

# The Last Casualty Of the Bay of Pigs

## Decades After the Bitter Betrayal, The Suicide of Pepe San Roman

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By Myra MacPherson  
Washington Post Staff Writer

**O**n a Saturday evening not too long ago, Jose Perez San Roman carefully vacuumed his two-bedroom mobile home, left his mementos in orderly piles, painstakingly wrote his last letter to friends and family, then measured out enough medication to ensure an overdose.

The former commander, who in times past stood with President Kennedy as throngs cheered, planned his death as meticulously as he had orchestrated military maneuvers. His brother, Roberto, found San Roman's body in bed dressed in trousers and shirt, arms at his sides close to his body. "In position, like a soldier," recalls Roberto as tears come to his eyes.

San Roman's suicide came last month at the age of 58, but friends and family believe he died 28 years ago on the beaches of Cuba when he was the 29-year-old commander of the 1,500-strong 2506 Brigade of Cuban soldiers. Then, on April 17, 1961, he watched in horror as his troops were slaughtered in the Bay of Pigs invasion as they waited in vain for promised support from the United States.

There were many tragedies of the Bay of Pigs assault; the lost life of Jose "Pepe" San Roman was a consummate sorrow.

A cadet and officer who earned highest honors in his native Cuba, San Roman was picked by the CIA to command



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Roberto and Pepe San Roman with President Kennedy in December 1962.



BY BILL COOKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Roberto San Roman, with a 1964 photograph of his brother, Pepe.

the invasion because of qualities everyone remembers—steady, professional leadership tempered with goodness.

He was also remarkably trusting, a man who had "absolute faith in the support he was going to get," recalls Alfredo Duran, another Bay of Pigs veteran. That is why he could call on the Brigade to salute the Cuban flag as it was raised at sunset on the transport ship Blagar as they neared the coast of Cuba. The Cuban national anthem was sung. They were invincible. Liberation was theirs.

See SAN ROMAN, C4, Col. 1

JFK had  
not promised  
air cover

C4 TUESDAY, OCTOBER 17, 1989

# Pepe

SAN ROMAN, From C1

Roberto, who fought at his brother's side during the three-day battle, said, "During our military upbringing in Cuba and through all the barrage of movies from Hollywood, we always thought the might of the United States armed forces was such that they would succeed in whatever they got involved in. As plans changed from guerrilla warfare to a task force brigade, we thought, 'There is no chance Castro can win.'"

"One of the things that always bothered my brother later was that he never questioned any of the American plans."

The guilt and sorrow and sense of betrayal that haunted Pepe San Roman for the rest of his life began in those frantic last hours at Playa Giron.

San Roman's pleas for help to the Blagar remain chilling to this day. *At dawn:* "Do you people realize how desperate the situation is? Do you back us or quit? All we want is low jet air cover ... need it badly or cannot survive."

*An hour later, 6:13 a.m.:* "Blue Beach under attack. ... Where is promised air cover?" *7:12 a.m.:* "Enemy on trucks coming from Red Beach are right now 3 kilometers from Blue Beach." *8:15 a.m.:* "Situation critical ... need urgently air support." *9:14 a.m.:* "Where the hell is jet cover?" *9:55 a.m.:* "Can you throw something into this vital point in battle? Anything. Just let jet pilots loose." The messages came quickly toward the end: "In water. Out of ammo. Enemy closing in. Help must arrive in next hour. Send all available aircraft now."

In his book, "The Bay of Pigs," Haynes Johnson wrote, "through all the chaos and despair of defeat, Pepe retained the calm that was his hallmark. Those who heard him on the radio that day ... heard the quiet voice, sounding more tired, edged more with anger and bitterness but still determined and still calm."

The weary men fought on the cries of the wounded echoing in the broiling sun. Pepe saw a best friend in a jeep lying there bleeding all over, as if he had exploded inside. He was lying there as a person that is going to die very soon ... he told Johnson, "and he had the courage to tell me, 'I may not see it but I am sure we will win.'

And then he shouted, and I will never forget it, 'Beat them! Beat them!'"

Shortly after 4 that afternoon San Roman sent his last message before retreating to the woods with what was left of his brigade: "Am destroying all my equipment and communications. Tanks are in sight. I have nothing to fight with. I cannot wait for you."

## In Remembrance

Roberto, at 54, looks like the comfortable businessman he now is. Warrior tautness has given way to a slight paunch. Wounded in those last hours of battle, Roberto escaped; but he was 20 days at sea before rescue, thinking that his brother was dead. Pepe San Roman, in turn, was convinced of his younger brother's death. Fidel Castro, confronting his prize prisoner in San Roman's cell, told him a month later that Roberto was alive.

Roberto's voice cracks as he looks back over Pepe's life—his golden promise, the days of battle and almost two years of prison. Then fame and obscurity, and the ordeal of trying to survive the demons of his memories.

"If all of this had not happened in Cuba, he would have lived all his life a happy man," Roberto believes. Historical accounts praise the valor of the Cuban soldiers against impossible odds; blame for the bungled mission centered on the CIA and the Kennedy administration. But this was no consolation for Pepe San Roman. The commander was, in effect, a one-man metaphor for the feelings of betrayal, defeat and survival guilt that would later haunt a generation of Vietnam veterans.

"He took the defeat all into himself," says Johnson, who spent months with San Roman while writing the

book. "He was a sweet, sweet person, if that term can be applied to a military commander."

Says Roberto, "We all felt, and he should have felt, that we were proud of having hit Castro the hardest with so little supplies. That was enough for me to survive the betrayal, but being in charge, Pepe just couldn't."

## A Cuban Youth

San Roman, a bright and artistically inclined youth, was called by his nickname Pepe. His family was poor, and their bid for respectability and local prominence came through the army. His father, a second lieutenant at the age of 18, was a self-made officer. His greatest desire was that his sons get an education. He insisted that his children study English at night. "When we came to this country," says Roberto, "we learned what a gift our father had

given us."

Unable to afford the university in Havana, Pepe and Roberto went to military school, where they quickly excelled. Pepe ranked first in his class and became captain cadet, in charge of 250 cadets. "I was first sergeant cadet," recalls Roberto with a smile. "I was supposed to be tough and I was." But Pepe's style was different. "Instead of 'you do this' and 'you do that,' first he talked to them, got their cooperation and always gave a person a chance. Always. Even though he was strict, he would always let you know what you had to do not to get in trouble."

Driven to excel, Pepe started to work at 15. "But I can remember him helping others, staying up at night to help classmates with physics and calculus," says Roberto. For years the younger brother cherished the intricate handcarved toys—buses complete with passengers, for example—that Pepe created for him.

All his life Pepe clung to pictures of a distant time in Cuba. They were among the keepsakes given to his family with the suicide letter. His 1953 cadet yearbook shows a handsome, slim 22-year-old winning a trophy for excellence in horseback riding. It was a life of fencing, jumping horses, long infantry marches, rumba dances with men in ceremonial blue dress uniform and their dates in crinolines. Studious Pepe said his main ambition was to "gain some weight and sell his Lincoln for \$50 and to sleep." He met and fell in love with a neighborhood girl and they married very young. They divorced about 10 years ago when Pepe was no longer the man she once knew.

After training in the states at Fort Benning, Ga. (where he graduated fourth among 81 men in 1956), Pepe returned to Cuba and Fulgencio Batista's army. But the San Romans, father and sons, abhorred the excesses of Batista's army and were among a group of officers arrested for conspiracy to overthrow Batista.

It was the first of three times Pepe San Roman would face Cuban jails. "My brother and I were in the same cell," recalls Roberto. "They tortured us psychologically—what was going to happen to our family, how they were going to hurt our father. Two months later Batista left, and that day we became the heroes of the same people who had us in jail!"

Although the San Romans did not side with Castro, they tried to make things work in the earliest days of the revolution. Pepe was among a group of officers commissioned to clean up and restructure the army. Roberto was in hiding because he had been among Batista's troops who fought Castro in the mountains: "My brother

was able to get a lot of friends out of jail; he was the one who always hid me in different places." Pepe helped many to escape to the United States until he was arrested, this time by Castro.

When released in 1959, Pepe and Roberto left for the United States. Roberto recalls the terrible "sense of guilt and strain as we left our family behind. We had no promise of any kind of financial aid to our families. It bothered him and me a lot. But we were thinking we'd be back in Cuba in a year or six months." Their parents, wives and children were able to follow

them to Miami at the time the two brothers were training to return to "liberate our homeland" with the Bay of Pigs invasion.

### After the Debacle

For 20 months, San Roman had ample time to brood over the Bay of Pigs debacle as he languished in Castro's prison. He was often in solitary confinement and never had a visitor. In a letter to his father, he wrote, "I had to order the troops to retreat. . . . God help them, I told myself, what right do I have to order my men to sacrifice their honor? What right do I have to order men to go on building Cuban widows, only for honor. . . . Our purpose was not to kill Cubans, our purpose was to win a war that will bring peace and happiness to all Cubans, and this war was lost to us."

Later he was to write how he "hated the United States, and felt that I had been betrayed. . . . Many times I had the feeling that we were thrown there to see what happened, because they were sure that Fidel was going to capture us and put all of us in the firing squad and we would be killed and there would be a great scandal in the whole world. . . ."

San Roman and two other brigade leaders were placed in the *bartolinas*, the worst cells. "I thought that only a pig could live there," San Roman told Johnson. Rats and cockroaches filled the dark cell; the toilet was a hole in the floor. At one point, they were allowed to join the men of Brigade 2506 and San Roman immediately assumed command—ordering the his men to wear black armbands and form honor guards when they learned that five prisoners had been shot.

Castro seemed fascinated with his major adversary and visited his cell for long talks. In Johnson's book, San Roman related how he talked back to Castro, decrying the acts of a Castro officer who had put San Roman's men "on that trailer truck and killed ten of

them. That was a crime! That was assassination!" Castro shouted: "San Roman, you don't deserve to live." Replied San Roman, "That is the only thing that we agree about. I don't want to live any more. I have been played with by the United States and now you are playing with me here. . . . Kill me, but don't play with me any more." Castro reportedly walked away.

After 20 months of waiting while the United States and Castro haggled over the terms and the amount of money, brigade prisoners were finally ransomed for more than \$50 million in food and medical supplies.

It was nighttime in December 1962 when the last plane load of released prisoners landed in Miami. San Roman was asked to disembark first so that the brigade members could salute him. Waiting among other brigade members who had escaped was his weeping brother, Roberto. Taken by bus to ecstatic mobs, Pepe San Roman was engulfed by brigade members "who tried to take us on their shoulders."

Recalled San Roman in "Bay of Pigs": "Then I saw my mother and then I saw my wife and I ran to them but the crowd wouldn't let me get to them. Finally I got to them and I almost killed my mother and my wife and my kids with the embrace I gave them. It was a very great moment because I never thought I would see them again." He heard the words of praise coming from the microphones, as if off in a distance, hearing little of what was said "because I was just crazy with happiness."

It was one of the last times Pepe San Roman would feel such total joy.

### Beyond the Homecoming

At their homecoming celebration, 80,000 cheered San Roman and the other warriors in the Orange Bowl, as Jacqueline Kennedy spoke, in Spanish, of their bravery and the president stood solemnly beside San Roman.

But all too soon San Roman was left with the lonely ordeal of trying to forget.

For a while, his friendship with Robert Kennedy helped. For several months, the Kennedys provided San



Pepe San Roman in 1983.

Roman and his family with a furnished home near them at Hickory Hill. Some evenings, Robert Kennedy would ride over, bringing an extra horse for San Roman and they would ride off into the woods of McLean, Va. San Roman's letters from Ethel and Robert Kennedy, warm and personal, were among the souvenirs left to his family at his death.

The question is asked, after the sense of betrayal felt by San Roman and so many members of the brigade, how they could work again with the Kennedys and the United States. (Many of them joined the Army and the CIA.) Roberto, who was sent by Robert Kennedy to Central American countries to seek aid for a second invasion, says, "There was nobody else in this hemisphere that wanted to help us. The only open door for Pepe's men, whether financial help or education or another try at Cuba, was the American government—the same government that left us there. And so Pepe ate his words and his pride and went with them."

Roberto believes the Kennedys had a sense of guilt and wanted to help, but even those offers were slights to San Roman's talents.

"Pepe doesn't know what he was going to do and he told Robert Kennedy he wanted to work with his hands. He was a beautiful artist," says Roberto, producing a detailed sketch that Pepe once did of Roberto's daughter. "So what does Kennedy find for him? A construction job at the lowest pay

and the hardest work—moving concrete blocks. And then Pepe would come home from work and maybe find Kennedy waiting to go on a horseback ride with him. What kind of insensitivity! I could never believe it.”

San Roman decided to join the Army—“that’s what he knew how to do.” Roberto starts pacing the floor in agitation. “Instead of fighting communism in Cuba 90 miles away, we had to go across the world to fight communism.” San Roman was now a paratrooper, in the special pathfinders unit, and when he got orders to go to Vietnam, Roberto planted the seed that he should resign. “Al Haig told him he was going to be court-martialed, accusing him of cowardice,” Roberto recalls today.

One of the few times San Roman ever pulled rank, so to speak, was at this moment, in June 1965, when he wrote to Lyndon Johnson. Bitterness laces the letter as he writes about the United States’ decision to “back off from supporting the 2506 assault brigade which I commanded, in order to protect the best interests of this big nation and the world, as the late president told me. . . .

“This morning I talked by phone to Colonel Haig . . . to explain the situation and tell him I wanted to resign my commission. Colonel Haig felt he had the right to insult a veteran of two wars against communism and implied . . . that I was in the service just for the money, and that I was trying to get off now just because of the risks involved. . . . I think you will agree with me Mr. President in [sic] that the

methods of this gentleman are not the best to make friends among allies.”

Shortly after, San Roman received an honorable discharge. A pink carbon of his letter to the president remained with San Roman to his death.

Roberto now says, “so that was another disillusionment, another lack of respect from the Army to him.”

### Down and Out

Eventually, San Roman, his wife and four children settled in Miami near Roberto. San Roman drifted in and out of jobs; boat dealer at 39, truck operator at 50. He moved to Houston in 1982 and managed three tractor-trailer combination trucks. During the Texas oil crisis, he closed the business and returned to Miami in 1986.

The last decade of his life was especially troublesome to family and friends as they watched his depressions and pain. “He couldn’t communicate, couldn’t concentrate,” says Roberto. His bitterness toward the United States had subsided but he still “lived

the invasion.”

Many brigade members, like Roberto, refused to get involved in the Bay of Pigs veterans association—“the meetings, anniversaries and celebrations. Perhaps for me it was an automatic way of survival and peace of mind,” muses Roberto. For others, however, the Bay of Pigs was the penultimate moment in their lives, to be invoked, even in sorrow. Brigade friends toasted their commandante Pepe San Roman this past summer at a tribute that raised \$6,000.

But San Roman’s depressions deepened. Once again, he and his brother worked side by side, but this time it was in the world of business, not battle. Roberto set aside a corner of his marine supply store for Pepe, who made, sold and installed vertical blinds. “He was doing very well, compared to before,” says Roberto.

But 10 days before his death last month, San Roman began planning his end. He gave some pending business to a cousin. His sister, Laly de La Cruz, who Roberto managed to get out of Cuba so many years ago, returned home one night in that last week to find a message on her machine from Pepe: “My sister, it is very late and you’re not home. I just called to tell you I love you very much and don’t you ever forget it.”

His sister nervously dialed Pepe’s number, got no answer, slept very little and called again early the next morning. There was no answer. She went to the store and told Roberto, who sent her immediately to Pepe’s home. As Pepe greeted her, his sister made believe that she had just stopped by to say hello on the way to work. Roberto saw his brother only twice that week at work. Pepe instead visited his grandchildren, bringing trinkets of marbles and small coins.

Then on Saturday night, Sept. 9, Roberto phoned about 8 o’clock and

Pepe told him his leg hurt from a flare-up of phlebitis. “I said, ‘On Monday, let’s make a tour of the medical supply houses and find out if there is a machine, like a water massage, for your leg,’” Robert recalls. He says his brother replied, “‘Sure, let’s do that on Monday.’ I asked him what he was doing and he said, ‘I am writing.’ I didn’t like that, because normally when he writes, he is depressed, mulling over the same things.

“Late at night he cleaned the house, put everything mentioned in the letter in sight, so that we could find them.” Then Pepe drove to the home of an uncle and placed his final letter in one of the cars. On Sunday morning, when his aunt found the letter, she frantically called Pepe’s sister, who called

Roberto and then 911.

“When I arrived,” recalls Roberto, “the police were already there.”

The letter was addressed to his entire family in order—two sons and two daughters, sister and brother, uncles and cousins. San Roman ordered his body cremated and the ashes, sprinkled in the Brazos River in Texas where he once played with his children. The ashes stayed in a closet in Roberto’s home until sister Laly took them to Texas last weekend.

He gave his avocado tree and a book on Cuba to Roberto, his paratrooper jump master wings to his sons.

The day Roberto and Laly had dreaded for years had arrived. As he reads the letter now, Roberto does not stop the tears that touch his cheeks. In his elegant script, Pepe San Roman wrote, “Great is the sorrow, for the shock I am about to give you. I am sorry but I have to do it. There is no other way. This decision is taken after 20 years of struggle against myself. You all know that I have fought back with all my might, with all my will and tried every course available from the sublime to the ridiculous, to no avail. But I am not quitting. I am only dying so my death serves a purpose. I am responsible, not guilty, for my last moments only. These I have done not in a moment of desperation, depression or self rejection. These I have done talking with God constantly for the last 10 days in almost complete isolation from others.”

“God,” he wrote, “does not punish guys like me to a life sentence of the soul.”

### An Epitaph

An epitaph of sorts appears in Pepe San Roman’s most recent résumés and job applications.

His “work experience” included “political imprisonments.”

For previous employer, San Roman listed “2506 ASSAULT BRIGADE.” Under job title he wrote “Brigade Commander. Annual salary: none. Supervisor’s name: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.”

And, finally, “Reasons for leaving: Obvious.”