway on the way to the Bay of Pigs? Immediately all my colleagues in the medical corp. stared at me, they must have thought - This man knows the story of Battalion 123, most likely he must know about 111 too.
I told them in few words the story of both battalions, and also what followed, which became 111 and 123 last stand.

Although both battalion were so badly mauled by the air raid, they regrouped together the unhurt survivors, eleven hundred men, made it to the battlefield on military trucks sent by the military command in Australia Sugar Mill, which trucks took them to the very forward lines of combat of the brigade which at that time were in full retreat to the beach.

Our hospital crews in Cienfuegos received four hundred wounded herded on board the ten buses, the dead remained behind on the highway, as well as the charred burnt corpses of the personnel on board the exploded trucks. The Cuban Red Cross could not do anything about evacuating the dead, there were so many of them that if they just had started to evacuate them they would have not had any facilities for the wounded.

And so with the end of the fighting, they erected a large monument on a park in the City of Regla, with the names of those killed in action of battalion 111 whose personnel was from that city. Two hundred seventy seven men killed.
CHAPTER 11

HEAVY ARTILLERY

APRIL 19, 1961

TEN O'CLOCK ON THE ROAD

Not all my sources of information for this book were from our casualties or from the medical personnel I worked with. There were several men in the branches of the Cuban Armed Forces who fate made them witness the events that were going to play a decisive part in the future destiny of Cuba and perhaps of many other countries in Central and South America.

One of these persons was a young artillery commander, by chance he was at the time of the air raid over Havana, in the military airport of Columbia, and that bloody day of April 15, 1961, he had left the base the previous night on pass, in fact it was an unauthorized pass, when he made it back there it was in the middle of the action, and he saw the raiding planes flying back and forth. Firing all through the camp and killing many of our men, he was a lucky man, his barracks received a long burst of fire from on end to the other, twelve men got killed, and he could have been one of them.

He told me many things about the famous Artillery Corps of Castro, for instance on the military parade of May 1, 1961 to celebrate the Giron victory, Castro paraded the bulk of this corp. through the Revolution Square, it was a show of force. But there was a small catch to it, only a few of the artilleryman, the first group to pass the artillery course knew how to operate the heavy 85 millimeters cannons, and they were carefully emplaced all through the island guarding beaches and airports, against another possible attack. All of those who paraded that day, hardly knew how to handle the big guns they were marching with.

Not only was that, the situation for the military in Cuba, unique. Castro had received hundreds of cannons of 85 millimeters from Czechoslovakia but he did not have any crews to man then. That was the reason why during the month of December of 1960, he quietly ordered the most advanced college students to go to a meeting at the Havana University main campus, where he personally picked up a thousand of this young men, that were to the first artillery commanders and sent to the artillery school on a twelve hours a day of theory and practical studies on the new arrived 85 millimeters canons. There were not enough men for all the cannons, Castro knew it, but he needed the artillery commanders to direct the fire, in other words the brains of the artillery.

The other men to handle the cannons were also trained, but at a lower level of finesse, they were in fact like robots, doing exactly what they were told to do, to the letter.

In 1961 there were only 15 batteries of 6 85 millimeters cannons per battery and only 6 batteries of 120 millimeters cannons.

The 85 mm were not supposed to any fighting at the military base of Columbia Airfield, and all their cannons, were kept well away from the airplanes, the hangars and the ammunition dumps. Only the over important men lived and worked in seclusion on the military barracks. This men were not allowed to
leave the military camp for months, Castro knew how much he needed them, and did not take any chances of losing them.

When the battle erupted, of all the artillery batteries, held in reserve, Castro gave orders for only three batteries to move to the battle field to help the hard-pressed infantry, once again he was sending his forces piecemeal into action, remembering perhaps his experiences as a guerrilla fighter for almost two years, from 1956 to 1958 when he fought the Batista government in the mountains of the Oriente province.

We will see what happened to this three batteries, which we will call batteries "A," "B" and "C."

On the battlefield, battery "A" was going to fast for its own benefit and bypassed our infantry units stationed around the battle zone to seal any breakthrough by the invaders. All of the sudden battery "A" commander realized they had no support units with them, only marshes, trees and high grass. He did not want to retreat and look bad in the eyes of the other batteries and kept on driving forward by the road, trying to locate our units, which he knew must be in the area. Mile after mile of unseen friendly units and witnessing so much wreckage and dead men littering the road and adjacent terrain, they only found small patrols and the ever present trucks with the Red Cross markings, nothing stronger than that.

Commander Dario Dominguez did not want to go back to our own lines by the highway again, and he studied the countryside parallel to the road narrow trails with evidence of use for long time, there was no vegetation, only flat grass. He told his crews of going back to our lines by these trails, because he did not want the enemy to see them. And there they were back to our lines by this trail. It was a nice terrain, separating away from the main road in places, sometimes he could see the road and sometimes he could not. He made it back not in time for his sake, in the midst of the trail they received a heavy bombardment of mortar grenades, the sharp edges of the exploding grandees went through the truck canvas wounding the artillerymen inside, even though due to the heavy cargo of shells in the trucks, plus the heavy cannons in tow, they could not go all the fast they needed. A big bang and a blinding explosion involved the last truck in the convoy, the engine hood flew away, the windshield was also gone and so the driver head, and the man seated next to him. The cannons could not move, and the same went for the crew still on it.

One more truck received hits in the tires, big chunks of hard rubber flew in the air when the shrapnel hit it, another truck that could not move. They had no other choice but to take cover and wait for the worse.

Among the incoming mortar shells, they emplaced the six cannons and fire to no special place, for sheer logic, they set the elevation on their weapons at the maximum, since mortars do not have a long range of fire, therefore the mortars could not be that far away from them. They fired on the road ahead, on the trail behind and all the trees and grass surrounding their position.

Finally the enemy fire stopped, and they sent a truck without its cannon, by the road to make it to our rearguard to bring infantry to defend the cannons in the event of another enemy attack, next time by their own infantry.

They did not receive any infantry, but two more trucks arrived, plus the one left before, with orders to retreat back to our lines right away, as fast as possible, they had to emplace on a perimeter well clear of the road and six to nine miles away from the beach. Definitively at that moment, there was a rough strategy for the first time in the combat zone.

Battery "B" did not advance far inside enemy lines, as a matter of fact, it did not advance at all, they emplaced
their cannons next to the road on the outskirts of the Australia Sugar Mill, its commander did not take any chances.

Our artillerymen feared attacks from enemy tanks, which might be operating all over. Also the strength of the invaders was greatly exaggerated by the gossips, and they suspected the enemy to be all around them. One more time orders arrived, this time by messengers riding on jeeps, the high command started to realize the importance of communications and although they had no radio stations in the area, they could send messages on fast driving jeeps. The orders for battery "B" arrived, it simply said, make contact with other batteries in the area, emplace your guns and stay on the alert.

They did not have to move forward, battery "A" arrived with the six cannons and a bunch of wounded, our forward units of the Red Cross, treated the wounded and evacuated the serious cases, all the other wounded man, remained with the batteries. Twelve cannons emplaced and waiting for more orders

Our artillerymen feared enemy tanks, the gossips from the infantry and their own kind, has greatly increased the esteemed strength of the enemy armored forces, which they calculated in about fifty heavy tanks, plus halftracks for infantry, plus hundreds of cannons, that was exactly the morale among Castro's artilleries.

But for our "C" battery fate was going to play a very different role with its six cannons and its able commander who realized the ambush on "A" battery and got himself the service of a local farmer named Juan Rivera, who knew the swamp like the palm of his hand, and this man could take the battery through the large areas of quick sand.

Pedro J Perez, was the commander of "C" battery and he advanced ten miles south of the Australia Sugar Mill and parallel to the road on Saint Blas, in a route that should have he finished all the way, would have taken his outfit to the doorsteps of the Brigade 2506 main Headquarters. He decided on his own to emplace sis cannons a mile southwest of the road, in a semi empty space of trees in the woods, with a solid view of the road on his right, heavy wooded area on his left, a clean field of fire up front, commanding an imposing view of the road ant its shoulders where any tank with a bit of luck could have made it undetected by our forward observers for the artillery, if we had any on this area.

Reasons for any enemy tank to use this road shoulders was simple enough, its silhouette blend with the countryside, its gray-green color must be indistinguishable from the distance and a small detachment of six tanks could advance unnoticed and once among the forward infantry units in their area, it could crush any battalion, with machine gun fire and the rapid fire cannon, not discounting the feared possibility of crushing our men under its threads. Our commander position was more than exposed, as a friend of mine in the artillery corps told me about, let us call him Enrique Valdes, there was no infantry to defend the battery position if enemy forward patrols ever made it there, his men did not have any heavy weapons, and the best they had was the 9 mm Tommy guns with 200 rounds per gun.

He ordered his men to cut the small trees between his position and the road, zeroed in his guns with the correct distance on the road, and its nearby fields, Commander Perez, was going out of his way, he sent one of his trucks as a forward scout to know in advance if any enemy armored force was on its way to this position.

That truck acting as a forward scout was the only one ever sent into enemy held territory by any of Castro's commanders. At half hour past one, our men heard an engine coming fast on the road ahead, - That must be our scout, and it was, the artillery truck was coming fast, among a clouds of the brownish dust of the road, and the men in artillery felt it was its scout was not bringing any good news, specially by the reckless manner in which it drove from the road and headed straight for their positions, crushing bushes and small trees on its way. It braked ant the big tires
skidded on the wet grass around the artillery emplacement, both doors of the truck opened at the same time and out came driver and escort, yelling at the top of the lungs, -Comrade Commander Perez, enemy tank is approaching by the road shoulders, it will be here in an hour, and they must know there is artillery in this area, they are coming very slow, stopping at times and the top hatch is opened and the tank commander has his head over it and is watching like a hawk.

- Is it only one tank? Ventured to say Commander Perez.
- Yes comrade, but it is big like hell, we had never seen a tank as big as that, was the dreaded answer.
- Make sure all the camouflage nets are in place and get plenty of branches and leaves and spread them, to cover our position to that fucking tank, ordered their commander.
- Load your guns; check your sights and use anti-tank shells, make sure you have plenty next to your cannons.

Our artilleryman had unloaded their trucks and stored the ample supply of shells in the nearby woods, within easy distance from the artillery pieces, after all they did not want an enemy lucky hit on the shells, to cause another explosion by sympathy on the other shells and wipe out the whole battery of six cannons.

- For Heaven's sake, do not move!

Many thoughts came to their minds, - What about if the enemy infantry was slipping in through the wooden area on their rear left, while the tank ahead acted as a decoy? Could they cope with that tank?.

After the short training period must of the time, they only fired against stationary targets, which do not fire back, and very few times against target towed behind trucks, but that only was done a few times.

April 18, 1961, at two O’clock in the afternoon, air stool still, the hot rays of the sun hit the cannon shield and barrels scorching any hand that touched them. The gray shirts with the red stripes on the sleeves that indicated the Artillery Corps, were sticky wet with sweat, the woolen olive green berets made the heads sweat with big drops falling down foreheads and temples. Some sincere souls assured my friend, that the last was due more to fear than to the hot weather prevailing over the battle field.

They did not move, they stoked behind the cannons shield and the artilleryman behind were busy in the process of getting the shells out of boxes and staggering close by, ready for battle. They also had drops of blood falling over the shining steel heads of the cannon shells in front of them. Even with sweating hands they had to handle the shells being extra careful not to drop the on the ground

A distant rumble down the road made all of our men to look to each other, in fear, the roar distorted by the trees ahead and the grassy ground with short vegetation made the incoming enemy vehicle to look like a whole tank battalion. Maybe the scout saw only one tank and there were many more.

Silence, the rumble stopped, the tank turned off its engine, most likely the able commander was surveying the terrain ahead and wanted to make sure if other forces were coming down the road and was trying to hear something, tanks, artillery or infantry coming by trucks.

Five minutes elapsed, the silence made the tension on the air to grow to an unbearable point among the emplaced artillerymen. Finally the heavy engine came back to life, and a blue halo of smoke rose hazily in the distance.

There it was, coming straight on the road, its massive steel frame filled the road from shoulder to shoulder, its long
cannon seemed like a mile long to our men in hiding, who backed up instinctively behind the steel shields, they never imagined an enemy tank to look as big as the one on the road.

It was advancing with open hatches, its crew must be watching the road and the adjacent terrain, the vehicle slowed down and moved its turret from left to right, looking through the periscope on board, scrutinizing the woods and in particular the position of the battery. Our men panicked, they had heard already how good the aim of the enemy gunners was, and if the one ahead was only half as good as the others, then they were in a heck of a trouble.

They almost shit on their pants, in spite of the numerical superiority of six cannons to one. Our green crews were deadly afraid of that tank.

Slowly, like crawling the enemy tank approached the point of the road where the sights of the six cannons converged, at the last minute, before the artillery commander had the chance to order his six guns to fire, the tank speeded up, like if its crew suspected something was not right. Most likely they had noticed the path on the vegetation cut by our men, to have a clear field of fire. It did not matter to the artillery commander that his guns did not have zeroed in, he ordered -FIRE! - and six hands pulled the lanyard sending the firing pins into the shell fulminant and one big deafening report involved the artillery site. Six explosions straddled the tank, only one came real close to its right side, but that was all the close they came to destroy the tank.

-Did we get it? ... -Did we get it? .

Was the common question among our men. They watched how the tank escaped intact the rain of shells, and with pounding hearts in their chest, they watched how it moved with ease leaving the road, passing over the slimmy shoulders and crushed the few small trees our men left standing next to the road.

-What the hell are we going to do now?

Our battery commander knowing damn well that every second they lost in the face of the enemy imperiled the safety of his cannons and of his most precious crews, shouted,

-Fire at will, don't stop for a second, you son of bitches.
-Do you want that fucking tank to crush us all!

From that moment on, there was no more fire control or any unity in tactic or strategy of any kind, just fire and reload, and back again to the same process.

Having missed the advantage of surprise and ambush, our emplaced battery was in a precarious situation. They faced a powerful Sherman tank, well known for its strong armor and with a well-trained crew inside. These two factors made a deadly combination to deal with.

The cannons shell fell wide away from the mark, and in the meantime the enemy was returning the fire with the two .30 machine guns inside sweeping close to our positions while its long 90 mm. cannon was aiming toward our position.

A light cloud of smoke and flames engulfed the tip of the tank cannon and a sharp whistle blew in the air, like an express train arriving at the station. Its grenade passed over the heads of our men, crashing and exploding behind in the woods, dangerously close to the cannon's ammunition dump. They had heard that sometimes the marshes
generated natural propane gas that originated many forest fires in the swamps by itself, let alone all the heat and fire generated by an exploding cannon shell amid the dense vegetation.

The enemy tank did not fire as our artillery, it took its time between shots, after all they only had the combat supply inside and that was all. It had left the road and was going straight toward our artillery emplacement and fired a second shot with a tremendous roar, it went off in a momentary lull between the fire of our own guns. One dark geyser of fire, smoke and shrapnel mushroomed in the very barrel and shield of the extreme right cannon, putting three gunners out of action, burnt and wounded by the searing heat of the shell with its flying pieces of steel.

A neighboring crew of the next cannon helped the hit cannon and it was back in action in no time. Still they did not register any hits on the tank, which was getting closer to our position with the apparent intention of ramming our crews and cannons to pieces.

Some gunners were considering the alternative of abandoning the cannons to get gasoline from the trucks, parked in the woods, to prepare Molotov Cocktails, to rush the attacking tank, once it reached the perimeter out of their field of fire. After all they had witnessed many times during the basic training how two or three bottles with gasoline and burnt oil, with some rags dangling from the top on fire always destroyed old tanks or houses, and that trick never failed.

One more tank shot, and another hit on our positions, lets say it was a lucky hit, it hit broadside the cannon struck before, blew the shield killing instantly the acting gunners and left four more wounded on the cannon to the left. The other crew members escaped for the reason they were in the process of bringing anti tank shells for the gun.

It was less than a hundred yards away, and its two machine guns registered many hits on the shields and its bullets were whizzing and ricocheting dangerously closed to our gunners, who had to dodge to escape being shot.

We all were scared to death; we did not think we were going to destroy the tank, once we saw one of our grenades ricocheting harmlessly off the front plate of the tank, the slanted plate below its turret, where the armor is the hardest.

Our artilleryman luck held by a string when the enemy tank advanced at full speed, found a wide shallow pond of water on its destructive wake, and its commander thinking maybe that it was filled with quick sand, too commonly found in this area, stopped right on its tracks, while the speeding momentum kept taking it straight to the pond, and almost on top of it, swerved violently to the right still on skidding motion, giving our gunners the ample and thinner left side of the tank, to our gunners. The tank sped up and headed back to the road, where it would intend a fast move to attack our battery from the rear or perhaps to retreat back to his own lines, still held firmly by the Brigade 2506.

Those short seconds did not escape our gunners, who fire the remaining four guns in actions. One anti-tank shell hit the vehicle on its left threats slowing it down, detaching two wheels, although the tank kept on going back to the road, a second and final hit, the shell penetrated inside its wide body and a muffled explosion came from the inside.

One bloodily wounded tanker opened the top hatch, his face a messy bloody pulp looked at our positions; he crawled out and fell on the right fender over the thread. Dead!. He was trying to escape the deathly steel trap below him.

"C" battery was the only one which destroyed an enemy tank in action, and our gunners charged that feat to their great aim and training, while my friend, Lieutenant Enrique Valdes, really confided me, they did it only because of the terrain and the tank crew who was running away from the quick sand, and not the six cannons, of which only four remained in action.
A very important point was proven to the Cuban High Command beyond the shadows of any doubt, our artilleryman were not yet able to cope with fast-moving tanks, and should the enemy ever had landed a tank brigade on any other beach, east or west of the Bay of Pigs, they could have wiped out all of our rearguard and most of the first line troops. It was late in the afternoon of the second heavy day of fighting when Captain Jose R. Fernandez, a US trained officer of the Batista's Army, received the order of taking command of all of Castro's artillery. With the addition of thirty batteries of 85 mm., cannons which had arrived during the day and six batteries of 120 mm., cannons, which were sent from the Cabanas Fortress, next to famous Morro Castle. Those powerful 120 mm., were used to defend the capital in the event of any landing on the north coast of the capital, but under the certainty that there were no more landings, not even on the capital, they moved all the artillery they had to the battle area, and placed the total combined power of two hundred thirty two cannons under a single command.

All the heavy guns received, were ordered to be emplaced in a semi-circle position around the area where the 2506 had its emplacements. The total territory occupied by the invaders was over fifteen miles inland, and on the second day of combat, it was reduced to five miles only. It was on the fringe of those five miles in question, where they emplaced all the cannons, which at that time of the day, were completely orphaned of any infantry protection. Once more, the brigade lost the occasion to destroy all of the heavy artillery and its most precious artilleryman of Castro's forces with one swift commando raid.
CHAPTER 12

FRONT LINE COMMUNICATIONS PLATOONS

APRIL 18, 1961. MORNING

During the first heavy day of fighting, the only source of communications between the front line troops and the rearguard were the much abused runners. They had to go back and forth everywhere they received orders to go, requests for ammunition, medical supplies, reinforcements and water! yes, although the fighting took place in a territory with a large bed of water underneath, and wherever you dig under a foot of soil, sprung water and plenty of it, it was heavily contaminated by salty sea water seeping through the porous under soil, denying any supply of fresh water to the fighting forces.

There were no fluid communications, not only at the level of radio, but at the level of having trucks with much needed supplies to the from line troops, and they had to send runners to get water, and once the runner made it to the rearguard, he could not find any transportation to go back to his unit, and they hitchhiked on empty ambulances going to the front or civilian trucks widely used by Castro’s forces to evacuate the hundreds of casualties, which military trucks could not take them all. Our runners found themselves back to their units bringing with them a three-gallon metal can of water, which squalid supply was ceremoniously distributed among the thirsty men a company at the time. In other cases the runners brought back one case of 250 rounds of ammunition, which was also equally distributed among the personnel low in ammunition, at the rate of two bullets per man, leaving the front line troops, thirsty and defenseless.

After the first and a half day of combat, most of the front line troops were down to the last clip of ammunition, due to the nonexistent fire control on the part of the improvised officers, who could shout one order only and that was FIRE! to a troop in each case more than eager to follow the command, with or without any enemy on sight.

Our own machine gunners shot our own men in many cases. Therefore, many runner found himself under friendly fire when he tried to return to his unit, and what was the worst, once the machine guns opened fire, all other riflemen opened fire too, yelling like maniacs, enemy attack! Enemy attack!

These late arrivals machine guns crews made it to the front after the first day of combat, and were attached to the emplaced battalions as the machine gun company.

After receiving multiple reports of the deplorable communication condition existing in our lines, the high brass in the far away city of Havana, realized for the first time the overall importance of communications, which should have been kept opened constantly between front units and the rearguard, preventing that was costly errors in men and equipment.

They tried hard to mend their ways, in the event of another landing behind our lines, the rearguard, could have never been saved by immediate reinforcement from the very same front lines troop or from emplaced units in the nearby sealant areas.

They had two newly formed communications platoons in the area, integrated by switchmen, linemen and
telephone installers of the former Cuban Telephone Company, its members were part of the 117th. Battalion, which was going to be famous at the end of the combat and the 144th. Battalion, which took a passive role, since its members were stationed ten miles north of the Australia Sugar Mill and after the second day of combat, its personnel has many bus drivers, they were used in the transport of ammunition, medical supplies and more troop reinforcements.

Complatoons, as we will call them from now on, were under orders of not to do any fighting and to restrict their activities to restore all broken cables from the main center of troops assembly in the surrounding terrain of the sugar mill. Most of its personnel were over 40 years old, who hardly had received any fighting training.

First of all, let hear the story of the Complatoons 144, as I got it from its lucky survivors, on board a large station wagon, used as an ambulance, where I had to travel several times between the field hospitals in the vicinity of the fighting area and the main city hospitals where the badly wounded men had better chances of making it.

In many cases I was the only paramedic on board, and I had to empty urine bottles over the side windows on the highway below, to change blood soaked wound dressings dripping blood, caused by the violent swaying on the innumerable highway shaped squared potholes opened by the army patrols and filled with dynamite. Every time we made it at one of these intersection points, our men started to bleed like crazy and I had to change and tight those dreadful dressings.

During one of those extra lengthy trips, due to numerous reasons, engine overheating, road blocks, and search patrols on the roads, I developed a double function, one as a paramedic and the other to keep the ambulance driver awake, the poor fellow had been without any sleep for more than forty-eight straight hours, driving constantly and with lots and lots of hot espresso coffee, to prevent falling asleep behind the wheel. I noticed his head falling on the steering wheel and had to shake him badly, talk to him and spray his face with water.

In the middle of the trip, we stopped in the city of Matanzas to get more coffee for the driver and me, the moment the people in town realized who we were, gave us the biggest pot of strong black coffee I have ever seen in my life, without charging us a penny for the service. I gave the driver an extra-large cup of coffee and he lit a long
Havana cigar, from that moment on, I did not have to leave my patients for a moment and could stay with them for the rest of the trip.

Surveying the four men next to me, I was thinking about which one of them would have the most interesting story to narrate, and I said:
-I bet my life on a nickel that you guys must have a really rough time down there!

A middle-aged man with long white hair a grayish beard smiled for the first time and in a way answered my remarks:
-If you fix my bandages and give me a drink of that cold water of yours, I would tell you how I was wounded.
So there I was making the trip more interesting and less boring. I comply with his request and accommodated him in the stretcher, and told the driver:
-You better keep your eyes on the road and well open your ears, and in whispers said -I do not want to wind up like them

I did not want to hurt their feeling with my remarks.

My patient commenced his story saying:
- I was a member of the 144th. , Militia Battalion and was assigned to the new communications platoon, you know, my buddies and me were working for the Cuban Telephone Company, the man voice had a tone of pride when he mentioned the name of his working place.
- As you will notice, am not one of those Tommy guns hauling young fellows, that the only thing they know is to press the trigger and fire like a kid firing a toy gun.
All my friends were in the same platoon and we were called into active service the day of the air raid over Havana. I was told to report to my platoon leader, who was my foreman at the phone company. We waited for hours before receiving our equipment, all sort of electrical stuff and communications things that I would not mention by name since you do not know anything about them. We left Havana for the city of Matanzas, and from that moment on, we were checking the lines constantly, we climbed telephone poles and verified that all transformers and conductors were working and had to test the lines soon, and from there we heard all kind of news, whole battalions wiped out, armor and artillery destroyed, urgent request for reinforcements in men and more weapons, in fact we did not like what we were hearing.

All the lines were in order but from the Australia Sugar Mill to the fighting zone, it was another story, poles were down, wires cut, a whole mess and we received another truck with spare poles for provisional installation, plus one 7.92 mm. machine gun installed on each truck with two army soldiers to operate them.

It was my time to check the dressings and temperature of the other patients, and I had become an expert in that art, just touching the forehead I could say for sure if the man had any fever or not. In the meantime I had to empty four more bottles filled with yellow stinky urine. After finishing that chore, returned to that patient and exhorted him to continue

-We started to work heavily two and a half miles after the Australia Mill, restoring broken poles, and we went for the next, and the next, until we were deep into the battle zone, maybe not more than five miles from where we started. I could not fail to notice that my men were jumpier by the minute and the army escort was watching apprehensively the terrain ahead and the ski above.
-The soldier told us that they did not want to take any chances.
Those were the 111th, and 123rd, battalions I interrupted

-Exactly, we installed our supports, and I climbed the pole to test the cables, and by the way we were lucky indeed, Complatoon 117 had to install a communications center right in front of the invaders positions to control forward units and rearguard. Everything was in order and I was on my way down when an incoming convoy was passing us by, and the guys inside the buses waived us cheerfully, like kids going on a picnic.
-Then, still on the top of the pole, I heard the sound of planes in the air, and I saw two of our planes, I think those they call B-26’s. They had Cuban Air Force markings all over. They came down on the convoy from the rear, flew high in the air and came back on them head on flying low, I was not worried about, after all those were our planes.
-On that run the planes machine gunned the convoy from end to end, and dropped bombs, from the distance the bombs seemed like tiny specks in the air, but when hit the ground exploded, hitting squarely the trucks and buses, some went up in smoke and exploded, other engulfed by masses of yellow red flames.

That man repeated the same story, more or less the same way as I heard it before, massacred in the highway.
-I was still on the top of the pole, while some of my men climbed on it to watch the whole thing, it was like a distant war movies, with plenty of explosions, and machine gun fire.
-My men wanted to go to the front of the convoy to help the wounded and that was exactly what I was going to do when the attack was over.
-We had everything packed on board the trucks, and we shit in our pants, when we saw one plane coming our way. Everyone still on the pole jumped to the ground and hit the dirt, well away from the trucks. The pilot of the plane must have noticed two lone trucks in the middle of a fighting zone must be doing something very important and he wanted to prevent us from doing our job.
-Our army escort started a fast fie with the two machine guns on the plane, at that moment, we did not know that the bottom part of those planes was heavily armored, therefor it was like using a peashooter.
-From my elevated position, because I want you to know, that I froze on the pole, saw the blackened machine gun tips and the faces of the pilot and copilot, but what impressed the must was the array of machine guns on the front and the wings.

Why did you not come down on the spot?
-I could not move, I was paralyzed with fear and my legs did not respond to my commands of running for safety.
-Flashes of lighted balls went from the plane to our positions and our trucks with the pinpricks of machine guns having a duel with the plane, I saw the bomb bay doors opened and had a bad feeling about.

Did the plane bombard you?
-That was exactly what happened, a bomb fell and hit us between the two trucks.

What happened then?
-The truck with the poles jumped in the air and fell upside down, crushing to death the soldier on top with the machine gun, the shrapnel hit heavily the other truck, it riddled it form one end to the other, like if a giant machine gun had fired a point blank volley of shots, needless to say, doctor, that the soldier on top of the truck was a bloody pulp. I felt a solid hit on my right side, over here, pointing to his ribs.
-Did any of your men get killed or wounded?
-Three got hit, not seriously, after all we were deep in the ground, all others were safe. I was held to the pole by my safety belt. I lost consciousness by the force of the explosion and my wound.
-When I came back to my senses, I found myself bleeding like a pig, and all I could think was to get my green beret and applied it as a compress to stop the bleeding, you know, I am not a doctor like you, but I have common sense and could use it for my wound.

How about your communication lines, were they damaged by the bomb?

-No, they were all right, also the equipment on board the damaged truck, we even sent calls for help to the rearguard, to let them know what was going on with the buses, and request help to evacuate the hundreds of wounded the must had.

I never heard of any evacuating parties reaching the two battalions.

-We took our three wounded plus me and went back to the rearguard, we could not do anything else for those men, and besides the point, we were also in bad shape, as a matter of fact, I did not know how the trucks could move, it was like Swiss cheese with large holes everywhere.

With the last lights of the sun rays over the red horizon, we made it to the city of Matanzas, with its large hospital, which had become our most used stop for transport of our casualties. We unloaded our casualties, this was already April the 25th., several days away from the fighting and we had to take it a little bit easy with us, we had to take our ambulance to the nearby army mechanics for urgent repairs, it was a leaky radiator, and I did not rest as much as I wanted, a young nurse called me to the admission office, and asked me to help with our casualties that were still coming in, not in a desperate need of treatment, but still casualties to deal with.

On my rounds by the wards to help our men to relieve themselves with bed pans, and the usual urine bottles, I met my friend of Complatoon 114, lying in bed, I said hello to him and asked if I could be of any help, and in whispers the man pulled the sleeve of my shirt saying:

-Doctor, you are still missing the best part of my story, the broken link in our communications, the odyssey of Complatoon 117.

Do you mean there is more to it?

-Lots more than you think!

I grabbed a chair next to his bed and let him do the talking, then he told me one of the most revealing chapters of this book.

-Our Complatoon 117, was operating on a very dangerous spot, right on the verge of our front lines with the enemy and they were working under constant pressure, not exactly from the enemy, but from our high command. They had the mission to install a communications center. Our commanders wanted to make sure we had phone contact with the very forward units, those occupying the former positions of the Brigade.

Are you talking about our men in the most forward positions, barely located two miles away from the beach, that if they ever threw any rocks, would have never failed to hit the enemy on the beach, are you talking about those men? I inquired.

-Yes, and there were many troops in the rear who never got any news about such events, they did not figure
our troops advancing so much. Listen doctor - he said in a conspiratory tone Do you remember the heavy cannonade we gave those guys the third day of the fighting?
Sure I remember, our cannons pounded their positions all night long and on the first lights of the day, then our troops advanced in force with tanks and everything and captured the enemy beach. Once again lowering his voice to a whisper, he said close to my ear, as to make sure that nobody around us could be overheard anything of what he was saying:

- Doctor, do you know that our most exposed troops to the enemy never knew about our bombardment!

I stood up and yelled - What the hell!

His face stiffened for a second and held my firmly by the wrist,

- Doctor, if you do not control yourself, I won't be able to tell you anything else.

Regaining my control, I sat on the bed, and he looked at me like a parishioner look at the priest in the confessionary booth, when is about to relieve a guilty conscience.

- Commander Jose “Gallego” Fernandez, in charge of the artillery, sent the orders to our front lines troops to retreat three kilometers behind our own lines before nine in the evening of April 18th., and the orders were repeated that day from the time were given at noon time, and repeated every hour on the hour, up top seven O’clock in the evening. At that time messengers were sent by heavily armed military jeeps, with a 7.92 mm. machine gun installed. Those orders were explicit and clear and required acknowledgment from all the battalion commanders in the front lines.

- Well doctor, what would you say if I tell you that our front line men, composed of the survivors of the 111th., and 123rd. battalions, already emplaced in the most forward abandoned enemy trenches, never knew of such bombardment.

But what about the communication center that our men in Complatoon 117 were going to install.

The mean said suddenly speaking very fast.

- There was none, it was destroyed by the enemy artillery that fateful afternoon.

I jumped in the bed, having in mind that something very important was going to be discovered. - Go ahead and hurry, pressed the man knowing after all, that I was not going to have the whole day long to talk to him.

- Our men got all the telephone equipment emplaced, with lines ready at the new established communications center, with one purpose only, to close the existing gap between our very front troops and the rearguard, and that telephone center was the only way to reach them.

- The main error committed by our men in the Complatoon 117, was to use captured enemy positions for their center, probably they were trying themselves some digging job, but the truth of the matter was that the enemy had those forward positions zeroed in, and they knew exactly the place and distance, most likely the moment the enemy noted unusual activity in those forward positions, they launched a small scale bombardment that put half of the Complatoon 117 out of caution, eight men killed right off, and four
wounded, out of a total of twenty-four. The most devastation for us was the telephone center, it was
demolished, nothing could be saved. The installation job, the equipment, even the spare parts in cardboard
boxes did not escape the destruction. It was like if a giant hand had crushed everything to bits.

-Luckily for our casualties, we already had paramedics in the forward area, and they were properly taken
care of. But, for the equipment it was a real catastrophe, we could not replace anything at the front in those
crucial moments. Our survivors in the Complatoons were not in a condition to go back to our rearguard lines
for more equipment, and the army sent small detachments of men walking all the way back to our rearguard
to get more telephones for the center.

-They found enemy patrols on their way to the rearguard, and started to fight . . . But the stupid dumb
heads! ....Why did they have to do that?

They had their orders, didn't they? I questioned.

-Doctor, they fought for the simple reason that everybody and his brother in the Cuban armed forces, was
more than eager to shoot their weapons, as simple as that.

I inquired . . . Did our front line army commanders sent another detachment of men?

-They certainly did, the second time around another platoon was sent, with an extra ammunition supply, just
in case. They had explicit orders to prevent any fighting, and to run away from the enemy if necessary and to
return with the telephone parts. They made it to the our rearguard all right, but it was already seven thirty in
the evening and it was too late for our men in the exposed enemy trenches.

Too late for what? I questioned again.

-It was too late to save them from the bombardment by our own cannons.
Are you nuts? ..... I grilled my friend. It was the enemy who counterattacked the second night of the fighting
with a heavy cannonade killed some fifty plus of our men and wounded about a hundred.

-With what? ... he said, With rocks? The second night of the fighting the Brigade was out of ammunition for
their artillery, and maybe their tanks had one or two rounds, and I still doubt even if that much, therefore, it
was out of the question for them to bombard our forward positions, they had no ammunition.
-Doctor, our men were bombarded by our own artillery, which did not have to know that they were there.

I was shocked to hear that, to know that fifty of our men had died, and heavens only knows how many of the
wounded died later on, because of lack of communications and due to the fire of our own guns.

It was far from suspecting that I was going to know in detail, how it really was, and only knew it on May 1,
1961, in Cienfuegos Hospital at the time that Castro was giving his famous victory speech.

After finishing our conversation, the wounded man made me pledge him, that my silence was imperative, for
his sake as well as mine.

After finishing my rounds in the ward, had lunch with the nurses, who by now were treating us as their
equals. When finished my ambulance driver, came back with our repaired ambulance and informed me that we had
to return to Cienfuegos again.

Well, on the road again, but at least now, we did not have to worry about plane attacks, like those poor people had
CHAPTER 13

BATTALION 117 AMBUSHED IN THE SWAMPS

APRIL 18, 1961. - HIGH NOON -

It was April 1964, three years away from the invasion, I had continued in and out of hospitals, as a full-fledged male nurse.

I was talking to head nurse Carolina in the main floor of the Our Lady of Mercy, a nice evening after we relaxed having finished the medications to the patients, and inside the head nurse office, she was a veteran like me, having treated lots and lots of our casualties during the invasion.

Remembering those moments through the years, it seemed to me it was yesterday, when we were still in the emergency ward, where we had to act like doctors, and take lifesaving decisions, since in many instances the two doctors in the ward had their hands more than full, and right there, sometimes in the very presence of close relatives who forced their way in our ward, we had to give lifesaving injections, or punch chest to recommence, if possible the heart beatings, sometimes stopped for long periods of time before making it to the hospital.

Nurse Carolina, got a large manila envelope, with some X rays inside, and questioned me if I had noticed something familiar about them.

I looked at the film thru the light and Presto! there it was, a white curved object like a fisherman hook. Smiling back at her I said:

-These are the X rays of the famous machine gunner of our 117th. , Battalion, his name was Pedro Felix Valdes, the same guy our doctors in Cienfuegos operated and we had to remove a suturing needle they forgo over there. Shame on them, if that ever happened in the U.S.A., that guy would had sued the hospital for all they were worth, and probably more.

We both remembered that young fellow, a tall skinny young man, with a sad face in constant sorrow. During the hectic days of April 1961, we arrived in our ambulance to Cienfuegos Hospital, very late at night, as usually, back from the Matanzas Hospital, after evacuating our group of the walking casualties.

I was dead tired, sleepy, in urgent need of a bath and a shave, and of a cup of espresso coffee at the very least. Our people in the receiving Emergency room, in spite of been extremely busy, took of our needs the best they could. They even asked my driver for whatever he wanted.

-I want to sleep, he said, as he went back to our ambulance and dropped on a stretcher, falling sleep in less that you can say Cheese! . I had to stop those good Samaritans who wanted to prepare something for him to eat. Frankly speaking I was horrified at the possibility he might fell asleep while been at the wheels of our vehicle, specially after our trip back in the approaches of Matanzas City, on the highway, we witnesses how a big army truck hit a pillar of the bridge over the river and the army driver and his courier, seated next to him, both flew over the windshield and cut their throats from ear to ear. Both flew over the windshield, because
the relieving driver seated next to the man at the wheel was sound asleep and so was the driver, they never knew what happened to them. That vehicle was left for over two weeks on the same place where it hit, as a grim remainder for all drivers in the Cuban Armed Forces going back and forth to prevent falling asleep behind the wheel and as far I can remember that was the only accident of that type suffered during the two months that lasted the heavy traffic of military vehicles by the highways going and coming to the Bay of Pigs.

-On your feet, you big sleeper.

It was four O’clock in the morning, we had been sleeping for less than four hours, and were called “big sleepers,” it was a full night, with moon and stars all over the sky. All of the sudden I recalled the truck imbedded on the bridge pillars and asked people to awake my driver only at the last moment, I wanted him to rest as much as possible.

The hospital orderlies brought me a cup of strong and aromatic Cuban coffee, and a piece of hot bread with creamy butter all over, a real treat to somebody that was getting used to eat everything cold an on the run.

They made me shave, saying that a paramedic, must always look at his best, and to inspire the casualties he was evacuating, as a bonus I received a clean shirt and a lot of padding on the back.

Dammit, what the hell was going on, I had come to this hospital lots of time before and hardly anybody ever bothered paying any attention to me and now all this crap, Why?

At fifteen to five, I woke up my driver, who cursed like hell, and was complaining bitterly that we were going to finish like those two army boys in the truck.

Looking at my ambulance, I thought to myself. -Well if that ever happens, I have much better chances to make it than the guy seated next to the army driver. I am all the way inside the ambulance and I can never seat next to the driver, not because I didn’t wanted . . .  but because I am always inside helping our casualties inside.

Five thirty in the morning, still night time, we are ready to roll, I saw the stretcher mounted on wheels, carried by one attendant and two beautiful nurses walking alongside, it always occurred to me, to see our nurses as something beautiful, all dressed in starched white uniforms, with the white donors on the heads, they looked to me like holy virgins or saints.

Our two nurses were all smiles and compliments for the casualty laying on the stretcher, and still smiling they approached my ambulance and said:

-Doctor, we want you to meet Pedro, he is one of the bravest boys we have here, and we want him to go in your ambulance, he is an special case, and since we had heard so many good things about you, we want him to go to Havana with you, He deserves the best attention you can give him.

They brought us more wounded men after this one, although the others did not have the VIP treatment.

I thanked the nurses for the compliments and among the three of us, got him inside the vehicle, and just for the sake of the records, I told him in front of the nurses:
-We have a long way home, tell me anything you need.
He hardly said a word, obviously he was in pain and discomfort, a few minutes later, with all the casualties on board, we received our orders to go.

-OK, Joe, let's go. I told my driver.

He released the parking brakes and let the vehicle roll down the hilly street on the rear entrance of the hospital, when a young fat militiaman, with a baby face and his right leg in a caster, approached us, half way running and limping, yelling to us.

-Hey, don't leave me here; I know you are going back to Havana. Don't leave me here please, Doctor . . . please!

We halted the ambulance for a few seconds to allow this pleading soldier come inboard. He promise not to be a bother during the trip and was willing to be helpful.

We started to roll again in our way to Havana, there was a total silence inside the ambulance, only every now and then, some cries of pain were coming out of the young soldier

- Are you in pain my son?
- Yes Doctor, it hurts like crazy.
- Were you hit in the stomach?
- No Doctor, I got hit in my bladder, it got perforated by a bullet.

I did not question him anymore. administered a sedative and made him relax for the rest of the long trip.

Our last entering passenger, the baby face militiamen, called me to the rear of the ambulance and pointing a finger at the semi sleepy boy said, very matter of a fact:

- That guy you see sleeping there saved our battalion from extinction! We both are from the 117th. we fell into an enemy ambush and him and his beloved machine gun did the job!
His beloved machine gun? I questioned.
Oh, yeah, he cleaned it, he cared for it, I think he even talked to it. I still think he did it to save his gun from the savage fire on the truck more than to save the battalion.

I looked back at the sleeping hero, and I could not reconcile that face and body with the idea that I still had about a war hero. We were still very much influenced in Cuba by those Hollywood movies of the forties and fifties, and I still imagined a machine gun firing hero, saving a battalion with the handsome features of an Errol Flynn, like I remembered him from the movies "Edge of the Darkness" or as in "Adventures in Burma," or perhaps I had in mind somebody like Gary Cooper in the last scenes of "For Whom the Bells Tolls," when he was mortally wounded and firing his machine gun, held the Germans at bay, while the other guerrilla fighters escaped to safety taking with them, his beloved "Maria," played by Ingrid Bergman in her best years of the movie industry.

The fellow lying on the stretcher was tall, skinny, dark colored with short kinky hair, incipient mustache and beard and the somber look on the face, contrasted vividly with the "bon vivant" style and smiles on the faces of all of those Hollywood hero’s, although we must have in mind that those heroes never had the type of a wound this fellow had.
The chubby guy commenced his story by saying:

-We advanced in our trucks by the road to San Blas, the Road to Hell, as the guys we met in our way, were calling that road, and we were taken by the sight of the burnt out buses and charred corpses still lying on the countryside y the vehicles.

I meditated about his words and remembered that in war the sight of a wounded or dead soldier of your own, hurts very deeply another soldier who is going to enter combat soon, logically he may be thinking that he might be in the same predicaments as the casualty in front of his eyes.

Seen casualties, for a soldier about to go into combat have to meanings; if the casualty is dead, the dead will serve as an inspiration to fight for the dead of the country and to top that, most of the time the sergeants keep telling the advancing soldiers, about remembering the dead comrades who died fighting for their motherland, cause and ideals.

On the other hand, if a soldier who is about to engage in combat, sees a wounded man, yelling a suffering, cursing all the saints in Heavens for his bad luck, I can assure you that even the most courageous of all men, will feel deeply discouraged and afraid, that the same thing could happened to him, in a matter of seconds.

My buddies, of the 177th., did not have the same happy go lucky faces they had when they left Havana, we has seen the effects of real war at closed range and nobody like it.

For the first time since I had been with my battalion, our sergeants did not have to shout at the troops, the gloomy expression of our tighten mouth and the faces of all of us, was more than sufficient to understand what we were thinking about.

-We were traveling very silently, he repeated once more.

-I know, was my replied, the whole battalion was tight lipped.
-No, I was referring to our trucks, he muttered.

Our driver changed gears very carefully, so slow and cautiously that we could hardly heard them. There were no sudden accelerations, and the exhausts were not making any noises. Without saying a word, we noticed that everybody was as tense as a violin cord.

I had no idea of the distance traveled so far, I only knew we had left the deadly trap of the road, and we were going over dry land, we had a local fellow acting as a guide and was leading a convoy of trucks.

All our efforts for silence were to no avail, perhaps the enemy look outs spotted us from faraway or maybe it was our rotten bad luck that lead us into the ambush, but the case was that all of the sudden bullets were coming form everywhere. I could distinguish the peculiar heavy sound of the enemy fifties and the light voice of the thirties.

There was no need to rush our men to abandon the trucks, we jumped over the wooden side boards and took cover on the ground, well away from the trucks. Not everybody was as lucky as me and him, he said pointing at the hero, Lots of our men remained on board of the trucks, those men were hit by the first burst of enemy fire and were now screaming and yelling for help.
All of our heavy equipment was abandoned in the trucks, including all the extra ammunition, everything was lost.

-Were you shot during that part of the action? I said pointing to his leg.
Yeah ... that must have been a carbine bullet that hit me on a ricochet; it penetrated the leg, broke the bone, but did not exit on the other side.

-You were lucky in a way - I pointed to him - that wound of yours is what the called in the USA, the million-dollar wound, it leave you out of the war and at the same time did not disable you for civilian life.

-You are damn right, it was not that bad, although I was cursing my rotten luck, do not forget that at that time I did not know if we had to retreat on foot, because any man intending to board any truck, would have been cut to pieces on the spot.

-What about your trucks? Did the enemy pay any special attention to them, once you abandoned them? - were the following inquire -

-Our poor trucks received a terrific punishment, every time the enemy bullets perforated the overheated radiators a cloud of steam blew high in the air, also pieces of wooden sides strewn on the ground, showers of windshield glasses covered the bodies of the dead drivers and escorts, who did not have time to leave the cabin before the enemy slugs cut them to pieces on the spot.

-We had six trucks on fire, and the smoke blew toward our positions, giving us some cover, although the ammunition boxes inside exploded in a fusillade of shots.

I questioned, did your riflemen had any fire control?

-Hey Doctor, what do you know about fire control?

- Listen my friend, I had talked to so many of our casualties by this time, that I already consider myself an expert in the art of military tactics.

His reply was swift. -No, doctor, we did not have any fire control. Our tummy gunners emptied magazine after magazine, after the first twenty minutes of action, they were reloading with the spare ammunition we had . . .

-spare ammunition in your old socks? I said half-jokingly.

Our rifleman had two hundred rounds each and the vast majority of them were down to less than twenty bullets in the first few minutes of combat, and the fight was only beginning.

Did any of your commanding officers ever tried to regroup you guys for any counter attack against the enemy machine gun nests? ...... or did they try to bring any order into the disorder your battalion was?

-No doctor . . . as a matter of fact . . . I did not know where the hell our sergeants were!

-Probably, I said, into any hole or behind a log, like anyone else.

Our weapons were silent, scarce shot here and there, were heard from our ranks, those who had saved their
bullets for the real rough times, were the only ones still in action. However the enemy kept on firing, short burst of fire at the time, in a cadence of two, three, paused and again, two, three, two, if my memory serves me true, he said looking up in the air, like revealing the action again.

-Doctor, there are times in life when men disregard personal safety and are willing to give up their lives for the fellow men, without any reward, and that happened right in front of our eyes, that fellow, he said pointing at Pedro Felix, climbed on board of the truck in which he arrived and calmly commenced to emplace his machine gun, like he did when he was in the training school, all of the among the enemy rains of bullets, he inserted the belt inside the fire chamber and pulled the bolt back, a mounted it in the tubular section of the truck next to the cabin, which had facilities for that sort of machine gun emplacement.

He commenced firing on the enemy positions, enemy fire slackened for a moment, then all of their machine gun fire concentrated on that fellow truck. -We could not understand how he could had remained unhurt through the tempest of tracers and slugs, inch by inch, they hit every board on that truck, it seemed to me that God himself was protecting his position saving him. He was in full control of the situation and was not afraid to die.

Yes, I uttered, that is the answer, when you are not afraid of dying, it is the time less likely for you to die! ...... I think that death has a tendency to respect the valiant and goes after the cowards.

Inspired by his heroism, other machine gunners climbed on board of the other trucks, retrieved their machine guns and emplaced them on the ground and began to protect the battalion positions, at the same time, some of us on common accord, decided to go back to the trucks and started retrieving whatever ammunition boxes existed to replenish our exhausted supply, ... doctor ... I can assure you that from that moment on, we counted every shot we fired. Meantime our first machine gunner in action, Pedro Felix, finished his first 250 rounds ammunition box, got himself another one, inserted the belt into the chamber, pulled the bolt twice and kept on firing.

-Did any of you guys tried to talk him down from that exposed position? I probed.
-Doc, we yelled, begged, asked, pleaded, even ordered him to come down, we called upon of him the most offensive and dirty terminology in our language, to no avail ... the berserker son of a bitch, kept on firing his machine gun, for all practical purposes he was deaf to our pleas.

His truck was impacted time, after time, after time again, finally caught on fire, due to the incendiary 50 and 30 caliber guns bullets, flames came up the cabin, the tires, the wooden sides, we expected the big explosion whenever the flames reached the main gasoline tanks. He finished his second case of ammunition and at this time decided to abandon the burning truck, and what he did, believe or not, he picked up the tripod he had not used, and dropped to the ground, then he leaned very carefully over the side and dropping also the weapon to the ground, besides the truck, and then at the last time skipping the flames, he jumped into the air, to fall near his weapon, must probable to take it back to the perimeter and keep fighting.

I saw him when hit, the bullet entered his right buttock and exited by his belly, you know one inch below his belly bottom, and if it would had only made it out two inches below that, we would have him without balls and probably without a dick.
CHAPTER 14

APRIL 18, 1961.  7:00 EVENING

KILLER TANK

THREE MILES SOUTH OF SAN BLAS

Of our first three tanks which ventured in territory commandeered by the 2506 Brigade, two were destroyed right off. The third one survived due to the protection offered by the wrecked hulks of the first two, other than that it would have also been destroyed in action.

3.5” anti-tank recoilless weapon, with armor penetration of 11” and a maximum range of 900 yards, effective range in moving target 200 yards

After the disastrous defeats of five battalions in a row, Castro himself who was in Havana took the decision to send five tanks brigades of twenty tanks each, one hundred tanks, going by railroad, on board of flat cars. Each brigade was dispatched on trains leaving with two hours intervals. That important decision was taken only after it was certain that no more landings were going to take effect in the island.

These tanks traveled with the crews inside and the tank commanders on the top turret, manning the 7.92 hatch machine guns, they were ready to repel at least, any air attack on the trains or if any saboteurs had ever tried to derail the trains. In the last event the tanks could get away from the derailed train in no time at all.

Our first tank brigade arrived at the Aguada de los Pasajeros railroad junction of Aguada de los Pasajeros, a mere 30 kilometers away from the fighting zone. From that point on the commanders deployed the brigade in individual units which were going cross countryside as back up force for the forty battalions of 1000 men each, already deployed as a sealant in a semi-circle perimeter around the Bay of Pigs, where there was heavy anti-aircraft artillery consisting of four barrel guns pieces, in force, intended to be used at zero elevation against any infantry breakthrough of the invaders.

Our tank crews felt a very heartily respect for the accuracy of the enemy anti tanks gunners, which had already
dispatched to hell the first armored forces we sent against them. Therefore they were extra nervous and restless.

The situation we are now referring to was a local one. Commander Raul Cisneros of the local infantry forces in Matanzas, took with him a detachment of six tanks as spearhead and an infantry battalion of regular army troops which the objective of advance up to the beach midway of Long Beach, at that moment the Headquarters of the invaders, once they had the beach secured the Brigade would have been split in two bulges and with armored forces and ample infantry in the area, they could had liquidated the invaders in a matter of hours, or so he thought.

During the last hours of the day his infantry battalion received the order to advance, and to stick to the tanks like glue.

One sergeant Tomas Ruiz in charge of the first platoon, second infantry company, was the forward elements nest to the advancing tanks, with the first objective to capture the airstrip located deep into the enemy positions, they had orders to take it and to secured it at any cost, once with positions secured another advance was going to take place, the second one in charge of Commander Arturo Pino, another veteran of from the mountains, this second attack, was going to be supported by two tank brigades and no one could have ever stopped once started.

Everybody was deadly afraid of a sudden counter attack, our infantrymen advanced real close to the rear of each tank, at each side of the threats, that way they would be protected from enemy machine gun fire. On the other hand, they were covering the possibility that our jumpy tankers would advance at full throttle at the first sign of enemy anti-tank attack, it was a very unstable combination, jumpy tanks and nervous infantry behind.

Our troops kept advancing carefully, while our tank crews had all hatches tightly closed. Tension was mounting with every step they took forward the enemy positions, our tanks accelerated at times and jumped forward, making our infantry run to keep the tank cover. The only consolation, night was coming soon, and all problems will be over, since the commanders of the infantry and tank forces did not want to jeopardize their forces in a night confrontation against an enemy that was well entrenched and by all logic must be ready and waiting for them.

Night shadows were already covering our advancing force, our men were more than relieved, it would be a matter of minutes, before they received the expected order to discontinue the attack and camp for the night.

Our six tanks stopped, we all did the same, the engines on idle made a deep sound, heard by all men in the advancing battalion, on top of that the forward elements heard noises coming ahead from the bushes, undoubtedly the enemy was all around us, they had us all in the open, with no cover or any place to go.

Advance continued a slower pace, our men were almost on top of the tank, the only reason that prevented us from riding on top of the advancing vehicles was the respect for the Brigade artillery, which caused high casualties to the Police Battalion, also caught in the open with three tanks as armor spearhead.

It was unbearable, the tension got hold of our men, and many of them took a leak right there on the battlefield, in front of the hidden enemy. It was like the five O’clock rush hour on the highway. Stop and go! .... Stop and go!

We were questioning ourselves . . . - Where the hell these commanders want us to go? ....... To hell perhaps?

A blinding flash in the dark terrain ahead flashed, so close to the leading tank and a deafening metallic clank, rang in the air, like a gigantic hammer hitting a bell. The leading tank was hit! .... The leading tank was hit! .

Luckily for crew inside, it failed to penetrate its front armored heavy plate, it ricocheted harmlessly, fact that nobody knew during those moments. Our infantry ahead, expecting a rain of machine gun fire raking the ground in front of them, jumped like one on each side of the tanks threats to be safely covered.

A sight of relief sprung on everybody’s chest, our tank was safe! ,..... Our tank was safe! .........., their joy was short lived, because . . . The deafening dim that the tank crew must had felt inside the small space inside the armored vehicle must have
scared the living hell out of the crew and for the flashy space of time of fifteen seconds at the must, the T34 tank remained totally motionless . . . then with a terrific surge backward it reversed its march right on its tracks, giving no warning and no time to move away from its destructive path to the close following infantry. Our soldiers froze when the tank backed up on them, six of our men on either side of the threads were crushed to death like so many bugs, twelve good soldiers, whose bodies remained splashed on the ground.

Four more 57 mm. cannons shot rang in the air, and our men took cover, our tanks did no advance any further, next time the enemy could have a bigger weapon to crush them like the advancing leading tank crushed to death the infantry behind.

The killer tank stopped its reverse march, to top hatch opened and the tank commander came out mumbling words of apologies to the shocked infantry nearby. From that moment on, our troops moved away from the tanks and the advance was cut short at seven fifteen in the evening without accomplishing anything.

Our tank abandoned the battlefield and went to the headquarters in the Australia Sugar Mill, where the tank commander informed the war accident just happened. He was verbally reprimanded and that was all, and for the men killed under the tank threads, our Red Cross men, had to take their corpses in plastic bags, the type used in hospitals to cover the mattresses. The poor soldiers were so much crushed that the Sam Browne (1) or uniforms could not be removed from the flesh; all was tightly compressed like forming part of the same body.

April 19th., the following day. First thing in the morning, an army mechanic effecting a routine check on the tanks in the rearguard and with no acknowledgement of the macabre episode of the previous day, had the shock of his life, when he found all of the sudden encrusted between the steel threats of the right side the upper part of a man face, from the upper lips to the eyebrows, with wide opened eyes, staring blankly. The mechanic went crazy . . . yelling . . . cursing and pointing at that half face. No one dare to touch it, let alone remove it, the only obvious thing to do was to call a Red Cross corpsman, who removed it, put in a tray and took it to a field hospital, posing a problem for our doctors, who could not identify the owner of the smashed half face and could not give it a proper military burial at the same time.

I never knew the final destination of that face, and the lieutenant who told me the story, said after he finished:

-I feel kind of relieved after sharing this experience with somebody like you, one who was there and will understand it! ..... I know that I will sleep better tonight!

He was the tank commander in charge of the killer tank, although he never revealed his name to me, he said that he will always have the remorse of killing twelve of our own men.

(1) Leather belt used to carry a side weapon, with a strap through the shoulder.
CHAPTER 15

A BRAVE AMERICAN PILOT

NORTHERN TERRITORY OUTSIDE BRIGADE AREA

APRIL 19, 1961

FROM NOON TIME ON

When I finished my active tour of duty with the Medical Corps, left many good friends behind, many of them were real nice people and not concerned at all with politics and although the messages given through remarks, jokes and double talk, let me know they did not like the communist line of the Cuban State. I would not dare to reveal the names of those friends of mine, whose dedication through the medicine for the welfare of the Cuban people, put them well above the lousy situation of the state-controlled country, and if I ever mentioned them here by first or last name, I would be jeopardizing their lives unnecessarily.

This chapter is dedicated to the Brigade Air Force, and to the men who fought the last mission over the skies of the Bay of Pigs, this got plenty to do with my friends in the Medical Corps, because I was there, where I got this real story of fighting on both sides.

Every B26 shot down over Cuban soil, was checked, whatever remains, pieces by pieces and although most of them were badly charred, the Cuban technicians reconstructed the way the air riders were fighting.

They found extra gas tanks fitted inside the bodies of the planes, tail guns removed to compensate for the extra weight in fuel to add extra range for the plane to operate over the skies of Cuba and to return to their bases in Nicaragua, Central America, close to 1500 miles the round trip.

In fact, my people gave ample credit to the small Brigade Air Force, whose brave and undeterred pilots flew planes with twice as much the normal load of gasoline, making their crafts easy targets for our fast-flying jets T33's and fast propeller driven Sea Furies, those B26's were in fact flying bombs, and once our planes got on their tails, they were as good as shot down.

In spite of the enormous losses, they kept flying hopeless missions, especially during the second day of fighting, when Castro was convinced that he was not going to face another landing poured everything he got, from infantry to tanks, all of the T34's 125 tanks, plus heavy mortars caliber 120 mm., plus the bulk of his anti-aircraft artillery, the powerful 37 mm., anti-aircraft four guns cannons that also could be used against advancing infantry with deadly effects.

Our doctors in the Medical Corps, were saying that if a second and third landings had ever taken place, anywhere in Cuba, those new arrivals could have made their way to Havana, walking down the highways after liquidating the guarding platoons. There was not a single piece of heavy equipment to stop them. As simple as that, everything heavy was sent to the Bay of Pigs, to contain first the invaders before they could advance deep inland and second to liquidate them later with one powerful punch of a combined advance of all forces, infantry and tanks combined.
Even with the military situation well under control, Castro's commanders kept sending more and more anti-aircraft batteries deep into the battlefield, they went in groups of six pieces cross country, although in sight of the entrenched infantry guarding the access to the battlefield.

Our story will be centered on the last B26 flying over the fighting area, when the whole thing was about over, and this battery of six pieces, was on a collision course with the B26. It was two miles south the over mentioned Australia Sugar Mill and north of the two miles perimeter of the long beach. Still, securely hold by the Brigade.

The aircraft flew very low at slow speed, surveying the terrain ahead, that was the way my people recounted this story. Our incoming battery spotted in the distance and rushed to get cover of trees and nearby vegetation, it was too late, the plane zoomed down on the six anti-aircraft pieces, firing all fifties on board of the trucks, right off three trucks caught fire, exploded with their crews inside, only remained the three guns attached to the trucks, the operators left the trucks faster than the faster way they did it, while on basic training and started to emplace the weapons, they were in the open with nothing to hide from the B-26’s, which were pressing the attack again, it was madness, with shaking hands the gunners faced an almost impossible task to make the guns operative in seconds and hit the attacker or the attacker will get them. It was as simple as that.

Before the B-26 fired its guns, the battery commander still alive, ordered the three trucks to flee to the woods, where they could escape destruction, and to keep close by, at hand the precious ammunition supply.

At least the three guns and its crews, were ready for action and waiting for the B-26. They covered each other with cross fire, preventing the plane from coming from behind

-Here comes the son of a bitch! ... We are going to break his balls this time!

It was twelve o'clock noon, a blazing hot sun shined on top of the three anti-aircraft guns, its rays of bright light hit the ground perpendicular, the perfect time for an attacking plane to hit a stationary target on the ground, with the sun behind the attacking aircraft. The enemy B-26 dove down making the aiming of our gunners a real nightmare.

As a matter of fact, they did not aim at all, they shot at the place where the noise came from, firing streams and streams of shells, emptying drum after drum of ammunition. No one would dare to raise his eyes to the sky above for a second, to look at the enemy plane; they only heard the aircraft and only saw the blinding and burning sun.

Our gun servants inserted drum after drum of ammunition, which the gunners emptied almost as fast as they inserted them, they were like factory workers doing their job all day long, with the big difference that a factory worker could make a mistake . . . and our gun crews knew damn well that their first mistake, could be their last one.

Our battery commander observed the attacking planes through his binoculars and observed many hits of the ground 50 mm machine guns, ricocheted off the armor bellies and sides of the planes. It was there that Castro's commanders realized the worthless of the anti-aircraft machine guns, just mere pea shots against a any well armored attacking plane, and if it comes too fast, its gunners would not even stand a chance.

On the second strafing run, the B-26 hit squarely another piece of anti-aircraft artillery, mowing its gunner and gun servants alike, the heavy caliber fifties on the plane inflicted total damage to the gun. No one was saved and the piece totally wrecked.
The count of the aircraft against our anti-aircraft artillery was four down and two to go

This is it, . . . the pilot got wiser, he was coming real close to the ground, making our men to fire with both four barreled pieces depressed all the way. The attacker allowed himself a better aim. A trail of geyser on the ground made by the hitting bullets made it to one of our guns in action, two of its servants, busy loading drum after drum of ammunition, while watching fascinated as the trail of bullets approached their position, could wait no more, and abandoned the four barrel gun and its gunner, who strapped firmly to the seat, could not run for cover, he got it a right there, three bullet hit him squarely, making his body explode in a shower of blood.

It was the end of the battery, only one gun remained in action. Any other enemy plane would have been more than satisfy with all of that, but not this B-26 pilot, who flew the plane high into the sky and dove down for the final kill. Fernando Suarez, the only anti-aircraft gunner left of the six pressed into action and, after witnessing the fiery ending of the first three guns and how the other exploded in fragments in front of their own eyes and how the fifth gun gunner got it and still strapped to his gun, ordered his gun servants:

-Load up the gun and leave this place, I will wait for the plane on his last run.

The ammunition servants did not want to leave Acosta alone to face the B-26, approaching at high speed.

-Go to hell, you stupid ass holes, do you all want to get killed!

Wore Acosta's logic words and the servants ran away to the nearby woods, where the plane could no shoot them dead. They still had a guilty conscience for leaving their gunner alone to face the plane.

They watched from the safety of the woods, how the plane headed straight for the emplacement, while the gunner waited quietly seated on his place, with the same at ease face they has seen so many times in practices, while trailing and shooting at the practice target towed by an aircraft.

The whole field was silent, not a whisper, only the deafening drone of the twin engine plane approaching and still holding its fire. The scene was like ancient Rome, our gladiator in the arena has drawn a sword of steel and fire, facing a roaring lion, a lion that roared bursts of machine gun fire and had already disposed of five other gladiators, or better said five more anti-aircraft pieces.

Our men held their breath, they feared for the comrade in danger. but just for mere survival instinct preferred to ply it safe, and stayed behind in the safety of the woods.

They watched the plane coming, it was not taking any evasive action, and held his fire and so did our gunner, who was motionless watching the incoming plane through the cris crossed sight, moving the four barreled gun, trailing and holding the fire.

The plane fired first, the slugs came from the solid dome at the nose and its eight fifties sent its steel missiles toward the lonely remaining weapon in action.

Fire you fool . . . yelled our men in unison . . . Fire, don't wait no more . . . Do you want to get killed . . .

Does he want to commit suicide? ..... The trail of bullets made it to our gunners position . . . He was hit! ....... Our gunner been hit! .......... Our gunner had been hit! ... that was the general cry, but in the fraction of a second before his
death, he fired his weapon at last, a steady burst of fire reached the sky, found the raider left engine, the projectiles hit the propeller blade that broke in pieces and inside the engine putting it out of action, a thick black cloud of smoke came out, followed immediately by tongues of flames.

The airplane jumped violently in the air, like a wounded lion, it jerked violently to the opposite side of the damaged engine, the pilot corrected the course immediately, but he could not gain any altitude. He left the area and headed straight up north, a deadly error, should he had taken a southern heading toward the beachhead, still in the hands of the Brigade, he and his crewman could have survived, but all the terrain north of the Bay of Pigs, was alive with ant aircraft weapons of all styles and calibers, ranging from the small 7.92 to the 37 mm cannons, a whole belt of weapons was firmly emplaced awaiting for any able B-26 approach their ground, let alone the damaged B-26 on its way, with only one engine in action.

In the meantime lets go back to our gun emplacement. Our crew came out from the hiding places, yelling all kind of insult to the enemy pilot and crew. They rushed to the gunner who was bleeding profusely from two wounds, one on his abdomen and the other in his chest, they could not control the tears flowing freely to their eyes, and nobody dared to touch the dead gunner ant to remove him from the seat.

At last they decided to remove him from the straps, one of our men run to the trucks where he got a Cuban flag, opened and extended over the dead gunner's body. He was the only dead in Castro's forces to be evacuated from the battlefield, covered by the Cuban flag.

What was the fate of the B-26?

They had to fly to low, it was too low for its own safety and passed over many fields alive with ant aircraft batteries, which were not too effective against a frontal attack on a B-26, but when the combined power of tens of the guns firing at the same time, such combination proven deadly for the B-26, which took hit after hit in every plate, on every wing, on every side.

It made by sheer miracle over the skies of the Australia Sugar Mill, and over there was the heaviest concentration of all, unending stream of tracers lit the sky, almost opaquing the bright sun.

How many hits did the plane withstood? .... nobody knows, finally the other engine could not take any more punishment, conked out and died, with all the power lost the plane descended brusquely over the ground below, it came down on a sugar cane field, that muffled the forced landing, the stricken plane crawled it, still going at an amazing speed, while it bounced and bumped, catching fire when the wings gasoline tanks were broken with the impact, spreading a trail of fire behind and came to rest on an opening of the cane field.

The force landing happened unfortunately for the crew in the midst of four militia battalions strafed and bombed earlier during the day, by other B-26's flying in the area, and the casualties in wounded and dead among the stricken battalions were immeasurably high and they were in a dark vindictive mood against any plane coming within reach of their weapons.

It was hard to believe that any human being could ever survived that landing, specially inside the sea of flames surrounding the plane, but in wars, the most unbelievable events are practically everyday occurrences, and out of the flaming wreck came out an staggering figure thought the pilots top hatch, he jumped to the left wing, stump and from there to the ground escaping the scorching se of flames, he lost no time in running away from the wreck and the soldiers around the landing site.
There was no place to go, hundreds of our troops were already in the area and the pilot could had never go anywhere, but his instinct to escape captivity was too strong to any logic in the world and kept on running.

The militiamen reacted promptly and ran behind the brave pilot, who was getting close to a sugar cane field ahead, where he thought of having good possibility to escape capture, at least for the time being, our men also knew it, therefore they were determined but to let him go and yelled a warning:"

Halt! ..... Halt! ..... or we'll shoot!

The brave American pilot turned around facing hundred men and destiny, and in perfect Spanish that resounded among all the noises in the field yelled:

Fuck you bastard! ..... I will never surrender! ..... You'll have to kill me first!

He fired three shots in rapid motion without taking any aim, with his snub-nosed revolver, he knew he was through, and could not escape and was taking his life into his own hands, when he took aim for the last time. One more shot rang from his gun, hundred shots from so many rifles echoed and he fell to the ground killed on the spot.

This was the last Brigade plane over Cuban skies, time twelve twenty five in the afternoon.

It was the end of a glorious chapter, and the beginning of a dark one, there was not a single prisoner from the brigade planes shot down over the Bay of Pigs, of the twelve confirmed four fell over land, and all crews got killed.

Many rumors circulated and the most spread of all was that those who survived crash landings were killed on the ground when captured. Maybe that was just a rumor, but the true story of the pilot who was a member of the Alabama Air National Guard, and whose body was returned by Cuba to the United States in 1980, was evident proof that there was more than rumors, since this brave pilot received no quarter or a real opportunity to surrender.
Bodies of the two American pilots, Willard T Ray (to the left) and Leo Francis Baker shot down near the Australian Sugar Mill, on Wednesday April 19, both wounded in action and later executed with a bullet in the head at their same sugar mill. Willard T Ray, also known as Pete Ray was kept frozen at the morgue in Cuba for almost 20 years as a prove of the US intervention in the affair.
CHAPTER 16

BATTALION 132

BEACH DEFENDERS  (ISLE OF PINES)

It was a cold morning of January 1961, and frantic preparations were going on, in the High command of the Cuban western army. They had a hot potato in their hands and that was the Isle of Pines, a small island in the southern coast of Cuba, not to far away from the provinces of Havana, Las Villas and Matanzas, not much of an island, but the probable landing point for any invasion force trying to occupy any portion of Cuba and to create a provisional government where they could facilitate the American government to bring reinforcements in men and weapons.

On top of that the prison which housed over 5,000 men, most of them political prisoners, including the famous group of army pilots who were sentenced to twenty years of hard labor and many others pertaining to Castro's own army, who had rebelled and had received harsh sentences of 10 to 20 years in prison.

Fearing that any landing in that part of the country, will have the double effect to liberate those prisoners and enlist them in the ranks of any incoming invasion and at the same token to utilize the island as a springboard for future landings in the main land, Castro's hysterical commanders sent ten militia battalions of 1,000 men a piece, heavily armed all of them, ranging from mortars of high caliber to heavy machine guns which were emplaced all over the beaches in the island, paying much attention to the deployment of medium caliber cannon of 37 mm., lavishly deployed as support weapons and in many instances as artillery command post. Needles to say that I can not cover all of those forces in such remote part of Cuba, although by curious coincidence I has access to the micro wave transmissions and personal contact with men pertaining to the 123rd Battalion, which had the micro wave in question.

First of all, any landings in the Isle of Pines, would have bring immediate death to all the men in the gigantic prison complex of bee hive style, all foundations of those buildings have been heavily mined and the men in charge of exploding the TNT, used for this purpose had only one order, thinking that they were not going to see any action at all.

For many days they sat in their trenches doing nothing, until the day of action, April 15, 1961, when they heard over the micro wave of the air raid over Havana main military airfield.

The atmosphere of the camp changed instantly, they were pit on a 24-hour state of readiness with the gunners handling the 7.92 mm., Czech-made machine guns aiming at the sky, expecting to see a whole armada of airplanes and parachutists landing on their positions.

The news of the landing of the Bay of Pigs did not bring them any relief in their tension, and with strain nerves they sat and waited for one more day, it was April 18, 1961, the second day of the landing and the rumors were going wild, everybody was seen landing barges on the sea, American ships over the horizon and the drone of air engines was heard by everybody frankly they were scare stiff.

It was maybe for coincidence or perhaps to help the morale of the prisoners at the island that one B-26 of the brigade changed course on his mission to the Bay of Pigs and decided to over fly the island, that way they thought the prisoners would know that liberation was close.
Initially the B-26 flew from the sea to the shore going inland, it did not fire, it did not drop any bombs over the island, their main concern was to avoid any reprisal on the men in prison, although the militiamen below realized that the plane was not attacking, they opened fire, it started a chain reaction of heavy firing against the plane, which was hit many times all over the fuselage by the 7.92 mm., machine guns, apparently with no damage to the plane or crew.

On the final round over the beach, all heavy machine guns started to fire against the plane, which this time was going back to the sea, turned around and this time came down on the beach, firing with all the guns on board.

Machine guns nest hit by the 50 caliber slugs, flown into the air, like hit by bombs, men in the beaches were cut almost in pieces by the murderous fire of the plane heavy guns, which kept raking the beach and the surroundings areas, it was an unending stream of bullets that raked the beach from one end to another, the north beaches of the island has the sand tainted red, the alarm was sounded, this time, not as just an air raid, but the preliminary air attack to cover a naval invasion. The order was passed from beach defender to the men in the deep zone of the island and for the chain of command to the men in charge of demolishing the buildings with the prisoners inside.

Everything was set, all demolitions squads were ready to explode the charges, all they needed was the final advice of the expected landing, which did not materialize, luckily in a way for the men in the prison who would have blown in pieces together with the buildings.

In the meantime, the beach was in shambles, with many of the machine gun nest destroyed with men and weapons, there was an immediate retreat from the beaches to the inside of the island, after all they have seen first hand the effect of a single bomber attacking entrenched infantry and the results were bloody demoralizing for the defenders.

With the plane gone to cover its vital mission over the Bay of Pigs, the 132nd., battalion took survey of the casualties, it was simple appealing, over 100 men dead and wounded and many wounded bleeding profusely without any hope of surviving.

It was mentioned briefly in the Cuban media that one lone airplane of the Brigade flew over the Isle of Pines, and fired several rounds of ammunition, wounding some of our men, but it was never revealed the high cost that the lone air raider caused to the troops on the beach of the Isle of Pines.

One more chapter won by the Brigade, one against too many, Castro's commanders now knew for sure, that their foe was coming to fight till the last bullet, which they did in fact.
Upon the entry of the United States into World War II, the U.S. Army decided to develop a high explosive round for the mortar so that it could be used in a fragmentation role against enemy personnel. In order to extend the range to 2,926 meters, more propellant charge was used and parts of the mortar were strengthened. Eventually, the range of the mortar was extended to 4,023 meters.

Subsequently, the mortar proved to be an especially useful weapon in areas of rough terrain such as mountains and jungle, into which artillery pieces could not be moved.

Rate of fire: 1 round per minute

Effective range: Minimum: 515 meters. Maximum: 4,023 meters
never crippled for good the defensive capacity first and the offensive later on.

It was 6 o'clock in the afternoon when from the chain of commands came down the order:

- Send all mortars batteries available, this order applied to the 82mm mortars.

With six mortars to the battery, fifty batteries, all they had ready for action, embarked hurriedly to travel by night from Havana to the city that was closer to the landings than any other, Jaguey Grande, with towing trucks and mortars, the convoy of 300 pieces made an impressive sight at the highways interceptions when they received right of way, in their case they even had priority over the Red Cross.

In the haste to send the mortars, it was not taken into consideration the limited supply of shells they could carry, only fifty shells could go in the trucks, since they also carried the mortar crews, including observers. The reasoning behind was, they will be able to clobber the enemy right away, and they could use captured shells, those 82mm mortars could use American made 81mm shells, although if the invader ever captured a supply of shells of ours, they could have never use for their guns.

Our mortar base was located in San Julian, a former air force base, a deep inland emplacement in the province of Pinar del Rio, near the city of Pinar del Rio, some 350 kilometers away from the battle zone, with limited access to main highways that linked Pinar del Rio, with the northern road of the island, only after arriving at the city of Matanzas in the very north coast of the province of the same name, they could take the Southern Circuit of highways and make it to Jaguey Grande.

Average age of the mortar men was 15 to 16 years old, and among them many dropouts, boys without families who had taken this military game as the only way to have a hot chow every day and a roof over their heads, most of the others, the well to do boys who were in their ranks, was mostly for the sense of adventure and to play war with the heroics of make it back to their villages, with the light grey blue shirt, with the white stripes around the sleeves and the unremittingly Tommy gun which they kept while on furlough, and was a status quo, among the young men in Cuba in 1961.

As young men never feel any fear that was the rule for the mortar men, they had and intensive training, and the forward observers were a special elite class of college boys, or advanced students in sciences, for the complicated shooting tables and the high class mathematics they had to use to compute the operations of the fast firing mortars.

When they left San Julian, and many hours of traveling, the heavy Russian trucks carrying the total number of 300 mortars with crews, spent three hours in a detour road near the Military Headquarters of Matanzas, known as the Cuartel Goicuria, and at midnight and still on board the trucks, they received an impressive speech by Mayor Guillermo Garcia, who stressed the importance of their mission, the urgent need of arrival on the battlefield to give support to the infantry and for them to hold their ground at any cost, and that the enemy could never take the mortars, at least as long as any crew was alive.

Upon arrival to the city of Jaguey Grande, another center to receive troops and equipment, the mortar men were deployed to the very doorsteps of the Brigade, small army detachments accompanied the mortar emplacements, once they sent the forward observers deep into the swamps, they climbed trees to observe the enemy, although there was no enemy to see, and they controlled the fire from whatever elevated position they could get, they did not order the mortars to fire on the enemy positions because there were no targets in sight, but it was a different story with the orders received from commander Juan Almeida in the early morning on 18th. , at noon time of April 18, 1961. , a
deadly silence permeated our mortar lines.

In the early afternoon, the usual gossips,

- They are sending a convoy of trucks with plenty of ammo for the mortars, then we will shoot like hell to the enemy.

A simple mention of good news was not sufficient to calm nervous men, who knew there was no sufficient infantry cover to stop any enemy counterattack, and for weapons to defend themselves only the 9mm Tommy guns.

They did not stand any chance in the event of a strong commando attack, and if any enemy armor, no matter how light, it ever got a chance to penetrate our exposed positions, the mortar barrels most likely would be crushed to the ground like toothpicks.

But, where was the famous convoy with the needed mortar shells? It was a long convoy of 20 heavy trucks with plenty of mortar shells and propellant charges, it was loaded the morning of the 18th, from the underground ammo dumps in Columbia Airport, the same dumps missed by the brief air attack on the 15th. Once the twenty trucks were ready to go, Commander Universo Sanchez, indeed went out of his way to protect the trucks.

Each truck carried four regular army personnel as escort with a machine gun mounted in the cabin for anti aircraft main purpose, although it was the high speed of travel of the convoy by a congested highway a real hazardous matter, with a dangerous cargo of high power explosives the drivers reached speeds of 45 miles per hour in the open highway, and when crossing any town on the road, they only slowed down to maybe 30 miles an hour, which in 1961 was a very fast speed for the narrow highways in Cuba.

Luckily for this convoy, they had found no airplanes on its way, only after passing Jaguey Grande at four in the afternoon, the drivers gassed up the engines resume 45 miles and hour, when the look outs on the top of the cabins, spotted three tiny dark specks in the sky, zooming down on the ammo convoy, a cry for airplanes went into the air, in fact they were airplanes, but whose planes?

Our drivers received immediate warning about the incoming aircraft and the twenty trucks left the road and scattered wildly over the fields ahead in a wild run.

No one expected the planes to reach them, but drivers and escorts abandoned the convoy and hit the dirt well away. Any possible attack would not fail to cause a chain of deadly explosions.

Three jet fighters planes zoomed on the convoy, flew very low and made a climbing turn into the sky and flew back to where they came from, the same way they had arrived suddenly and silently. They disappeared in the blue sky.

A comment spread like fire - American planes flying over Cuba, deep inland - maybe the three planes did not have ammo or rockets and spared the convoy the of the same fate of the bus convoy.

After deliberations of what to do, it was accorded to continue on the way to the front, where the much needed ammo was expected, but after this event, the drivers did not take any more chances and slowed down, just in case of any enemy air attack, they could abandon their trucks on time.

As an irony of the destiny, when the twenty trucks made it to the front, all of our mortars batteries that were
emplaced, had packed and retreated three kilometers behind our lines, due to orders received from commander Gallego Fernández, for an upcoming cannonade on the enemy lines.

In the meantime the sitting ducks of the mortar crews, waited and waited for the ammo all day long, and with the going rumors of strong landings on the beach and paratroopers coming down from the skies, they were very agitated, specially since they had no heavy weapons to defeat any large scale attack.

What a relief they felt, when the runners on board jeeps, brought the orders to the mortar batteries commanders. - Retreat three kilometers behind our lines.

They packed everything and took off for the rear guard.

It would be worth to mention that all of the three hundred mortar pieces were emplaced without any adequate infantry protection, and if should the Brigade ever had the man power to mount an attack on the mortar positions, Castro would have found himself with no mortars and with no crews.
Only 189 paratroopers landed with the Brigade, some of them, we heard sunk in the quick sand when they descended from the sky, but unbelievable as it seems the mere presence of their abandoned parachutes accomplished so much, that all of our front line troops and also in the rear guard were in the psychic state of imagining that thousands and thousands were coming from the sky every night.

To make a long story short, let us say it here the same way I heard it in an ambulance on the way to the city of Cienfuegos from the city of Jovellanos. When the army patrols sent deep into the fighting zone, first discovered the discarded parachutes and took them to our rear, the mere action of taking such items, folding them carefully, made our troops to suspect they did not want us to know about any paratroopers landing over our lines, consequently the rumors spread fast, our man only saw a few parachutes taken by jeeps, then the first rumor was something like this, in whispers:

- I saw paratroopers landing behind our lines - then it was added - I saw the skies behind our lines with lots of parachutes - and the third rumor that hit us when we were traveling through the highways next to the battlefield was something like this - Be careful, there are paratroopers all over!

Due to the scary situation, our sentries where ever they were, had always one eye on the ground below and the other on the sky above.
In many instances they had one bullet in the fire chamber, just in case the paratroopers arrived suddenly. Such action of a bullet in the breech was forbidden although there were so many men like that, not even the sergeants could do anything about it.

Because of that unexpected event, we had received orders in the medical corps, to go with the lights on inside our ambulances and to take it very easy with all of our sentries, specially with those sentries in dark and solitary places, that would guaranteed us a sentry with an extra itchy finger on the trigger.

Many trucks and jeeps received bursts of gunfire and men got killed due to extra nervous sentries who blamed their behavior on the paratroopers who were all over the battlefield.

I remember one of those times when in the outskirts of the city of Cienfuegos, on plain sight of the mountains close to the city, so to speak, our Red Cross convoy was stopped by a militia platoon stationed next to the highway and told us very matter of fact:

Be careful doctors, there are enemy paratroopers in those mountains, and you better take good care with them, you know those guys never bother taking prisoners . . . They had shoot us.

It was true, not about the paratroopers on the mountains, but about the shooting. Another militia battalion the 192nd,
was in a hilly terrain around the city of Cienfuegos, and late at night its also itchy sentries, fired volleys of shots on the forces at the foot of the hills, and that started it all.

All troops around Cienfuegos were fully convinced of the existence of enemy paratroopers in the vicinities and any nightly activities by our troops in the area caused a whole inferno of shooting in both sides.

In a few words, the thought of paratroopers, put our troops in a case of collective hysteria and gave us the false impression that they had arrived in force and were all over, and that all the roads to our rear were in the hands of those elusive figures coming down from the skies.

In one case, one commander, known among our troops as Red Beard (Barba Roja), was interrogating two captured members of the Brigade. He was under the impression that the paratroopers had arrived in great numbers, and told one of them:

-Your paratroopers must had been around fifteen hundred? .... Right? ..... the prisoner asserted, after all he had no other choice, and besides the point, he did not want to antagonize the red bearded man in front of him.

When they brought the second prisoner, the red bearded commander asked the same question to the new prisoner, but rephrased differently:

-Your paratroopers must had been in force, how many were them?

And the prisoner, not knowing the answer of his predecessor in the interrogation room, answered candidly:

-We were only 189 men, sir!

The reply caught Red Beard by surprise, his reaction was quick and slapped the prisoner in the face several times.

-You son of a bitch . . . so making fun of me, eh! I want you to know that we know for sure how many paratroopers you guys were, fifteen hundred of them!

The commanders of the Central Army, had to cope with the new menace for the security of the troops, whether real or imaginary, and to show our troops that the rear was safe and sound, a word of gossip was spread by the high command itself:

-We are sending infantry companies of special trained anti paratroopers to make contact with that type of forces of the enemy and to destroy them on sight.

It was true, a whole battalion of army troops, was dispatched to the battle zone, and its ten companies spread along the roads, on the fields around the Australia Sugar Mill, and on the surrounding perimeter around the encircled Brigade on the beach. These ten companies spent four days combing the area looking for the hundreds and hundreds of enemy paratroopers they expected to find in the area, as if when a man landed on enemy territory by parachute, he was going to be walking around dragging his parachute to show everyone he was a paratrooper.

Only one company made contact with the enemy, his able commander Evelio Rodriguez, was famous after all, everybody who saw the news reels in Cuba about the invasion, would not fail to remember the bearded young soldier with a revolver dangling from his belt, he was been evacuated from the battlefield with a leg wound, and on a stretcher,
carried by the Red Cross. He got shot by a 30.06 bullet that did not shattered his leg bones, but punctuated his femoral artery. He applied a tourniquet to his wound, luckily for him, not to tight, and he did not loose the limb. He walked back to our lines, two solid miles, losing blood. We had to administer two litters of plain blood, and even though he was ashen white for the loss of so much blood.

We were coming home from Cienfuegos, fifteen days after the invasion was over, and late at night we stopped at Jovellanos, just for the force of habit and to say hello to our friends in the hospital in there, and to take the opportunity to enjoy some midnight snack, real black strong Cuban coffee with a piece of good Cuban bread with butter.

Just when we were leaving, a young attractive nurse, whom I had never seem before, approached me and requested a big favor,

- We have and army sergeant, in his room, he wants to go back to Havana, and stay in a hospital over there, to make it easier for his wife to visit him, we already gave him his release papers, and we would like to take him in your ambulance, if you are going back to Havana.

Yes, we are going back to Havana. I had only two more wounded men on board we were transporting to the Calixto Garcia Hospital, and we have room for perhaps two more.

- He still is too weak to walk because of all the blood he lost in combat, would it be too much to ask from you to carry him, now?.

She went back to the office to get the remaining release papers and I went to the man's room to get him into the ambulance.

I was kind of dirty, unshaven, even my Red Cross arm band was all stained with blood, which after dried got a dark brownish color, making it look, like a piece of dirty rag tied around my arm, so in those conditions I entered the man's room, who was seated on his bed, in full military uniform.

- Put your arms around my neck and hold firmly.

I grabbed him under his knees and arms and I got the shock of my life when I got him up in my arms, he weighted so little, that I almost felt on my back, with the impulse I took to get him out of the bed.

I walked back to the hall, to leave by the main entrance and pick up his release papers that we had to deliver together with the patient to the receiving hospital in Havana.

- Hold it right there soldier, where do you think you are going with that patient?

I did not know what to say to that nurse in front of me, with an unfriendly grimace on her face, probably, I must seemed to her, like another soldiers removing his buddy from the hospital, without any authorization of course.

I was about to explain to her, the whole thing when Dr. Felipe Gonzalez, who knew about my performance in the hectic first days of the invasion, came down the hall saying:

- Nurse, this man is one of the best paramedics we have here, and let me tell you this, I would trust him, even with my own life.
That did it, the nurse waved me to go ahead with my patient, and the doctor smiled back at us. After that big compliment I thanked the doctor warmly and the patient in my hand weighted less for me.

I took the fellow to my ambulance, with the other two sleeping casualties, and made him rest on the only empty stretcher that I had in mind to use for sleeping on our way back. But I thought for myself, there is no luck for an honest man in this world.

Sergeant Rodriguez, was impressed for the deferential treatment I had received from that doctor, and he lost no time in thanking me for helping him at the hospital and for the fast way I was driving him to Havana to be reunited with his wife.

We left town by the central main highway, and the fellow did not feel like sleeping, so with nothing else for us to do, even my driver was not as dog tired as he was in previous days. I admired the view from the window, although it was the passing of small towns.

- You know doctor, I was with an infantry company locating paratroopers behind our lines . . .

My driver looked back and smiled at me . . . and said "so you are going to hear something else."


- We found the enemy all right, although nobody could know if they were paratroopers or not, you know, after they landed and leave the parachute behind, only God could know what branch of the enemy forces they belong.
- While on the march, I had the idea to flank the enemy positions, maybe we would not find any paratroopers after all but that way we could relieve some of the pressure on our front lines.

- My men, some of them of course, questioned me how we were going to identify the paratroopers when we found one.

- Just watch their backs, they always carry with them a big white opened parachute to show everyone who they are. I did not intend it a joke, as we were not in a mood for such a thing, but anyhow my remarks made our men to laugh and it improved the morale of our group.

- I surveyed the terrain ahead and I did not like it a bit, the typical swamplike vegetation every where, with dangling branches and trees covered by parasite plants. During my time with Fidel in the mountains, we always had prepared ambushes to Batista’s soldiers in terrain similar to, this one, and I was feeling that this time the shoe was going to be on the other foot, and I was worried.

- Perhaps due to my experience or maybe to something outside of this world, but the case was that I felt the same sensation I had felt years ago before I entered a combat where for the first time we were ambushed by Batista’s troops, and where I managed to escape to safety with most of my men, my hands were heavily drenched in sweat and a vibrating feeling was all over my body, like I was going to fall in a trance.

- Dammit! ..... I knew we were ambushed by the enemy, it would be a matter of only a few minutes, before they were to fire on us. Looking back at my men behind, I yelled . . . Hit the dirt! ....... Hit the dirt! ..... the enemy is all around us. My men looked at each other with an expression of incredulity on their faces. They
could not understand me how I knew the enemy was all around us. In that moment a volley of shots rang in
the air, those who were in the front ranks and had not obeyed my orders to hit the dirt as I told them, where
shot dead.

The enemy fire intensified by the minute, tree branches flew in the air, cut off by machine gun fire, and small geysers
of earth cause by enemy slugs rose in front of the infantry pinned down.

We returned the enemy fire all right, but with a big difference, this time they had able commanders, I told them when
and where to fire, perhaps that save us from extinction, that cooled off the enemy who restrained its fire, although
they kept firing on us, but not as heavy as before.

The sound of 45 caliber machine guns, sounded at our right flank and over there we saw what we taught were
American marines firing at us with Tommy guns, I ordered my men to retreat fast before they closed on us and we
crawled back on our elbows, leaving behind the skin of our elbows and knees.

- Well sergeant, it is far better to leave the skin behind than to leave all of you splashed on the ground.

We lost five men to the first attack, and ten more wounded on the second, and I praise myself for taking so much care
of the men under my command.

When we were away from the enemy fire, I stood up and ordered my men to retreat back to our lines at double time,
suddenly, I felt like a pinch of an injection, I was hit on my leg, I looked at my leg and I saw nothing unusual, so I also
started the fast double time, although we could not go that fast, we had our ten wounded soldiers to carry with us.

After about twenty minutes on the run, I felt dizzy, just like you feel whenever you are drunk, and another called me
yelling,

- Hey . . . sergeant you have blood all over your leg!

I looked at it, and then I realized my dizziness, my comrades applied a tourniquet, and I walked back to our lines,
three kilometers back.

No wonder the man has lost so much blood, he was walking, there for increasing that way the circulation in his blood
vessels, I wondered how he did not died of shock for the loss of blood.

When we made it back to our lines, my men where saying that there were paratroopers all over the swamps and we
were reciprocated with the gossips that the enemy had landed more men and had surrounded our troops facing them
in the Bay of Pigs.

One fact remained after all, the reputation of the invaders as good fighters has spread between our troops and nobody
dared to move a finger in front of the entrenched enemy, for fear of losing it!

We delivered sergeant Evelio Rodriguez to the hospital, in what was to be the first of the many trips with our
wounded in the Bay of Pigs.
CHAPTER 19

ALL OUT BOMBARDMENT

FROM APRIL 18, 1961, 1800 HRS

TO APRIL 19, 1961, 0600 HRS

April 18, 1961 was a great day for Castro's forces, with 12 B26 of the Brigade Air Forces shot down, with the invaders in full retreat toward the beach, morale was great. Although nobody knew in those hours such a retreat was due mostly for lack of ammunition on the invading forces.

Commander Universo Sanchez sent the remaining great located in Columbia Airfield on board of railroad flat cars. Commander Jose Fernandez, commissioned overnight in charge of all the artillery, ordered all the batteries in the Province of Pinar del Rio, west of Havana, to be mobilized to the fighting area, all in all these new arrivals totaled 40 batteries of 6 cannons 85 mm battery. On top of that the Cabaña Fortress commandeered personally by Ernesto "Che" Guevara, ordered 6 batteries of 120 mm cannons, to go also to the Bay of Pigs Area.

All of those cannons plus the 18 cannons of 85 mm already in the fighting area, minus 2 heavily damaged in action, totaled 258 cannons of 85 mm plus 36 super heavy cannons of 120 mm. Not a small amount of artillery for such small place to bombard.

At last under the able command of Commander Fernandez, there was a definitive strategy now, the cannons were going to throw heavy a heavy pounding on the Brigade positions for as long as their ammunition lasted, which they had a lot, with the tanks already emplaced behind the artillery, practically the 125 cannons and new arrived ten more infantry battalions, which will advance only after all opposition on the enemy was crushed due to the bombardment.

At 1200 hours over the field telephones sounded the orders for all infantry units in the vicinity of the fighting zone, and within the zone.

- Retreat three kilometers behind our lines. Do not remain in the actual positions for no reason at all.

That command was repeated over the telephone lines, every thirty minutes, without giving any clarifications about the ideas of the men in charge. They did not know if the enemy was intercepting the lines, and were playing safe.

Covering the possibility that there were units in the area without field telephones, they also send messengers by jeep, a driver, a gunner with a 7.62 mm., machine gun and a messenger, with plenty of ammunition on board, obviously at the last moment, nobody was taking any chances.

Sergeant Laudelino Gonzalez, was a very special messenger, he was another tough veteran of the mountains time, and received a job to take the orders to all forward units, specially to the most exposed of them all, to the survivors of the 111 and 123 battalions, well dug into the enemy forward trenches, abandoned on the second day of fighting. When he
left the command post, his jeep was going straight by the road to the beach, driving fast, they wanted to advise these two battalions to leave back to the rear, where they would witness all that was coming to the Brigade.

In separated incidents, another sergeant described how this happened, months after the invasion, he said the jeep with Sgt. Gonzalez passed by his machine gun emplacement, he knew the three men on board the jeep and they stopped briefly to tell him all about they heard the Command Post, the impeding cannonade that was going to be the end of the invaders, with the usual jokes about all the lost they were going to take from the invaders.
We waved good by to the jeep and saw it lost in the distance, by the same highway known at the Road of San Blas, the killing ground for hundreds of Castro's forces.

The unmistakable sound of caliber 30 machine gun, plus another fifty caliber-reverberated fay away, where the jeep had just left. Him and his men ran the half mile, that the jeep had already covered and found it laying in the gutter on fire, overturned with the driver below, and the gunner and the messenger on the highway bleeding from many wounds. The gunner was also dead, but the messenger was still alive, crying, cursing and yelling in pain. They could do nothing for that guy, a caliber fifty bullet hit him between his legs and has destroyed all of his masculine organs, they only saw a messy bloody pulp with blood oozing in torrents, they took the agonizing wounded and tried to stop the severe inguinal hemorrhage, but it was no good, luckily the man did not have long to die.
-He was yelling so much, said the other sergeant, he recuperated his senses, and held me by the shirt sleeve.
-He died in my arms, I cuddle him like if he was my own son, you know . . . I had fought with that guy together, when we were in the mountains, and he was a dear and good friend.

When that messenger died, also died all the hopes for battalions 111 and 123, whom did not have any field telephones with them, since it was destroyed during that fateful day.

All of the forward elements retreated orderly those afternoon hours of the 18 of April, our mortar batteries riding on trucks made it to the rear, among the first units, their services were no longer needed, only the big boys in the artillery were going to have their day.

There was a newsreel in Cuba, called "Death to the Invader," which filmed the retreat of the troops in the front lines, although in reverse, it looked as if they were advancing toward the enemy, when in fact they retreated the famous 3 miles behind our lines.

The police brigade which was stationed at the doorstep of the positions occupied by the Brigade did not retreat in fact all. The space ordered, they retreated barely one mile at the most, and were among the first units at the beach the following day. Luckily for them, Commander Efigenio Almeijeiras, reluctantly gave the order to effect and strategic retreat, since his troops were in the verge of mutiny and did not want to abandon the terrain they gained with a high price in blood.

Darkness was approaching the abandoned battle field, some last minute checking by messengers on jeep through the drivable roads, through the swamps, making sure not a single infantry unit was still on the bombardment area, all of these last minutes messengers returned safely and reported that was clear.

At 2100 hours, Commander Fernandez stood among the lines of cannons along the battlefront and ordered -Fire!
each battery commander passed it along to his gunners who pulled the lanyards of the cannons firing mechanism and 258 shells went up in the air, lighting the dark night with the thunderous explosions at the muzzle of the guns. It was like a giant flash bulb was illuminating the battleground for a picture.

It was a constant fire and reload, that lasted thru the night. Cannon gunners urinated next to the guns, looking with envy at the infantry troops behind, some of them were snoring.

In the meantime, lets see what was happening to our men who never retreated from the exposed forward positions. It was the same time nine o'clock in the evening in the abandoned trenches, already occupied by the 111 and 123 battalions, some lucky souls has used the concrete slabs of the roofs of all the destroyed cabanas in the tourists area and had the great idea of placing the concrete slabs over the trenches, making them in fact secure bunkers, that protected them when the first shells fell on the trenches.

The personnel of the two battalions heard the thunderous sound in the rear when the 258 cannons fired the first shots, they looked at each other apprehensively and ducked inside the trenches, looking for cover. The immediate thought was - enemy landing behind our positions and a rear attack was taking place two crush them between two fires.

The machine guns crews arrived during the day, were by far in the must secured place, they had dug deeply and covered everything with concrete slabs and had prepare for an incoming enemy attack. Our sentries yelled the alarm everybody knew, and also jumped into the trenches.

Huge big geysers of earth, flames, shrapnel and concrete erupted, when the shells struck dead center into the battalions positions. There was no protection against the 120 mm whenever hit, concrete slabs could not stop it and machine guns crews got it and disappeared in burnt pieces with the guns, ammo boxes and concrete pieces. Our 85 mm although less heavy, took a toll on the unprotected trenches were the bulk of the personnel was. Its high explosive shells, intended for infantry bombardment, did no have score a direct hit, just near misses were more than sufficient to crush the infantry in the exposed positions.

- Maybe is the American navy giving us this hell . . .
- You stupid . . . idiot, don't you realize is coming from our rear!
- Maybe the have captured our artillery positions in the rear, was the reply.

It seemed a whole eternity this artillery barrage, it had no trace to slack in its intensity, it crawled over our positions lasted for one solid hour, finally at ten o'clock it started to move gradually toward the beach ahead, although every now and then astray grenades still fell midst our already shell shocked troops, nobody was showing their heads over the trenches, were we had roughly 1500 men, including the arrived machine guns companies as reinforcements.

They could thank in a way the Brigade for their high rate of survival, because when they first arrived they found the well-built bunkers, with the concrete slabs on top and they copied the idea and used it widely. That was the reason the losses of human lives were not as high as anyone could have ever expected.

Both battalions personnel remained inside the trenches for the rest of the night with the interrupted bombardment over their heads. Our sergeants went from trench to trench together with the paramedics and obtained grim results out of the checking.

In some cases, they closed the eyes and tried to get any identification from the corpse, in others they found corpses torn to shreds and in other just empty trenches with traces of men, in the cases of direct hits.
Luckily for the survivors, our artillery commanders did not repeat the bombardment of the former Brigade positions, thinking logically that after the first bombardment the enemy had to be in a full retreat to the beach.

Also our troops were partially responsible for the initial onslaught, due to the high concentration of men inside the trenches, ten to twelve men together and whenever a high explosive shell hit it inside the trench, all men got killed.

One wounded, which in fact they had many of them, was cut by flying shrapnel and bled like crazy. Some were inside the trenches in stunned state of shock, ranging from mild to extreme, other remained alive in agony and bleeding through the night to die with the first light of dawn. When I heard of so many men dying with the beginning of the day, I could not help thinking that I had found that situation in hospitals throughout the years. Dying patients who clung to life all night long, and died during the early hours of the morning, as our nurses used to say.

- Our night shift keep them alive, so the die in the morning shift, to save themselves all the aggravations of the paper work.

With the first rays of the sun in the horizon, all of the sergeants left the trenches and checked the troop situation. Some ten machine gun nest in ruins, its boxes of ammo strewn over the ground with dead crews inside, in the most crazy positions, like protecting themselves from the incoming "enemy" shells and the unharmed men killed one again by concussion alone.

Our battalions trenches with corpses had plenty of urine, vomit and human excrement, yes sir, plenty of shit. When the anal exphincter of the corpses opened due to the slackening of the muscle around the anus, the intestines emptied and the bladder let go all the urine inside.

Men walked around, getting more slabs for open trenches, they had no way to know if the bombardment was going to happen again and for all practical purposes the enemy attack could be there again.

At six thirty in the morning, our besieged troops heard another rumble coming from the rearguard and they looked at each other in fear.

-Oh God, not again

Some bright minds swore that the new rumble must mean only one thing, Tanks! , and at that point they were not sure if the ranks could be ours or of the enemy. It was an unnerving wait, one hour and a half, perhaps a little more, and the rumble grew louder in intensity like an approaching tornado.

There they were, a big group of tanks followed by our infantry . . . What a relief they felt. One of our in that action with tears on his eyes could no mustered a word, to tell me how they felt when our tanks arrived with our infantry behind.

When the approaching forces made it to our positions, they were shocked at the sight of the destruction and our casualties and questioned us........

-What happened, when did the enemy attack you?

All the high brass accompanying the advancing troops probably realized what had really happened and blamed the carnage on a last desperate attempt by the enemy, attempting to dislodge our men out of the captured positions.

That explanation convinced most of the men, although others were putting two and two together and had their own conclusions, thou at the end nobody dared to press for further explanations, after all our dead, were dead already and
they were not to stand up and ask for explanations. As for the wounded, they were to worry about their predicaments and all they wanted was a prompt evacuation to our rearguard to receive medical treatment.

It was the end of the story I heard on board an ambulance fifteen days after the fighting was over, this was the second part, although not as revealing as the first one.
THE MILITARY TRIAL
CHAPTER 20

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

0600 HOURS APRIL 19, 1961

With the first crack of dawn, sixteen thousand men, supported by one hundred heavy T-34 Russian made tanks, started the advance of the last two miles to the Brigade last position on the beach.

Finally Castro's armor found solid ground and his armed forces advance was for the first time at the same pace as of the infantry. The orders were to rush to the beach to prevent ate enemy from reembarkation.

All tanks advanced with open hatches, checking every inch of terrain ahead. Most likely the retreating enemy has left behind anti tanks mines, on every possible road to the beach and the advancing forces were no taking last minute chances.

A wave of disappointment swept the advancing troops.
- Where are the dead enemy?
- Where are the wounded, the destroyed equipment?
- Where were the enemy troops eager to surrender after the savage bombardment of the night before?

They found no prisoners, but something better perhaps, within an opening in the bushes, an abandoned enemy encampment, with tents, boxes, equipment, weapons, even with its machine guns nets still emplaced.

- A pointer man of ours, saw all of those goodies, gave a yell of warning that our troops mistook for a yell of joy, of plundering and looting.

There they saw Tommy guns, portable radios, boxes of food, pistols Colt 45's in brand new holsters laying abandoned all over the ground I a complete state of disarray, like only an army in full and sudden retreat could leave.

Our men struggled with each other to take the loot, abandoned water canteens, brand new boots, containers with canned fruit, packed perhaps by Libby's or Del Monte.

The word spread around and it went like this
- The enemy has retreated and it living a lot of good stuff behind.

An army corporal with and irrefutable logic said:
- Those men must have been in an awful hurry to destroy this equipment or to set booby traps, so I don't think it is any of a problem to pick up everything they left behind.

So with the idea of boots, guns, food, radios, watches and heavens know what else, the advancing troops were going faster than ever before.

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It was a mad race, not exactly toward the beach of the enemy, but everybody wanted to be the first for the next cache of abandoned goods.

Far ahead a mere mile from the beach, when they could feel the refreshing breeze coming from the sea, the advancing troops discovered camouflaged uniforms, more portable radios, pistols and boots, the whole works in one word, our guys advanced confidently, nothing had happened before and they did not think that anything was going to happen then.

It was a noisy crowd of looters, everyone was on his own, a lucky one, arrived later at the abandoned enemy positions, discovered a shiny brand new Colt Commando pistol, buried in the middle of the small camp, he seized it and holding it high in the air, he yelled at his comrades.

- Hey, look what I have here!
The happy fellow held the Cold Commando up in the air, he dug it out from the ground where it was half buried, also together with it came a thin wire attached to the gun trigger guard and a live grenade with its fuse sprung in the air, obviously it was under the gun with a safety pin off, the weight of the gun was keeping the fuse from going off, the moment it was removed from the ground it made the grenade activated and in a flash space of seven seconds it exploded on midair showering the nearby men with fragments of shrapnel. The explosion killed the finder's keeper. That event marked something important, which was the first booby trap discovered by the advancing troops and the first casualty for that reason.

Hardly a mile ahead they found another enemy camp abandoned, this time it was the biggest cache ever found, it has tents, rifles, uniforms and boots, and plenty of boxes with a sign indicating the contents inside, most of them contained food.

An uncle of my wife, who was in that action from the beginning to the end, thought to himself at the site of the goodies in the camp, that it was too good to be true. Everybody was busy as bees helping themselves with everything in sight. Far away from the bulk of all this stuff, was a big box marked "radios."

A group of the man ran toward the big box, but another man with perhaps better intuition or experienced in life, warned the leader that the box should be left alone.

- Hold it right there . . . Don't touch that . . . he never finished the word box . . . a terrific explosion shook the encampment, a grand slam smothered the area, that was a big trap to trigger explosions in the tents containing perhaps more explosives, it was a ring of explosions, that caught our men dead center, the gory scene was beyond description, so many corpses burnt, so many men lying in agony with bodies riddle with shrapnel, even one human head was found a block away from the explosion.

The advance stopped, they were afraid the next logical step of the retreating force would have been planting mines, and our men stood still, looking at each other with fear, they did not dare to move in assistance to the wounded, perhaps the small lump in the ground could be a mine, or the small bush could be filled with dynamite.

Other companies also had their day when the advancing men tripped over live grenades left among the bushes, or when they tried to remove weapons or personal effects left by the invaders, and the rumors went wild.

- Caution with the food left behind by those guys, it is poisoned!
- There are mines everywhere!
- They have secret weapons that can blow you sky high a mile away!
An order was given to all of the advancing troops, first to the officers who passed it along to the men.

- Do not touch anything left behind by the enemy, no matter what!
- All commanding officers have orders to shoot to kill anybody who do not follow this order.

They surely meant business, all commanders got the Tommy guns in the sling, behind their backs and got he pistols from the holders and inserted a bullet into the breech, with that precaution, they reorder our men to advance, those pistols were the hammer all the way back, awaiting for the slighted contravention of the order to shoot the culprit to death.

Our casualties for the last incident mounted to thirty some men, among the dead and wounded, that would not be the end for the advancing, but it would bring bad results for the brigade by the time it surrendered on the beach.

The advance continued, toward the beach, they could even smell the sea by the breeze blowing in their direction, and suddenly a dreadful sight appeared before the horrified eyes of our men. It was the view of our troops in the forward positions, the whole place seemed like a section of the moon covered with craters everywhere, with the big difference that in every crater there were dead men or portions of them at least.

Our men received on the spot explanation about that tragedy, and what an explanation! ..... the whole disaster was due to a last minute treacherous attack by the retreating enemy. It angered the advancing force, and they put the blame of the carnage on the retreating brigade.

They had to leave back their comrades in distress, regardless of personal feelings and this corp. of men and tanks was in a revengeful mood to such an extent that our armored corp. took a sudden an unexpected move for the infantry behind, all tanks accelerated engines in unison leaving the troops behind and advancing toward the beach with the obvious intentions of not allowing the enemy to reembark and maybe to crush them to pieces under the steel threads. all tanks were out of sight in a matter minutes, and the infantry resumed the advance at double time, trying to reach the enemy at the beach, before our tanks finished them off.

I did not know what happened on those last moments of the three days of fighting, and maybe fate wanted me to know everything to tell the world as it happened.

Many years later . . . It was by sheer coincidence when I was traveling on a business trip through the Caribbean and during my first stop in Puerto Rico, in January 1978, I was invited to a social and business gathering, where my business associates told me, we were going to have the best paella in town, at one of the most exclusive and well-known restaurant in town, the Costa Brava.

I was introduced to a number of fellow Cubans and after the usual preliminaries we started to take some drinks before the main course.

There was a charming man in the group making al type of jokes and funny remarks about those present, when the vice-president of the company I was traveling with, told the fellow:

- Could you tell us how it was at the Bay of Pigs, I was told you were there, and I would like to know first hand about it.

That fellow did not enjoy particularly the idea of talking about that episode in his life that was not going to bring any
good memories and flatly refused, but all others Cubans whom were not aware previously that this man was a member of the famous Brigada 2506, did not want to miss the one in a million opportunity to know first hand about the fighting and the ordeal at the beach of the Brigade. He covered the events from the very first moment he was recruited in Miami in the late 1960, until he came back to Miami in 1963, to be reunited with his wife and two young children, he had not seen for two and a half years.

While he was talking about the combat I was keeping myself silent, after all I did not know how the man and my other compatriots were going to react if they ever knew that I was on the other side at the time the fighting.

But sometimes our brain cannot control our mouth and there I was, when the man was describing some of the scenes of heavy fighting, I found myself making additions to his words and sometime correcting the story. We even had an occasion, when I finished his words when ever he could not complete that part of the story.

Then, that man interrupted his conversation and looking me straight in the eyes said:

- You must had been there, for the way you talk about it . . . but, I don't recall ever seen your face before or after the fighting was over, not even in prison with us. He finished with an air of interrogation.

I hesitated before answering him, finally with great effort on my part, I told him and to all the other men sitting around the table.

- I was with Castro's forces during the Bay of Pigs!

A heavy silence followed my words, it was to such extent that the head waiter approached our table to make sure that there was nothing wrong with the food served.

- I want you to be aware that I was there in a mission of mercy, I was over there to save lives, on either side, not to make any killings, I was a paramedic.

These last words of mine, relieved the tension all over the table, everybody smiled back, and then the veteran of the Brigade raised his cup of wine to propose a toast to me, which was followed by all others.

He said several more jokes, before the conversation returned to normal and addressing me, he said:

- I am going to tell you something that I had said to very few people before, it is the last attack staged by the Brigade 2506 in the Bay of Pigs, against advancing forces.

When we were in the beach, with our infantry, all of the heavy guns did not have a round of ammunition to fight, the artillery was out of everything and so the mortars, and our tanks had two or three rounds at the most. Then there it was, a section of Castro's tanks advancing at full speed toward the beach, that we all got the feelings that those bastard were going to crush our men under the tanks threads, and brother, I can tell you here, our tankers were low in everything, in fuel, in ammunition for the cannons and machine guns, but I can assure you they were not low in balls, they got plenty of it.

Our tanks advanced head on and without any tactics, they just move themselves in the path of the incoming armor, and they shot seven tanks to pieces, at point blank, it was a duel, theirs against ours, our tankers were not concerned with their safety at all, they were only concerned with stopping Castro's armor, and they did it.

All in all the Brigade destroyed twelve of Castro's tanks, two with the police brigade, three more with the 111 and 123 battalions, and the last seven I just told you, and we only lost one tank.
When our tanks fired the last shell, they retreated to the beach with the rest of our men, waiting for the worst, and there they were caught prisoners like the rest of us.

One thing more, when those bastard took us prisoners to Havana, they put us in metal trailers, all fully closed, standing in our feet next to each other, without any spare room, not even for a fly to fly, there was no ventilation, no water, no toilets, nothing and it lasted for hours, several of our men died of suffocation, and we did not loose more men, because we scratched the metal sides of the trailers with our belt buckles and opened little holes to get some fresh air, other than that I don't even know if I could be seated here and talking to you.

- Well, I also have a few things to tell you, that probably you don't know and I think this is as good as any occasion to tell you all.

As you all know, Castro's battalions were emplaced in and around the Bay of Pigs in force, since the second day of the fighting, after he realized that nothing else was coming to land.

There was no discipline, no fire control, and just any man approaching their positions, late during the day, when the foggy eyes of the sentries failed to recognize friend for foe, the sentries shouted,

Halt, who goes there? ....

and it was followed by a volley of fire from the sentry in question, and in a matter of seconds whole battalions joined the fusillade, spending thousand and thousand of irreplaceable bullets which were arriving very slow at the front, fact that was not assimilated by the inept battalion commanders, who were more than happy to order - Fire at will. Let us give those son of a bitches a dose of their own medicine. In a matter of hours, all front line troops had exhausted all the ammo in clips and in spare socks, after realizing that foolishness, a legion of runners from every battalion made to the General Headquarters at the Australia sugar mill, looking for ammo, after eluding the cross fire of the Brigade 30's and 50's still commandeering every access to the front.

They sent ten, twenty trucks, I don't know for sure how many trucks loaded with ammunition for the troops at the front, and they wined up in flames and explosions, hit by the rain of fire from the invisible Brigade machine gun nest, and not a single of those trucks made to the front line, the attackers became the attacked.

Hours elapsed during the second day of heavy fighting, more runners went to the rearguard with urgent requests for ammo, and the commanders did not dare to send any other truck, as they wondered how they could transport the much needed ammo.

Some bright minded officer in the rear echelons noticed that the only vehicles moving along the dangerous road were our ambulances and the giant army trucks with the Red Cross markings on either side, the brigade machine gunners restrained the fire every time our Red Cross vehicles passed their gun sights. On either way they made it safely bringing in to the rearguard the legions of dead and wounded.

Inspiration flashed onto the minds of those officers. Could we sneak two or three trucks with the much needed ammo for our troops up front, that would be more than sufficient and then the whole routine could have continued like nothing has happened.

First, they found two army trucks which were used and driven by Red Cross personnel to evacuate our casualties, later on they changed the drivers, obviously they did not want to take any chances with our Red Cross personnel, who might spill the beans, and finally after they got two trucks heavily loaded with ammunition, they sent it along
with two other real Red Cross trucks to the front. That convoy passed by the most forward machine gun emplacements of the Brigade, which remained silent, then as they approached the first line of infantry, they started to unload boxes after boxes of ammunition, and continued all the way ahead, perhaps some Brigade forward observer must had witnessed that ammo procedure and alerted the machine gun nest, next to the firing line, and it was there when they fired on the four trucks which were approaching the most exposed and hit positions of Castro's forces, the four trucks received a shower of fire, windshields and sides took a heavy pounding, although it was to late to stop the ammo supply, they had unloaded everything they had on board.

Once the news of the ammo carrying trucks with Red Cross markings spread around, your men must have kept a sharp look out for our ambulances and trucks, they fire on any of them on its way to the front which might look too heavily loaded, and so was the case with ambulances, somewhat smaller than the trucks, they were more maneuverable and could negotiate the terrain, to transport ammo to the front and of all of those used for that purpose only one was shot at and it was displayed later on, with the windshield and sides perforated by bullets.

The Cuban media showed how harmless ambulances carrying our medicines for the front line troops, received torrents of bullets. Bullets that in the first place were more than well deserved by those vandals who took cover under the noncombatant flag of the Red Cross.

We knew of those devils deeds in the front line hospitals, where our wounded told us all about it. We the Red Cross men were more than shaken after knowing the bastardy attitude of our commanders in the battlefield.

The second bloody event in this part of the fighting referred to the last minutes of fight on Giron Beach, where the Brigade surrendered in force, but at least, more than a hundred of your men escaped to the woods surrounding marshes trying to escape the arriving might of Castro's armor and infantry. Those men ran away in groups of two's and three's thinking that they were safe and easier to escape in such number. How wrong they were, Castro's troops were all around the landing zone, in thousands making sure not even a fly could escape the ring of steel.

They did not last for long in their quest for freedom, first of all thirst drove them out into the open, a killing thirst which could not be quenched with the salty water of the marshes or the putrid and stinky pools of water all over.

Only hours after the bulk of the Brigade surrendered, our troops were hunting for the hundred or so escapees, soon they were joined by the three hundred survivors of the Police Brigade, who were in a mood more than vindictive, that troop who was in the forward positions, had not forgotten that terrible slaughter caused to them by the Brigade. Our Police Brigade spread in platoon force and hunted and hunted the marshes and the wild jungle and once they found their pray in the same groups of two and threes who had escaped from the beach, once the men had surrendered and had their arms in the air and weapons on the ground, a whole tempest of machine gun fire swept them and cut them to pieces, even the few survivors lying bleeding heavily on the ground grasping for breath received a shot in the head, some thirty odd men of the Brigade died that way.

Few of our people ever dared to comment about such bastardy actions, although the news spread in hush comments here and there, and once it hit the forward area Red Cross personnel, it was a matter of hours before it reached our area.

It was late 1961, when we slowly started to realize that the communists were really in charge of our country and that the stand of the Brigade 2506 was right all along the way, and those courageous men who fought against impossible odds, defending their ideals with their lives was a pitiful waste.
Thousands and thousands of the men who were part on the same infantry battalions fighting the Brigade 2506 on the battlefield, presented resignations to the same positions in the militia battalions which were originally on a voluntary basis in the 1960 and 1961.

A torrent of resignations made Castro to think twice and he came with the solution to prevent the problems that we would had two years ahead at the most, where he would had nobody for his militia battalions, Castro enforced a military conscription for all Cuban males between 18 to 25 years of age, and all others over that age were forced to become members of the army reserve battalions, that were formed mostly by those same men that years earlier were volunteers all the way.

I was among those lucky ones, whom as a noncombatant I was assigned almost full time to hospitals to improve my medical training, and in those hospitals I kept my mouth shut for fear of winding up in jail for the silliest reasons.

My peers and me even discussed the way the Cuban media portrayed the members of the invading force.

They were heavily armed, but at the moment of their surrender in the beach they have no more ammunition to fight with, we even recalled that with the incredible ratio of 60 to 1 against them, they kept our forces at bay for three days of fighting.

We even compared them with the U.S. forces in Corregidor, during World War II, when a whole army of 60,000 men surrendered to the Japanese Imperial Forces, for one simple reason, they had no more ammunition to fight with. Nobody ever called them cowards, not even the Japanese with their strict code of the soldier, which do not condone surrender to the enemy, since they had lasted to the last bullet.

It was a different ball game with the communists. Humiliation after humiliation, followed their capture. They had the Brigade paraded in front of the yelling populace, they were forced to say and sign all type of self incriminating statement in from of the television cameras.

Were they cowards or not, can be answered easily by the remarks of our doctors after the unending stream of casualties.

"Men, for the number of casualties our troops are sustaining up to this moment, we estimate the strength of the invaders to be between twenty and twenty five-thousand men!"

That was not a small tribute to the fighting qualities of the Brigade that was at its best only with one twentieth of that number of men.
CHAPTER 21

WHY CASTRO'S FORCES TURNED AGAINST HIM

FROM APRIL 19, 1961 UP TO SEPTEMBER 27, 1965

(THE DAY OF CASTRO'S FAMOUS SPEECH WHERE HE OFFERED TO ALL CUBANS WHO WANTED TO LEAVE THE ISLAND FOR THE U.S.A. "COMPLETE AND AMPLE GUARANTEES")

There was a terrible shortage of food, medicines, clothes, housing, transportation and above all, freedom in Cuba, the days after the Bay of Pigs event.

My people, who have a reputation for saying jokes in the moments when everyone would be screaming or crying, said many of those political jokes, and one of the most explicit of them was this one:

Due to the terrible shortage of food in Cuba, an every day occurrence, Castro was interviewing the managers of his chicken farms and he wanted to know what kind of feed the chicken were receiving, and he call one of the managers,

Castro- Comrade manager of the People Chicken Farms, what do you give the chicken for food?
Manager- We only give them corn, comrade Fidel, answered the poor manager
Castro- Corn, did you said corn?
Manager- Yes, Fidel we only give the corn
Castro- Shoot him . . . how you dare to give corn to the chickens, corn should be for our people only.

He got another one of the managers in front of him, and this one after witnessing the previous performance, was more cautious and said after the already expected question,

Manager- Comrade . . ., we only give them kitchen left overs, as he smiled back at his friends.
Castro- Kitchen leftovers did you said?
Manager- Yes comrade, kitchen leftovers, no more, no less.
Castro- Shoot him . . . kitchen leftovers must be for pigs fattening only.

The third manager was brought in front of Castro who repeated the dreaded question.

Castro- Comrade manager of the People Chicken Farms, what do you give the chicken for food?

This was the most stupid manager of all of Castro's People Chicken Farms, and everybody was expecting the poor man to be shot like his two predecessors and they listened for his words.
Manager- Well . . . I don't really feed them anything, I only give them a nickel in the morning and they go and buy whatever they want!

The joke was simple, but the teachings were deep, in other words if you did not do whatever they expected you to do, you could consider yourself as good as dead. Even in jokes we were showing to the world how easily a man could be shot in Cuba in those terrible years.
We could divide the time in Cuba in periods of repression and political unrest due to all the stupid mismanagement of the country at every level, like for instance, Havana biggest printing company known at Compañia Litografica de la Habana, had four huge offset printing machines bought in West Germany in the pre-Castro era, at the enormous cost in those years of two million dollars, which in 1956 was a big amount of money, even for the US standards.

The accountant of the company, a good friend of mine, who had told me many stories about the problems in Cuba, including the one at Sears Roebuck, told me this one too. Most of the company expert employees and supervisors, fled the county in the early stages of the revolution, the early sixties, and besides the appointed interceptor by the red regime, removed all the supervisor personnel left from their positions due to one reason only, they were not considered political trustworthy, instead they were replaced by a brick layer who was appointed to run the presses, of course this was not an ordinary brick layer, he was a communist brick layer and the results were four off set machines out of commission in less than six months time.

Then in May of 1963, the Minister of Trade, sent two men as commercial envoys to Western Europe, where they visited every important capital, starting with London, Madrid, Brussels, Amsterdam and Bern among other capitals of the communist block, to sell our product. Lets us say here as a credit to their selling abilities that they came back with a letter of credit for $600.00 dollars to cover the production and export of handicrafts and an a cash order for the production of mail stamps for philatelic purposes for a total of $700.00 dollars. The fact that they spent well over $15,000.00 dollars that were transferred to them plus the air fare to the countries they visited, was not a big deal, since they were good communist and did not defect, at least for that period of time. They were selected dot his trip, because of their contacts with the big wheels of the Ministry of Foreign Trade, as a matter of fact only one of them spoke English and the other acted as his baggage carrier and body guard, the fact they had no experience in foreign trade was not in as much a bit of big consideration, they were good communists. For the records one of them was a former butcher and the other a liquor salesman.

Blunder after blunder, were committed by the new masters of Cuba, like the famous case when two commercial attaches in Czechoslovakia arranged to buy and automotive snow shovel, with plenty of spare parts, including an extra shovel for a good discount price. Let us note the Cuba has never had snow in her territory in her 500 years of history.

We had to pay dearly for all the weapons that Cuba received from the communist block. Castro's henchmen sent a beer factory to Russia, the name of the factory "LA POLAR," it was located in Puente Grande, in the Havana province. Also thru the Ministry of Foreign Trade our entire production of beef, pork, lobster, shrimp, fruits and shoes among many other things.

During 1963, a letter of credit came from Saudi Arabia, buying two hundred thousand cases of mangoes juice, it is to note that during 1963, we could not find a single mango in the entire island. Also in 1963, Cuba signed an export contract with Hungary, by which Cuba agreed to export 500,00 pair of men shoes, although it is worth to mention, that there were no shoes for the Cuban population.

And the last but not the least, the National Agrarian Reform Institute (INRA), Castro's biggest farce, exported 500,000 pounds of malanga to Venezuela, beautiful malangas in plastic bags, with a big sign reading "SURPLUSES OF THE CUBAN AGRARIAN REFORM," it is to note that malanga was the main diet for children in Cuba and it could not be found even in the black market. Our government was bragging of the success of the Agrarian Reform when our people were practically starving to death.
During 1962, Cuba was funding all guerillas movements in South America, I will quote two cases, known to me first 
handed.

In Venezuela, there was a guerilla movement "Douglas Bravo," they needed funds to operate in the fields and cities, 
and through the editorial house "Editorial del Pueblo" which shipped worthless old books to Cuba and in return Cuba 
under the pretense of buying those books, sent to Venezuela well over half million dollars in one year

Also the famous "Tupamaros" of Uruguay, were funneled well over half million dollars as far as we know; the first 
time was through a man whose last name was Pascale, the General manager of Editorial Pueblos Unidos, en 
Montevideo, who visited Cuba in 1962, he was dressed like a real capitalist, with a fancy stainless steel "ROLEX" 
watch, fancy suit and a hand made cow hide attache case and smelling a very expensive fragrance. This man was 
giving us a speech about the way his proletarian brothers and the cuban proletarian were going to defeat the Yankee 
Imperialism, and at the same time taking a check for one million dollars, issued by the Cuban National Bank, against 
one of its accounts on a Canadian Bank, while both of my children, my wife and myself hardly had anything to eat that 
particular day.

By mid 1962, we received the visit of another Tupamaro representative, a fat middle-aged man, who identified himself 
as Daniel Jodos, he passed briefly through our office on his way to see Fidel Castro himself, when he came back he had 
a signed order by Celia Sanchez, a personal representative of Fidel, addressed to the president of the Cuban National 
bank, and was driven by us to the bank, where he received $200,000.00 US dollars, in large denominations, which he 
dutifully stuffed in a money belt and the balance he put inside an attache case. This fellow also preached the 
conveniences of the new life for the proletarians, and he was in fact a denial to such syste 

Also in 1962, we received the visit of the world famous British Auctioneer Richard Elliot Cristin, of the Cristin House in 
Southern England. We received him at the airport of Havana, with other members of the Cuban Foreign Trade 
Ministry and I was acting as a interpreter 
for the meeting that took place the Club La Torre, a famous restaurant located on the top of the FOCSA building in the 
exclusive section of El Vedado. Lunch consisted of succulent large Shrimps Cocktails, Lobster Tails and the ever-
present Filet Mignons, besides salad, wines and other delicacies, unknown to the common people in Cuba, during the 
conversation , Mr. Cristin commented to me:

-I thought that you people in Cuba were practically starving to death, but here I found everything a person 
might want to eat.

-Mr. Cristin -I replay to him- Sir, if you want to know what is going on in Cuba, I would like to meet you 
after we finish here, if possible in your hotel room where I will be able to describe you all the details you may want to 
know.

Looking around the room in a conspirative way, he asked

-Do you think it will be safe for you to make it there.

-I am willing to take that chance Mr. Cristin, I confide him.

Later on, on the first on the first week of October 1962, before the famous Missiles Crisis, I visited Mr. Cristin at 12:30 
am. in his room at the Capri Hotel, after we finished the meeting at the Foreign Trade Ministry, and I explained in
details everything that was going on in Cuba, and as a summary I said:

- All the food you had seen on the table at the Club La Torre, cannot be purchased by any cuban on the streets at any price, not only that, my wife who is pregnant can not get any baby products for the baby she is expecting and she does not have a decent pair of stockings.

At that moment and much to my surprise, Mr. Crispin picked a box of English stockings with 24 pairs inside, an elegant woman night gown, a box of chocolate and a large box of Mennen’s baby products, all of which he stuffed in a large back and handled to me as I was leaving and said:

-Thanks for everything you have told me, I will never forget it.

A very common thing in Cuba, was the brainwashing of our children from an early age. One of the must common stories that circulated in the country was, that our teachers received orders to make the children understand the Revolution, what follows is not a joke, it is an example the way it was done.

The teachers will ask the pupils:

- All of you that are revolutionaries, raise your hands, then the good teacher will group together all of those revolutionaries.

A second question followed:

- Raise your hands of all you that believe in God! , another batch of hands in the air and another group of pupils in the classroom.

A third question followed immediately - Raise your hands those who like chocolate.

All the children in the class raised their hands at the moment.

-Those who are revolutionaries, ask Fidel for chocolate! Right away those young students cheered in unison.

- Fidel, we want chocolate! The teacher produced tiny bars of chocolate candy that were ceremoniously passed to each of those revolutionary children.

Our catholic kids were told - Ask your God for chocolate!
The message was crystal clear for the young minds, Fidel Delivers!

We lived in a circle of fears and distrust. The Cuban Secret Police or the Cuban Gestapo as we called it was checking on everybody. Tour own wife, daughter or son might be a member of the feared G-2 and his or her sole word would be good enough to guarantee you a stiff prison term. We even had the cases of people sent to jail accused of committing crimes against the security of the state, and after spending a couple of years in jail, they were told to pack their few belongings and leave jail. If the person ever dared to ask why he was kept for two years in jail, they invariable answered his question with another question:

-Do you want to spend two more years here?

Needless to say that the person did not repeat his question.

If you work overtime in the U.S.A. the law requires that your employer pay you time and a half, in Cuba you have to work all the overtime the government wants you to work without a single penny for payment. Nevertheless, if you
are late or miss a day of work, they dock your paycheck with the lateness and the absenteeism.

Our lives had no meaning, no hopes, no future, while the calendars all over the world were turning forward, our calendar were turning backwards.

When our cars, TV sets, radios, refrigerators or any other type of home appliances ever broke down, we can kiss them good bye. There were a few repair shops in the country, and due to gross mismanagement it could take months to repair the appliance because of improvised technicians, and if it was fixable it was at sky high prices.

Consumer goods were out of this world to get, for instance shoes for the family arrived at the stores at the rate of one pair per year for each person registered in the rations book. We did not have any styles to choose from, we only asked the salesman for the size and what year they were serving, since as a rule they were running two to three years behind.

We have long line of unhappy people waiting for the shoes, for instance, bitter faces that spoke for themselves, as a matter of fact, nobody on his right mind would have ever dare to complaint publicly about anything, or he would have ended in jail accused as a traitor or a counterrevolutionary. If anyone out of his mind stated in the streets the most innocent comment against the government must likely he had to be a provocateur agent or maybe crazy. Either way, my people did not want to take any chances.

We had the same motto as the mine disposal crews in World War II

-Your first mistake is your last mistake.

In regards to medicines, we were really in bad shape, we did not have sufficient in quantities or in quality and my people were confronted with the tragic situation of having a medical doctor prescribing medicines for a sick relative, and when the person informed the doctor of the difficulties in getting the medicine, the doctor answered:

- I prescribe the medicine only, but I can not get it for you.

There is nothing more aggravating that seen a sick son or a daughter close to death because of lack of medicines that our government did not import, giving us all kind of excuses like the long speeches given by Castro saying that the foreign countries monetary reserves were very low or that the American imperialism was blocking our international trade and in the mean time, people like me were witnessing all kind of transfers of funds in foreign currency going to all countries in the world to finance revolutions, like those transfers I saw going to Venezuela and Uruguay.

Food, was the magic word that send our imagination into the wildest fantasies. It did no matter the subject of our conversation. It could be baseball politics, wars, we put everything aside whenever the all important subject of food came into our discussions. If a beautiful woman was passing by, you could hear expressions like this:

- Her legs look like hams!
- Her arms look like chicken tights!
- Her buttocks look like custard pudding by the sweet way it moves!

We were crazy by the lack of food, the tragic thing was that at the time we were at the grocery, we have to be registered for our food rations, and nothing to eat at home, and when our turn came up, the grocer clerk would take a quick glance inside and say:

- We have nothing yet, the weekly rations had not arrived yet!

You could no and would not dare to insinuate the slightest complaint, or you would be risking to be called a
counterrevolutionary and that world could take you easily to jail for a period of time ranging from one week to three months to a year for such “offense”.

We were forced to go to the Revolution Square every time Mr. Fidel Castro gave us his long demagogic speeches, we were to make group. Many people, except cubans of course, reading this book will doubt such implication. How could it be possible to have such large crowds under so closed control?

I will answer your question. All unions in Cuba are government controlled, they have representatives in all and every working place. Those activists, tell you what to do, how to do it and when to do it.

When Castro said he was going to make a public appearance at the Revolution Square, in the center of La Habana, all of the activities in each of the government enterprises ceased and went from desk to desk, from machinery to machinery and they inquired if you intended to attend the Revolution Square with Fidel, needless to say that any person coerced in such fashion will have only one answer

- Yes

But don’t get the wrong idea that you just can give and affirmative nod and say, OK, put may name down, I will go. No way Jose! You must say it with gusto, with emphasis, like you really wanted to be there.

- Yes, I want to be with Fidel in the Revolution Square. With a happy expression all over your face, although deep inside all kind of courses are going through your mind.

Had you ever though what would be life for you, if you were forced to say and do things you hate to say or do? - Terrible, right? Well that is the daily life for the people in Cuba! A daily comedy for survival.

How deep was the system involved in everybody’s life, it can be expressed with two clear and vivid examples:
I had two working companions, a male and a female, both were married to different people, and they were having a love affair with each other, secretly or so they though.
One Saturday morning, during our periodic meetings, I saw the woman’s husband seated at one side of the presidential table, and could not avoid myself to wonder why? I did not have to wait too long, the first item in the meeting’s agenda was the love affair his wife was having with the other man, and there in front of more than one hundred persons, the informers were throwing all kind of allegations to the couple, accusing them of counterrevolutionary behavior!. My eyes were going from the man’s livid face to the woman’s horrified expression.
I was amazed of how dirty and rotten some people have become in Cuba. Even the love affair of the accused couple was nothing compared to the vileness of the accusers. At the end the offended husband, blamed himself for his wife actions, since he did not take care of her, because all his time was dedicated to the revolution.

The other example, if you want to survive in Cuba, you must distrust your friends and family alike. One day in September of 1964, we had one of the constant stupid meetings; this particular one was to elect a Model Worker in our State owned enterprise. There were several persons nominated and the chairman of the meeting began like this.

- Can any of you say anything good or bad for comrade so and so?
I was sick and tired of listening to all kind of moronic answers that even for any TV show would seem unbelievable foolish, but what the heck, that was the way the ball was bouncing in Cuba. The damn meeting went on and on until the last candidate name was brought up and the same stupid question was asked:

- Can any of you say anything good or bad for comrade so and so?
This man received all the praise of the assembly and was sure to be selected a Model Worker.

For the benefit of the reader a Model Worker, if you have that honor of been selected, you will have the privilege of asking for another apartment to live, to buy any electrical appliance for your home, whenever they arrive at the store, or to have the right to request reservations for a beach resort at you vacation time and all of that in a cash paying basis.

There was a silence after the last comrade name was nominated, the chairman asked again: Those who are in favor raise hands!
Before any hand could be raised, the closest friend to the man stood up and said:
-I have something to said about comrade so and so.
Everybody was smiling; we were expecting to hear all kind of good things about the man, after all this was his closest friend,
- Yes ........ said the chairman inquiringly!
- He cannot be elected a Model Worker, because he is GAY, I know it, because I have slept with him!

The chairman froze in his chair, the accused fainted in his chair and that was the end of the meeting, a few weeks later both fellows were transferred to different working places.

I am bringing these examples to illustrate some of the reasons of the exodus of the Cuban people.

Yes we sympathized with the Revolution in the early years of 1960 and 1961, as we grew disenchanted with the Revolution, the false promises and the reign of terror inside the island, we realized that we could not make any move inside Cuba against the regime for fear of been crushed like a bug. All hell broke loose in Cuba when Castro opened the doors to those who wanted to leave Cuba, first at Camarioca, then the Freedom Flights and later the Mariel Boat Lift, more than one million and a half of Cubans have come to the land of the free, must of us with the hope of returning at the near future to a free Cuba.

As the Soviet Block collapsed more hardships have been imposed to the Cuban people, how long will it take for Castro and the communist machinery to fall, only God knows for sure.