

AIRPOWER AT THE BAY OF



Cuban revolutionary forces set up a four-barrel 12.7 mm anti-aircraft weapon at Playa Giron, Cuba.

For a few days in April 1961, the US government kept up the pretense that the failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs was the sole doing of “Cuban patriots” seeking to overthrow Fidel Castro. The cover-up went no better than the operation did. It soon became undeniable that the whole thing had been planned and conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency and that it was a complete disaster.

Almost nothing went right with the assault-style amphibious landing of a “brigade” of Cuban exiles on the southern coast of Cuba on April 17.

Of the 1,400 that went ashore, more than 100 were killed and about 1,200 were taken prisoner. The ships carrying their ammunition and communications equipment were sunk. Half of

PIGS

It was a half-baked military operation run by the CIA and micromanaged by the White House.

By John T. Correll



The wreckage of two CIA B-26 Invaders shot down by Cuban fighters during the Bay of Pigs invasion. The aircraft, purchased by the CIA from USAF surplus, were similar to Cuban B-26s.



Fidel Castro

the obsolete airplanes supporting them were shot down.

It was a far-fetched venture, likely to have failed under the best of circumstances. One CIA official—Richard M. Helms, chief of clandestine operations and a future Director of Central Intelligence—would have nothing to do with the project, declaring it to be “harebrained.”

The idea was to establish a beach-head and hold out against the 32,000-man Cuban army until the populace arose to join in the liberation. Any remote chance of success depended

on preemptive air strikes flown by Cuban exiles to knock out Castro’s small air force ahead of time.

Three days before the invasion, US President John F. Kennedy—focused on political risk and plausible deniability—canceled half of the advance air strikes against Castro’s air bases. On the eve of the invasion, he canceled the next round of strikes altogether. As a result, enough of Castro’s airplanes survived to wreck the invasion.

All hands shifted into damage control. CIA officials blamed Kennedy and his advisors; Kennedy and his advisors blamed the CIA. Kennedy also blamed the Joint Chiefs of Staff for not warning him against the scheme.

Large parts of the story leaked right away but the CIA kept a lid on the

secret files. Almost 40 years elapsed before public acknowledgment that some of the air strikes had been flown by Americans, including airmen from the Alabama Air National Guard, four of whom were killed in combat.

THE CUBAN BRIGADE

Castro was initially popular in the United States when he supplanted the corrupt Batista regime in 1959, but the approval faded fast as he made a trade alliance with the Soviet Union in return for economic and military aid. His firing squads executed political enemies by the hundreds. He lashed out against the United States in speeches that lasted for

Photos: Gramma archive; University of Miami Library



hours. Cuba extended diplomatic recognition to Red China and North Korea.

The US public and both parties in Congress demanded that President Dwight D. Eisenhower do something. In March 1960—a month after Cuba entered the alliance with the USSR—Eisenhower approved a CIA proposal for “covert action against the Castro regime,” including the training of a “paramilitary force outside of Cuba for future guerrilla action.”

At the CIA, the drive to oust Castro was led by Richard M. Bissell Jr., the deputy director for plans and heir apparent to the aging CIA director Allen Dulles, who mostly left covert operations up to Bissell.

Recruitment and training began within the month for a group of anti-Castro émigrés who would be remembered to history as “the Cuban Brigade.” The CIA built an airfield and training site at Retalhuleu, Guatemala, in the Sierra Madre mountains near the Pacific coast. There was also a staging base, “Happy Valley,” at Puerto Cabezas on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, about 600 miles from Cuba.

The air arm of the Brigade was called the Cuban Liberation Air Force, for



Bissell Jr.

which some 40 Cuban pilots with commercial or military experience were selected for further training in Guatemala. The primary Brigade aircraft were medium bombers purchased from US Air Force surplus storage by Intermountain Aviation, a CIA front organization. The CIA chose the Douglas B-26 Invader—not to be confused with the Martin B-26 Marauder of World War II fame—mainly because Castro’s air force had B-26s.

The Brigade B-26s were painted with Cuban colors and markings in hopes that they could be mistaken for Castro airplanes. CIA planners did not know or paid little attention to the fact that the Brigade B-26Bs had a solid nose that looked nothing like the transparent nose on the Castro B-26Cs.

The roster of the Cuban Brigade eventually grew to 1,390 volunteers. Its equipment included five M-41 tanks, two landing craft owned by the CIA, and seven chartered commercial freighter ships.

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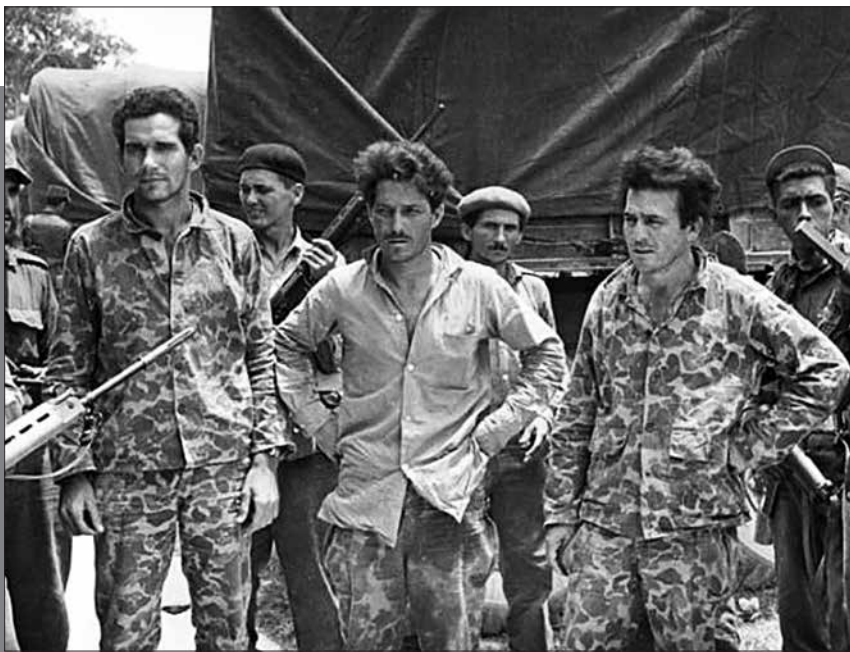
The CIA was able to arrange for the US Army special forces to train the ground crews. However, the official history of the operation noted “continuing difficulties” with the Pentagon and the Air Force “concerning the utilization of military personnel, particularly air crews.”

According to the CIA history, Bissell and his aides were “ready to joust with higher echelons in the Department of Defense” about airpower support when another option turned up. The Air National Guard was willing to help. A CIA cable in December 1960 reported that the ANG was the “most reliable and cooperative source of personnel.”

THE ALABAMA CONNECTION

A CIA representative went to Birmingham, Ala., to talk to Brig. Gen. G. Reid Doster of the 117th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing of the Alabama Air National Guard. The 117th was the last USAF unit to fly B-26s before they were retired from service in 1957.

Doster agreed to recruit volunteers to be advisors to the Cubans, fly some transport missions, and maintain the airplanes. They would wear civilian clothing and carry ID with fake names.



Above: Three captured invaders—Cuban exiles—from the “Brigade” are guarded by Cuban forces. The CIA sent 1,400 men ashore during the invasion, and 1,200 were taken prisoner. Right: The four Americans killed during the raid.



Baker



Gray



Ray



Shamburger

Strict secrecy was to apply, and the participants could not even tell their families what they were doing.

About 80 ANG members signed up, some from Doster’s wing and some from other states. Additional volunteers came from organizations affiliated with the Air Guard. In all, the CIA put about 130 of them on contract.

Two from the Alabama ANG—Lt. Col. Joseph L. Shannon, commander of the 106th Bombardment Squadron and his friend and operations officer, Maj. Riley Shamburger—joined the CIA as full-fledged members. The others were employed by CIA cover companies.

When the first Alabama Guardsmen reached Guatemala in January 1961, they found 16 refurbished B-26s plus assorted transport aircraft waiting for them. They were outfitted with auxiliary fuel tanks to give them enough range for the round-trip to Cuba.

Castro’s air force consisted of 36 airplanes, of which 18 were operationally ready when the Bay of Pigs invasion went down: six Lockheed T-33 jet fighters, six propeller-driven Sea Fury fighters obtained from the British, and six B-26s. Castro’s best pilots were in Czechoslovakia at the time, training on the MiG-21s that had been made available to Cuba.

The key Castro airplanes were the T-33s, vintage trainers that were outfitted with guns and wing-mounted

rockets. It was a stretch to call them fighters, but they were better than anything the Cuban Brigade could put up.

MISSION CREEP

During the election campaign in October 1960, Kennedy attacked the Eisenhower administration for “permitting a communist menace” to “arise only 90 miles from the shores of the United States.” Soon enough, he would have his own chance.

Upon taking office, Kennedy found the CIA a good place to get advice. “If I need some material fast, or an idea fast, CIA is the place I have to go,” he said. He considered Bissell “one of the four or five brightest guys in the whole administration.”

There was a big difference between the CIA’s proposal to Kennedy and the program Eisenhower approved the year before. The original plan was to recruit, train, and infiltrate guerilla forces into Cuba. That had evolved into an overt assault-type amphibious landing of almost 1,500 combat troops.

Kennedy asked former Secretary of State Dean Acheson what he thought of the latest CIA plan. “It doesn’t take Price Waterhouse to figure out that 1,500 Cubans aren’t as good as 25,000,” Acheson said. In fairness, the CIA never intended for the Brigade to take on the Cuban army alone.

Bissell and others assumed the

landing would trigger an uprising by the Cuban populace. In reality, as a report by the CIA inspector general said later, there was “no intelligence evidence that Cubans in significant numbers could or would join the invaders.”

The Joint Chiefs of Staff were given to understand that the mission was the CIA’s and the Pentagon’s role was to assist and support. Information was tightly controlled.

In one instance, a JCS meeting was delayed until Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, Air Force vice chief of staff substituting for Gen. Thomas D. White, could be cleared for the briefing. LeMay asked a question but was told, “That doesn’t concern you.”

In response to Kennedy’s request for a review, a JCS report said the operation had “fair chance” of succeeding. The actual analysis put the probability of success at 30 percent. The “fair chance” wording was intended to mean “not too good,” but it was interpreted as an endorsement.

The report also said that with complete surprise and complete air supremacy—no Castro airplanes left at all—the Brigade might last up to four days on the ground.

It was impossible to keep the exile community in Florida quiet about the venture. A *New York Times* headline in January 1961 read, “US Helps Train an Anti-Castro Force at a Secret Gua-

temalan Air-Ground Base.” Kennedy complained that, “Castro doesn’t need agents over here. All he has to do is read our newspapers.”

The critical factor was to destroy Castro’s airplanes on the ground. Prior to the invasion, Brigade bombers were to strike the three major airfields, two of them near Havana and the other at Santiago de Cuba on the eastern end of the island.

JFK CHURNS THE PLAN

Despite the CIA optimism and exuberance, Kennedy had his doubts, but rather than calling the operation off, he scaled it back by increments. The invasion was supposed to go ashore at Trinidad in central Cuba, a hotbed of opposition to Castro, but Kennedy decided that location was too “noisy.”

On short notice, the landing site was moved 100 miles west to the Bay of Pigs. The planners did not know it was Castro’s favorite fishing place, or that he was especially popular there.

Some on Kennedy’s staff were still fretful, as was Secretary of State Dean Rusk. They wanted the least airpower and the lowest US profile possible.

On April 14, three days before the invasion, Kennedy told Bissell to reduce the attack on the air bases and make it “minimal,” with six airplanes instead of 18.

Bissell was appalled, but grateful the operation was not canceled altogether. He decided that six B-26s plus two spares would meet JFK’s intentions and sent that order to Puerto Cabezas, where the aircraft were deployed and waiting. Case officers on the scene took the liberty of launching all eight B-26s.

Kennedy confidantes would claim



President John Kennedy congratulates Allen Dulles, retiring director of the Central Intelligence Agency, as he presents Dulles with the National Security Medal at CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., in 1964.



USS *Houston*, a troop and supply vessel, was damaged by Cuban airpower and deliberately beached by its captain on the western side of the bay.

later that it had not been made “entirely clear” that the whole operation depended on destroying Castro’s airplanes. No air defense was provided for the Brigade, which would be starkly vulnerable to any enemy aircraft that survived.

On April 15, two days before D-Day, Cuban Brigade air strikes knocked out half of the combat airplanes at the three bases. With any luck, a restrike to coincide with the landing on April 17 would get the rest. Castro still had two B-26s, two Sea Furies, and three T-33s left.

In yet another notion that went afoul, a Cuban “defector” landed his B-26 in Miami, part of a contrived cover story that the air strikes were the work of disaffected pilots from Castro’s own air force. Reporters quickly noticed that it was the wrong model of B-26. The machine guns, still sealed with tape, were mounted on the metal nose cone. Castro’s B-26s had plastic nose cones and guns mounted under the wings.

At the UN, Ambassador Adlai Stevenson—who had been kept largely in the dark—reacted impulsively and brandished news photos in support of the cover story. When the Soviet ambassador pointed out his mistake, Stevenson was embarrassed and furious. He complained to Rusk.

Late in the afternoon of April 16,

hours before the invasion and the air strikes were to begin, the CIA deputy director, Gen. Charles P. Cabell, stopped by the command post in Washington on his way home from playing golf. Cabell, like Stevenson, had not been told much, but with Dulles out of town, he was officially in charge.

Cabell questioned the authorization for the air strikes and called Rusk to check. Rusk, with Stevenson’s complaints fresh in mind, called Kennedy about Cabell’s question and added another round of cautionary advice. Kennedy decided the strikes might not be a good idea after all and canceled them.

ON THE BEACH

The first ashore at the Bay of Pigs, around midnight, were a CIA case officer and frogmen to mark the landing channel. They were surprised to find the way to the beach impeded by coral reefs. CIA analysts, looking at aerial photos, had identified them as seaweed or reflections.

The analysts had also predicted the beach would be deserted and quiet. It was “lit up like Coney Island,” the case officer said, with a beach party in progress. The landing craft, blocked by the coral, stopped 75 yards out and the invasion force struggled through waist-deep water, carrying heavy equipment, to get to the shore.

CASTRO'S AIRPLANES CAME AT DAWN, ATTACKING THE LANDING FORCE AND SINKING THREE OF THE BRIGADE'S SHIPS, DESTROYING COMMUNICATIONS EQUIPMENT, AMMUNITION, AND SUPPLIES.

The Bay of Pigs was about four miles wide and 18 miles deep, surrounded by a thick swamp with the only access by three gravel roads. The primary landing was at Blue Beach, just east of the mouth of the bay. Secondary landings were at Red Beach at the top of the bay and Green Beach, 20 miles down the coast. C-46 transports dropped paratroopers to seal off the swamp roads.

Castro's airplanes came at dawn, attacking the landing force and sinking three of the Brigade's ships, destroying communications equipment, ammunition, and supplies. Green Beach was abandoned. At mid-morning, the Castro militia counterattacked in waves.

The White House belatedly authorized B-26 close air support strikes for the ground force on the beachhead, but half of them were shot down by the T-33s and Sea Furies. The force at Red Beach retired to Blue Beach on April 18. Ammunition began to run short.

With the situation growing desperate, Bissell—supposedly without the knowledge of JFK—cleared American volunteers to fly combat missions. The cable authorization said, "Cannot attach sufficient importance to fact American crews must not fall into enemy hands."

Eight Alabama ANG people, four pilots and four crewmen, volunteered. Six B-26s, four flown by ANG pilots, launched before dawn on April 19. The two lead aircraft were hit but delivered their ordnance and returned to base.

Lt. Col. Joe Shannon outmaneuvered a T-33, but Maj. Riley Shamburger, flying on his wing, could not. Shamburger and his observer, Wade Gray, were hit by T-33 fire as they approached the target area and went down at sea.

Capt. Thomas W. Ray, flying with Leo Baker as his observer, was hit by T-33 and ground fire near a Cuban command center northwest of the beach. They survived the crash but were killed in a shootout on the ground.

The aircraft carrier *Essex* was in the area and authorized to provide "very

limited" air cover. What happened is still uncertain, but because of a mix-up between the CIA and the Navy about the time, *Essex* fighters were still on the deck when the B-26s went in.

On the afternoon of April 20, with only a sliver of the beachhead remaining, the landing force surrendered.

FAMILIES IN THE DARK

The Air Guardsmen returning to Alabama were ordered not to talk about the mission. In May, a lawyer from Miami showed up in Birmingham and called a press conference. He said he represented a private group that supported the invasion and was there to arrange insurance payments to widows of four mercenaries shot down on a C-46 cargo mission off the coast of Cuba.

The *Chicago Tribune* quoted the lawyer as saying, "The men knew what they were getting into. It was a calculated risk. If they came back, they had a nice nest egg." The widows were told only that they would receive payments for the rest of their lives unless they remarried.

Shamburger's mother wrote to Kennedy and got a reply from his Air Force aide, Brig. Gen. Godfrey T. McHugh, who said that neither the CIA or any other government agency had any information about her son's disappearance. McHugh said later he had not known any better.

Bits and pieces of the story leaked out. Alabama newsman Albert C. Persons, a civilian pilot who flew C-54s in the operation, was not in the Air National Guard and did not feel constrained by the gag order. His story was picked up by national newspapers and wire services, which reported that American airmen had participated in the final air strike and that four of them had lost their lives.

The CIA did not tell the families the real story until 1978, when Shamburger, Gray, Ray, and Baker were posthumously awarded the Distinguished

Intelligence Cross, the Agency's highest medal for bravery. Even then, the families were asked to keep the information to themselves.

Another 20 years would pass before the CIA admitted publicly what happened at the Bay of Pigs.

SECRETS IN THE SAFE

Dulles and Bissell were forced into retirement. In his memoirs in 1969, Bissell said that JFK's cancellation of the second air strike was "certainly the gravest contributory factor in the operation's failure."

Six months after the invasion, CIA Inspector General Lyman Kirkpatrick conducted an internal inquiry. His report said the CIA had "drastically converted the project into what became an overt military operation" that went "beyond the area of Agency responsibility as well as Agency capability." It also said the CIA "tends to assume responsibilities beyond its capabilities and does not give sufficient consideration to the ability of other departments of the government to conduct or participate in these operations."

John McCone, who succeeded Dulles as CIA director, gathered up copies of the IG report, destroyed most of them, and kept the others locked in a safe in his office. Between 1974 and 1978, Jack Pfeiffer, the CIA's chief historian, wrote a five-volume history of the operation. It was likewise critical and was likewise suppressed.

Peter Wyden had most—but not quite all—of it figured out in *The Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story*, published in 1979. Freedom of Information Act lawsuits by the National Security Archive at George Washington University forced the release in 1998 of Kirkpatrick's IG report, and in 2011 of three of the five volumes of the Pfeiffer history.

These documents, along with the reporting of Warren Trest and Donald Dodd in *Wings of Denial: The Alabama Air National Guard's Covert Role in the Bay of Pigs* in 2001, finally brought the full account of the ANG involvement to light.

A final perspective on the operation was offered by Fidel Castro. Asked why the invasion failed, he said, "They had no air support." ★

John T. Correll was editor in chief of *Air Force Magazine* for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, "The Air Raid at Taranto," appeared in the March issue.