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THE MAGAZINE FOR MEN



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GEORGE LOIS/CARL FISHER

## How I Signed Up at \$250 a Month for The Big Parade through Havana Bla-Bla-Bla and Wound Up in Guatemala with the CIA

A hipster-mercenary's  
version of the Cuban Affair  
by TERRY SOUTHERN

One night not long ago I was sitting around the White Horse Tavern, in New York City's colorful Greenwich Village, having a quick game of chess with a self-styled internationally famous blitz-chess champ. Six snappy ones and I pretty well had the game sewed up, when the champ suddenly said: "Say, see that guy at the bar—he was in the Cuban fiasco."

"Cut the diversionary crap, Champ," I countered, not bothering to look around, tapping the board of play instead, "and face up to the power." I had slapped the old de Sade double cul-de-sac on his Lady—and, as Bill Seward says, that's a rumble nobody can cool. "No, man," insisted the champ in petulance, "I'm not kidding—just ask him and see."

Well, to make a short preface even terse (the champ, by the way, interfered with the pieces when I did look around, and so eked out another shoddy win), I investigated further to find that it was, in fact, true: this man had participated in the Cuban fiasco, of April 17, 1961, right up to the eleventh-hour moment of the fiasco proper, "Bad Day at the Pig Bay." His story was so interesting that my immediate hope was to share it with whatever sort of sensitive readership I could muster, and to that end I invited him over to my place for some drinks and a couple of hours tape-recording of his curious tale. Here then is the story of Boris Grgurevich, thirty-three, born and raised in New York City; it is a verbatim transcript of the recorded interview:

Well, now let me ask you this, how did you get involved in this Cuban fiasco?

It was cold, man . . . you know, like January. You remember that big snowstorm? When they pulled all the cars off the street? Yeah, well that was it . . . Cold. And this friend of mine, Ramón, comes by. I know him ten, fifteen years, but you know, haven't seen him for a while, so there's a big bla-bla hello scene . . . and he was running from something, I mean that was pretty obvious, but he was always very high-strung, moving around a lot—Miami, L.A., Mexico—and right away he says, "Man, let's go to Miami, where it's WARM." And he had this car, and well, I mean it wasn't difficult him talking me into going, because of the weather and all. So that was the first thing—we went down to Miami.

Had he mentioned anything about Cuba before you left for Miami?

No, man, he didn't say anything about Cuba—or maybe he did mention it, you know, fleetingly . . . like "bla-bla-bla the Cuban

situation," or some crap like that, but we were just going to Miami. I mean he probably did mention it, because he was born in Cuba, you dig, and speaks Spanish and so on—but Castro was all right with me . . . I mean he had that beard, you know, and he seemed pretty interesting. No, we didn't talk about that, we get down to Miami, and we have three great days at the track, and then we have four terrible ones—we were reduced to moving in with Jimmy Drew, a guy I know there. And so Ramón's taking me around—I mean, he knows Miami, see, and there's a liquor store in the neighborhood and he introduces me to this guy owns the liquor store—nice guy to know, owns a liquor store, and we get very friendly, you know, and he's giving us bottles of rum. Well, he's Cuban, dig, and he and Ramón start yakking it up about Cuba and "bla-bla Castro" and so on, and now he's talking about the "invasion" and how he's going to get back what they took from him and all that jive. And naturally I'm agreeing with him—well I mean he keeps laying this rum on us, about three bottles a day . . . but he's, well he was obviously full of crap, a kind of middle-aged hustler businessman . . . and all these cats hanging around the liquor store all looked like hoods, but sort of failing, you know? Anyway, we were meeting all these hood-faces hanging around this liquor store, mostly Cubans, or born in Cuba, and one of them took us to this . . . well, they had this recruiting station, you know, where they're all signing up for the invasion, and Ramón, well he's getting more and more excited about this—he's a salesman actually, I mean that's what he does, you know, in real life, sell things, and so he's selling himself on this idea, invading Cuba . . . and of course he was selling me on it too.

Well, now this recruiting—this station—was this being done quite openly?

Openly? Well, man, it was open twenty-four hours a day. You know, like in the middle of town.

This was about the time Cuba raised this question in the U.N. and the U.S. delegation so emphatically denied it. If recruitment was being done as openly as you suggest, how could they deny it?

Well, use your bean, man—what are they supposed to do, admit it?

All right, now let me ask you this, what was Ramón's idea exactly—I mean, if the invasion was successful, did he think he would get something out of it?

Well, Ramón's what you might call an essentialist—and he just more or less figures that the man with the gun is, you know, the man with the gun.

And how did you feel about it?

The money was the thing that interested me—I mean we'd had these four very bad days at the track, and I had no money. Well, they were offering two-fifty a month and, you know, room and board, and... let's see, what else... yeah, a trip to Guatemala. But I guess the main thing was these cats at the recruiting station, giving this big spiel about "bla-bla-bla the American Government, the C.I.A., the U.S. Army," and so on. I mean the picture they were painting had battleships in it, Dad—you know, rockets against pitchforks. Well man, I mean how could we lose? Cuba versus America—are you kidding?

So it was pretty obvious even then that it was an American project?

Well of course, man—that was the whole pitch. You don't think they could have got these guys in there any other way, do you? I mean most of these guys were just sort of tired, middle-aged businessmen, or young hustlers... they weren't going to do anything, anybody could see that. It was like they were recruiting for the parade, you know, to march through Havana—and these guys were joining up to be in the parade, that's all. I mean there was a slight pretense at a front—the *Juan Paula Company*, that's the way the checks were paid, from the *Juan Paula Company*—and then there were some of these C.I.A. faces running around, trying to make a cloak-and-dagger scene out of it, but that was just sort of a game with them. I mean everybody in Miami knew about the recruiting.

Did you meet other Americans who wanted to go?

Well, they didn't want Americans, you see, they wanted Cubans—for the big parade, dig? So you had to be Cuban, or if you were American, like Ramón, you had to be born in Cuba. But yeah, there were some other Americans down there, trying to get in—guys from the South mostly, these real... you know, anything-is-better-than-home types. Most of them had been in the Army or something like that. But they didn't want them—they wanted Cubans.

So how did you get in?

Well, man, I mean they didn't make an issue of it or anything like that, not as far as I was concerned, because we had gotten sort of friendly with them, these C.I.A. cats... and they weren't bad guys really—I mean they thought they were doing the right thing and they thought we were doing the right thing, so we had a pretty good relationship with them. They were nice guys actually—just sort of goofy.

Where did you see the first C.I.A. person? At the recruiting station?

That's right, they would fool around this recruiting station... but they were sort of flunky types. The first, what you might call "higher-echelon" C.I.A. face, was this guy directing the loading, you know, when we left for the airport. Young, dapper, sort of prematurely grey, crew-cut, very square, would-be hip-looking cat. I guess he was a faggot really.

How did you get to the airport?

Well, one night about a week after we signed up and had finished taking these physicals they said, "Okay, this is it"—you know, very dramatic—and they picked us up, there were about ninety of us altogether, in these trucks... sort of like moving vans, and, well, went to the airport.

Was this the Miami International Airport?

No man, it was some kind of abandoned military airport. Took us about an hour to get there—then we were inside this huge hangar, and that's where they issued the uniforms. Khaki uniforms, shoes, and all that jazz. Then we get on the plane... C-47... with the windows taped up, you know, no light, very cloak-and-dagger. And the trip... well, we took off that night and landed the next morning. Guatemala. And it was hot, man... wow, was it hot. Cats falling out all over the place—I mean, these guys were in no shape to start with, and then this heat. Well, there were these trucks there to pick us up—sort of red, commercial-type trucks, like farm trucks, you know, big open trucks. And they took us from the airstrip to the camp—that was outside Retalhuleu, the airstrip—and it takes about an hour and a half to get to Trax, the camp, the last half hour very steep, like straight up a mountain. First we pass a Guatemalan outpost, then a Cuban one. And it's all lava—the campsite was all lava... cut right out of the side of this mountain about 8,000 feet up. It was laid out in three levels, you dig, like huge terraces. The first level had the firing range, parade ground, the second had the barracks, mess hall, and so on, and then at the top was where the C.I.A.

lived—separate, with their own mess hall, movie, and all that. Anyway it's all lava... like crushed coral, you know, crunch, crunch, everywhere you step. And it was supposed to be a secret camp, but of course everyone knew about it—I mean they were fifteen hundred guys up there eventually, blasting away all day... rifles, machine guns, mortars. And it was written up in all the newspapers and magazines—including *Bohemia Libre*. Know that one? It's the big anti-Communist magazine there.

Was this formerly a Guatemalan army camp?

No, man, this was formerly nothing. They were still working on it when I got there—I mean the camp was built for this, you know, this particular project, and they were still working on it.

Well, had you gotten to know any of the other men yet? What were they like?

You mean the guys on the plane? Well, let's see, there was this guy, Martinez... he was about fifty-two or -three, had been in the Batista army, a clerk—beautiful handwriting... well, you know the type, man, a clerk. And he was there because that was all he knew—the army and how to write. I mean that was the whole story with him. And then you get someone else, like this kid Raúl—young country boy, thinks his old man has been beat for a couple of cows or something. Very sincere cat. Well, you know, man, there were all kinds, like any army. Mostly pretty simple cats though—well, you know, like any army.

Can you describe the camp more fully?

It was the usual scene, man—a camp. A military camp. The barracks... well, a couple of them were quonset huts, but most of them were just ordinary wooden barracks—hold about seventy guys, something like that. Mess hall, orderly room, quartermaster, motor pool, and so on... like an ordinary American Army camp... a little shabbier maybe, you know, more makeshift.

How was the food?

Well, that was a pretty funny scene all right—that whole mess-hall scene. They had these three American cooks, you dig, and lot of Guatemalans to do KP—with a couple of translators, you know, so the cooks could tell the Guatemalans what to do—and the food was okay, sort of typical American fare, but the Cubans didn't particularly dig it. I mean they like different things, you know—black beans, rice, pork, they eat a lot of pork. Anyway a lot of times they wouldn't eat in the mess hall—they would cop a pig somewhere, you know, off a farmer, somebody like that... trade him a gun for it, anything—I mean, there were, you know, quite a few little black-market operations going on. So they would have this pig... a live, squealing pig, man, and they'd butcher it right outside the barracks and build a big fire and cook it. They have a ball—a kind of little *fiesta*, you know, singing and dancing, lushing it up, cooking this pig. It was a crazy scene.

Did you start your training right away?

Yeah, you started off as a group... They would keep all the guys who arrived together as a group, right through Basic Training—you know, marching, calisthenics, rifle range, and so on. And then they would train you for some specialty—like mortar, machine gun, or something. But we didn't get started until the next day. I mean there was a little confusion when we arrived, because there had just been a take-over the night before—a Batista coup—and the San Román boys had taken over. These were two brothers, Pepe and Roberto San Román—they were very tight with the Americans. See, the Americans never knew what was happening—I mean, they lived apart, ate apart, none of them spoke Spanish, and they never had any idea what was going on in camp—so if some guy came to them and said "bla-bla-bla Communist plot" or some crap like that, why they had to believe him—they really had no choice, they always had to take the word of the guy who was telling them. So they'd say: "Okay, you take over—get those Commies outta there!"

Had there actually been a plot?

No, man, this was just *politticking*. There was a lot of maneuvering going on, you dig—I mean, these guys were sort of divvying up the spoils, you know, even before they got there. That's how sure of themselves they were. And so the San Román brothers finally came out on top. Short-lived though it proved to be.

Anyway they had these three cats in the can—not the regular stockade, but a tin-roof shack built just to hold these guys. They were the ones who had taken all the weight in the coup—you know, supposed to be Communist spies. It was like that shack in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, and those cats were in there for three

months, man. Nobody was allowed near them except whoever was guarding the shack—and the C.I.D. guy who brought their chow . . . and, that's right, there were a couple of G-2 faces would question them sometimes. But they never cracked—I saw them the day they came out—they were strong cats, man.

Do you suppose they were Communist spies?

Well, I think they were just strong, dangerous cats, man—who, you know, disagreed with the Batista clique. So when they pulled off this coup, these guys caught all the heat.

So the San Román brothers became . . . what, the commandants of the camp?

Well, Frank Bender, the C.I.A. guy, was in charge of the operation—I mean he was in charge of the *whole* thing, you dig, but Pepe San Román was *nominally* the camp commander, from the, you know, Cuban point of view—and Roberto, he was in charge of the heavy-weapons company, the four-point-two mortars . . . that was the most important company in the outfit.

What were the American instructors like?

Well, they were all specialists—you know, *instructors*, mostly from the Army: World War II, Korean War, or young cats from, I don't know, *Ohio* or some weird place like that. There were about thirty-five or forty of them. And it was just a gig for them. They were getting seven-fifty, and they were usually pretty conscientious about whatever it was they were teaching—they didn't have any particular interest in the political side of it. They were sort of typical Army faces—but *specialists*, you know, pretty humorless cats, except for the guy training the paratroopers, and he was about half off his nut. And some of them, being from the South and all, were very color conscious—they didn't really *like* the Cubans, you know, because they were different. And of course they were very down on any kind of *mixture*, and the Cubans . . . well, my company commander, for example, was a mulatto—big six-foot-two cat, very temperamental, would shout himself hoarse, that kind of guy, you know? A very uneven cat—one day he would be great, outgoing, very friendly, and the next a mean mother. Anyway the fact that these guys didn't really dig the Cubans, and were down on color, and couldn't speak Spanish—it gave, well, a kind of comic-opera quality to the thing in front.

Would you talk to them about what was going on?

Well, you know, they don't crack—I mean you ask them a direct question and they fade you right out. But, of course, in most cases they didn't know what was going on themselves. Like we used to buzz these instructors—you know, "When are we leaving bla-bla-bla?" but they just "Man, we don't know, we're waiting for orders," that kind of thing.

I don't understand why they couldn't get C.I.A. people who spoke Spanish.

Well, man, I'm inclined to believe that they'd rather *not* have guys who speak the language—I really think their fear is that deep . . . you know? I mean they figure that if these cats get to *talking* to these people they might be in some way *corrupted* by them, you dig. Like they don't trust their own boys, that's what it amounts to. And you can see their point in a way—because there was really nothing holding these cats together . . . they were all there for different reasons, mostly *personal* reasons—and of course because they thought they were going to win, that was the main thing. But there was no single idea behind it—you know, the sort of sense of purpose you need to pull off something like that. There were too many guys just looking out for number one—you know, *collectors* . . . they collected things. When it came time to ship out for the invasion, some of those guys had so much *stuff*, man—stuff they had copped . . . transistor radios, binoculars, anything they could cop. They would be carrying an extra pack full of this crap—I'm surprised they could even get off the landing craft with all that weight. They thought they were going on a picnic. Not all of them naturally—I mean there were some sensitive faces there too—sort of fatalistic cats, like this kid Juan on the mortars . . . he used to say: "Land on Monday, get captured on Tuesday, and shot on Wednesday." Very sensitive, sort of morbid type. So it was like that, all fragmented. A lot of different factions and ideas. But the real nucleus of the outfit, the heavy-weapon company, was very strong—they knew their jobs, and they were ready to fight. Well, they were just *wasted*, guys like that. And then there was a huge bunch of goof-offs—cats who had never done *anything*, and weren't going to start now. A lot of them stayed in the guardhouse, you know, like *permanently*—and they had it pretty

good . . . they would let them out for chow, they'd get to go to the head of the line, that sort of thing. Some of them were very popular with the men, like clowns. They let all of them out just before the invasion, and a lot of them were made sergeants and so on.

What were the weapons you trained with?

Well, we started with the carbine and the M-1, then the M-3—that's the one that replaced the Thompson, you know, looks like a grease gun? And the Army .45, of course. And then the bazooka, machine gun, and mortar—finally the heavy mortars. That was the largest thing they had . . . these four-point-two mortars. And the Cubans dug that part of it—you know, the shooting. Especially the mortars—they were really *good* with the mortars. Primitive cats, you know, very good with their hands . . . and they'd do great things with the mortars, like dead reckoning, very unorthodox, and it would wig these C.I.A. faces, because they were all specialists—you know, they had learned by the numbers, and that's how they were trying to teach it—and one of these cats, like a young farm boy, would step up and just estimate the distance and drop it right in the top of a barrel about seventy-five yards away . . . and it would flip the instructor. "Tell him that's not the right way to do it," he'd say to the interpreter.

Were all the weapons American?

*Everything* was American, man. Blankets . . . well, you know *everything*.

What else do you recall about the training?

The training was a big drag, except on the firing range, that was pretty interesting. Very corny lectures and training films . . . well, there were a couple of paratrooper films that weren't bad. And we had this group, you know, which was *training* to be paratroopers, and they were a gas . . . about a hundred and twenty guys, they were being trained by this guy from California, very funny cat, like something out of a movie, about forty years old, very *tough*—you know the type, fires a 30-caliber machine gun from the hip. And this was the toughest training on the base. But it was a big joke—I mean *this* cat and his paratroopers, it was like Ali Baba and his hundred and twenty thieves. They would go through the most outlandish things you can imagine in order to cop a pig or something off another company—like one guy pretending he's hanging himself, you know, to attract attention, while the other cats cop the pig. They were a wild bunch of studs, man—the paratroopers.

Did you have any tanks there?

No, the tanks never came to the camp—they were put directly on the ship. The tank crews arrived along toward the end, but they had already been trained—in New Orleans I believe.

What did you train for after you finished Basic?

Well, Ramón and I decided that *telegraphy* might be a good thing—I mean they wanted some guys to train for it, so five of us went into that. But it wasn't as easy as it sounded—you know, *da-da-dit* all day long in a box about the size of a phone booth. Very hot, man, and *coffee flies* . . . terrible, you have to hit them mop-mop-mop and nothing happens. Extremely difficult to kill. The telegraphy hut was right next to the *church*, you dig—it was just a shack, but there were these *priests* . . . not Cuban, *Spanish* . . . Spanish priests, man—they had imported these cats, and *they were something*. Very pretentious, very contemptuous of the Cubans—spoke Spanish with a lisp, you know? And one of these cats was too much—weird face, had a weird turn of mind . . . he had been there when they were building the camp, and a guy had been killed . . . fell from a cliff where they were working. And this priest . . . well, we'd step outside the hut, for a smoke, and he would engage us in conversation, like "Why don't you come to church and bla-bla-bla?"—so we'd talk to him and he'd tell about this guy falling over the cliff, but in extreme detail, man . . . how they found the body, how there were traces of where he had clutched at the grass trying to keep from going over the edge, and so on.

When did you learn that you weren't going to take part in the invasion itself?

Not until the very last minute. We had *no idea* we weren't going, and it was a big drag man—I mean we'd been there *three months*, dig, and we wanted to *go*. We bugged the hell out of the Americans, Ramón and I, trying to get on that ship—but they wouldn't crack. "There's nothing we can do, your names weren't on the list," was all they would say. There were fourteen of us who didn't go—Ramón, myself, Molinet, who was the quartermaster, the guy in charge of the motor pool, one of the priests, two (Continued on page 140)

**HOW I SIGNED UP AT \$250 A MONTH FOR THE BIG PARADE**

(Continued from page 71) guys who were clerks, and about seven guys who were on weapons. We were all sore as hell about it—because of course we were sure we were going to win... but it wasn't just that—I mean we'd been through a lot together during those three months, and we wanted to go with them.

Well, it wasn't coincidence, I'm pretty sure of that. One story was that we were supposed to become

cadre—you know, and help train the next group. Like replacing part of the C.I.A. you dig. I don't believe it was because Ramón and I were American, because there was one other American there, a translator for the cooks, and he went.

And when did you learn the outcome of the invasion?

Well we set up this shortwave radio, with a huge antenna, and listened—tuned in directly to Cuba. And at first it sounded like it was a success

... so there was a big celebration got started—then after a while Castro came on, announcing how he wiped us out. And that brought everyone down, you know, very hard.

I simply can't understand how they could make such a mess of it. Well, man, it was one of those things. They wanted to do it, but they wanted to do it without really doing it—you know, like a broad. So that was that... and the camp became a terrible drag after that, and of course everyone wanted to leave—you know, back to civilization. But

these recruits kept arriving from Miami, about two hundred of them during the next couple of weeks—and this brought on the weirdest scenes of the whole time there... because these cats were *bugged*, man. I mean it was obviously a dead issue, and these guys wanted to go back to Miami. But the Americans were still trying to keep up some kind of training routine—you know, "Keep 'em busy, good for morale," the old Army crap. But these guys' attitude was "Okay, we lost, so let's get the hell out of here." And they didn't want to do anything. They had a meeting and sent a delegation up to see the Americans and told them they didn't want to drill or anything, they wanted to go back to the States. Well, that wigged the Americans—they thought it was "Communist agitation." See, they were still waiting for orders from Washington about what the hell they were supposed to do next. Anyway, the same day one of the toughest of these cats draws guard duty, and when the guy wakes him, he says, "If you wake me up again I'll blow your head off"—you know, that kind of reaction. Well, this guy goes back to the orderly room and tells Martínez Arbona, the guy who was acting camp commander, and Martínez Arbona comes down to the barracks and says, "This is insubordination, bla-bla-bla," and the other guy starts to beat him up. So Martínez cuts out, up the hill, tells the Americans—and this *really* flips them. Now it's a "Communist mutiny," you dig, and they're scared out of their wits. "We've gotta get those guns away from them!" But they had no idea how to go about it, so they were wigging completely. Well, we all knew they weren't Communists—I mean they just wanted to get the hell out of there. We told the C.I.D. cats, "Man, all you have to do is tell them to turn in the guns and they can go home." But they kept trying to figure out some tricky muscle way of doing it—and God knows what would have happened if we hadn't gone down and told them if they would turn in the guns they could go home. And of course that's what they did. But the Americans never did really believe it—they were very suspicious of them... kept them completely separated from the rest of us. And when we got to the airstrip, they sent them right out... you know, like thank God they're gone!

So everybody went back to Miami? Yeah, we get back to Miami, go to the recruiting station—that's where they'd been sending our checks, dig—pick those up, and go our separate ways. Very sad scene at the recruiting place because they've got the lists of guys that got wiped or captured, and relatives and so on are falling by to look at the lists. And we talked to a couple of guys who got away—swam out and got picked up by boats. What did they have to say about the invasion? What did they say? "We got wiped, man... wiped." #



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