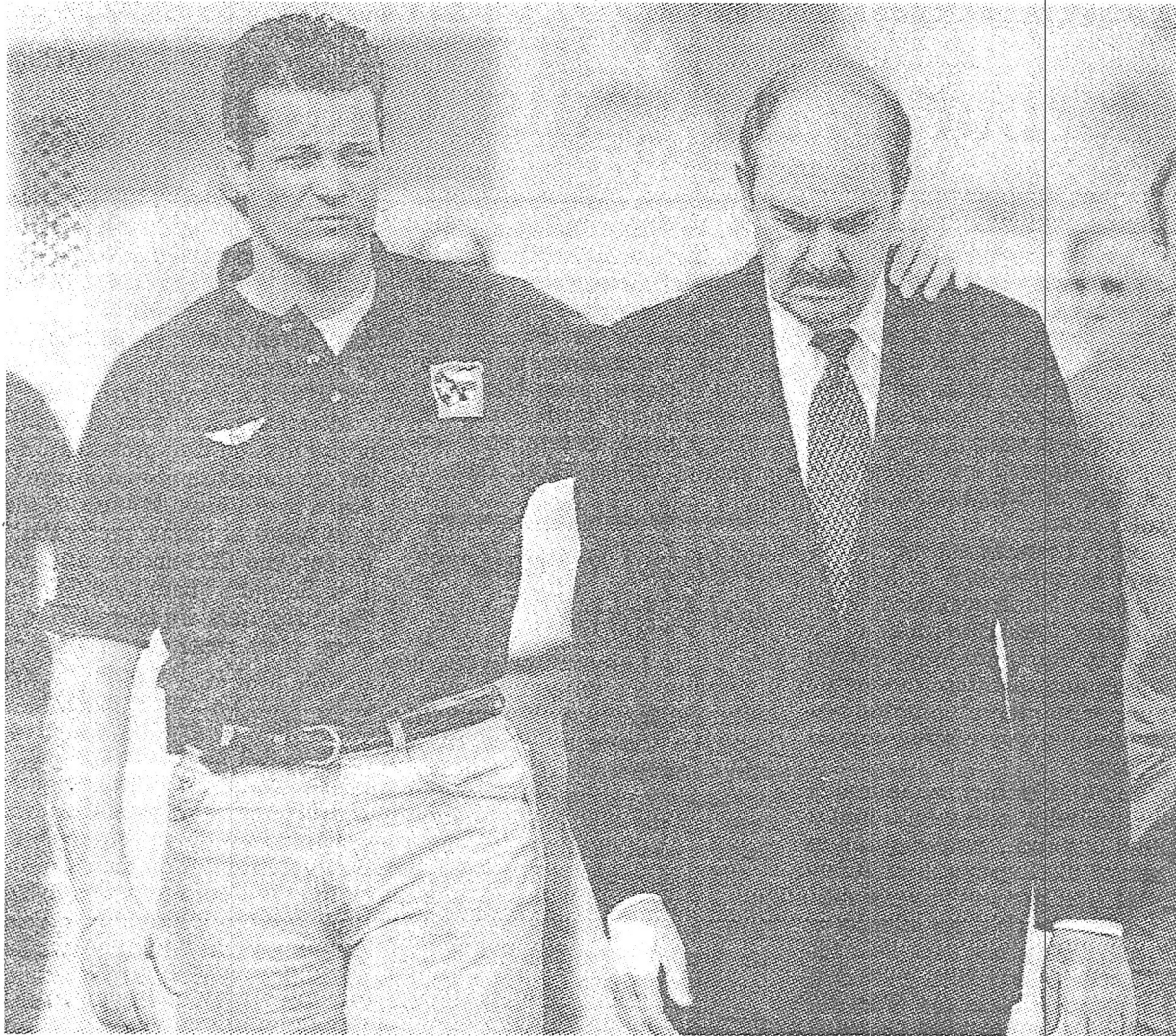


Years of Humanitarian Missions

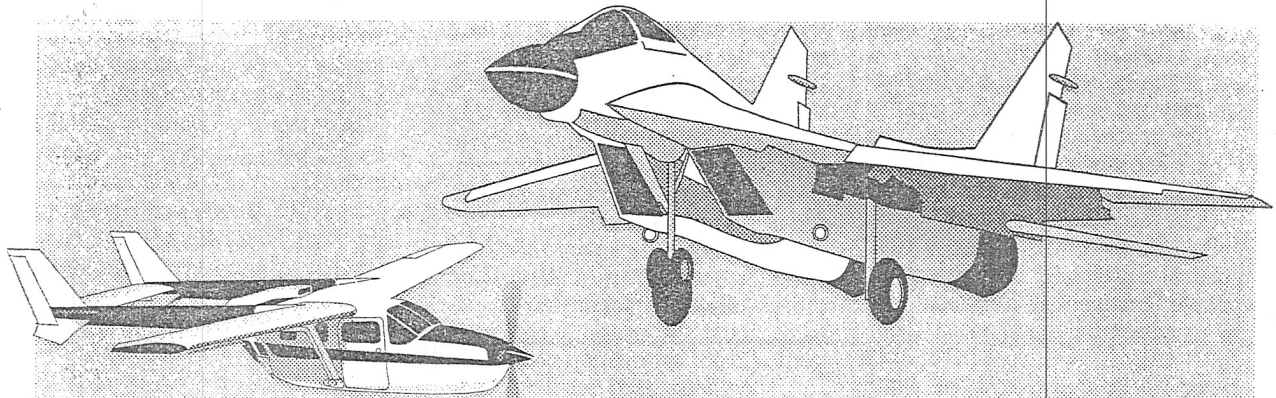


ASSOCIATED PRESS

Brothers to the Rescue pilot Guillermo Lares, left, consoles Armando Alejandro, the father of downed pilot Armando Alejandro Jr., at the group's hangar in Miami. The group has flown more than 3,000 missions since 1991.

Preceded Downing of Planes

COMPARING TWO PLANES

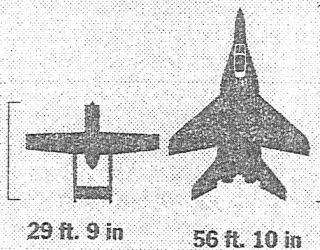


Cessna 337 Skymaster

Top speed:	190 mph
Range:	755 miles
Length:	29 ft. 9 in.
Weight, empty:	2,695 lb
Wingspan:	38 ft 2 in

MiG-29

Top speed:	1,520 mph
Range:	1,300 miles
Length:	56 ft. 10 in.
Weight, empty:	18,025 lb
Wingspan:	37 ft 3.25 in
Armaments:	Capable of carrying several types of air-to-air missiles. Also configured with a 30mm gun.



29 ft. 9 in

56 ft. 10 in

SOURCE: Jane's Information Group

BY D'ANGELO—THE WASHINGTON POST

Volunteer Fliers Had Widespread Support In Fla. Communities

By Catharine Skipp
Special to The Washington Post

MIAMI, Feb. 25—Brothers to the Rescue, the Miami-based group of unpaid part-time pilots whose two planes were shot down Saturday afternoon, inaugurated its search and rescue mission on May 15, 1991.

Since then, the group's co-founder and president, Jose Basulto, a former Bay of Pigs prisoner of war and current Miami real estate developer, has overseen the rescue of some 7,000 Cuban *balseros*, or rafters, fleeing their homeland across the Straits of Florida. That figure, according to Basulto and the U.S. Coast Guard here, reached its peak just as President Clinton reversed the three-decade policy of "paroling" all Cuban immigrants into the United States.

ed States.

The volunteer pilots for Brothers to the Rescue are mostly men and women in their twenties who fly in donated twin-engine, four-seater Cessnas. Before the shoot-down Saturday, there were five Cessnas; now there are three. In the five years since the group's inception, the pilots have flown more than 3,000 missions over the waters between the United States and Cuba to spot rafters, drop supplies and coordinate refugee rescues by the Coast Guard.

Here, in an exile community often torn by disagreements and political factioning, Brothers to the Rescue

has been virtually beyond partisan reproach. *Hermanos al Rescate* bumper stickers tag thousands of South Florida autos, from luxury sedans to broken-down clunkers.

The group's mission became the darling of the exile community and inspired corporations such as American Airlines to donate aircraft and money. Cuban American singers Willy Chirino and Gloria Estefan have helped raise funds for the organization's \$1.2 million annual operating budget.

About half of the regular pilots are not Cuban or Cuban American but are volunteering out of ethical conviction or to log flight hours in hopes of becoming commercial pilots.

"My father was a German Jew," said Stephen Walton, a pilot for American Airlines and a Brothers volunteer pilot. "There was a time when he had to run for his life, and people that didn't know him helped him, so it was karma payback time. In two years [with the Brothers], I flew more than 600 hours."



AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

At Opa-Locka Airport, Cuban Americans protest the downing of the two Cessna airplanes. The volunteer pilots were revered among Cuban exiles.

While non-exiles such as Walton fly for personal reasons, their charismatic leader, Basulto, is unabashedly anti-Castro, patriotic to his roots and fueled by a rage he never quelled. With a singular fervor that can best be understood perhaps only by members of Miami's Cuban exile community, Basulto feels entirely justified to conduct his airborne business.

"My request to the U.S. govern-

ment is, let us be," Basulto told the Miami Herald last month. "Let us act. Do not impose your designs on Cuba. Your help in the past has not been successful." That last observation could be an allusion to the botched Bay of Pigs invasion, which former soldiers such as Basulto wear as a bitter badge of dishonor. Or it could be a reference to dropping anti-Castro leaflets over Havana last July and again in January.

The United States "enticed me before to go drop bombs on Cuba," Basulto said. "Why should they bother me now if I go drop leaflets, especially about human rights?"

While the Clinton administration's change in policy in 1994 to repatriate Cuban refugees has greatly reduced the flow of rafters, the pilots

for Brothers to the Rescue are not without a mission: They fly weekly supply runs to refugees in the Bahamas and oversee the safe return to Cuba of the occasional rafter.

"They are the only folks still helping the rafter," said Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.). "It's still an apolitical humanitarian mission."

To those who questioned Saturday's alleged search and rescue mission or the purpose of the flights, Basulto's only explanation was that a supply flight was canceled by the Bahamian government at the last minute, so the *Hermanos* decided not waste the day and aviation fuel.

Basulto said the repeated warnings, "You are in danger," from the Cuban government were nothing new. He dismissed them Saturday night by saying, "They always say that." That may be true, but just a couple of years ago he received a very different message from Cuban aviation officials during his search and rescue flights. "Suerte," they radioed him. Luck.

Special correspondent Gigi Anders contributed to this report.