

Monday 3/17/98

37 Years Later, Public Heroes

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LOS ANGELES TIMES

Havana — When Pete Ray's B-26 bomber was shot down by Cuban anti-aircraft batteries near Playa Girón on April 19, 1961, he wasn't there.

CIA acknowledges U.S. pilots downed in Bay of Pigs mission

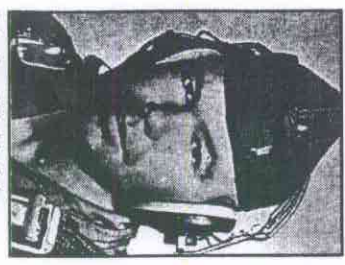
Alabama pilot was one of theirs.

For decades, the U.S. government denied that the top-secret squadron of civilians recruited from the Alabama Air National Guard ever existed, let alone was on a CIA mission to bomb Cuba in one of the agency's best-kept and most humiliating secrets. It was the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, in which, officially, no Americans were involved.

But Ray was there, and was killed, pistol in hand, by one of Fidel Castro's soldiers. They also killed three other fliers on a mission that had been scrubbed by President Kennedy.

Castro was so determined to prove the Americans were there he froze Ray's remains for more than 18 years. In December, 1979, after the Cubans learned of a personal mission by Ray's daughter, Janet Ray Weininger, to find his body, and after 19 months of painstaking diplomacy with a U.S. government that still did not want to claim him as one of its own, Cuba returned the pilot's body to Alabama.

Last month, the CIA released a document confirming that U.S. pilots had in fact been shot down over Cuba in 1961. And last week, agency officials acknowl-



Pete Ray, killed in Cuba

edged publicly for the first time that the Alabama pilot was one of theirs. "These were vortex people, the most important people in the world for a few moments, and then the government just cuts the strings and cuts them loose to drift," said Ray's cousin, Thomas Bailey, an Alabama journalist.

Weininger said she harbors no animosity toward the Cubans for keeping her father's body all those years. "I blame my government . . . They led these men into harm's way and then turned [their] back on them."

It is only in the past year that the CIA has admitted even that.

The Bay of Pigs story begins about a year after Castro overthrew Cuba's U.S.-backed dictator, Fulgencio Batista, and marched into Havana in January, 1959. In a plan

hatched under President Dwight D. Eisenhower and executed in the first months of Kennedy's presidency, the CIA plotted every ill-fated step of an invasion that was meant to appear the work of dissidents within Cuba.

The CIA recruited exile fighters, set up training bases in the United States, Guatemala and Nicaragua, and searched for planes to match those in the Cuban air force.

The agency found the B-26s at the Alabama Air National Guard in Birmingham, along with a willing co-conspirator in the local Air Guard commander, Maj. Gen. G. Reid Doster Jr. He rounded up a bunch of weekend fliers, including Ray, 30, an aircraft inspector at a Birmingham factory.

Weininger remembers the day her father left home for the last time: Feb. 5, 1961. She was 6; Ray and the other pilots told their families they were going to pilot-training school.

To cloud Washington's role, Kennedy had canceled U.S. air cover. But the exile pilots, who had been attacking Cuban targets for three days, "were exhausted and dispirited," according to declassified documents, and the 1,500 Cubans the CIA had sent to invade were being torn to pieces on the beachhead.

"This was a last-ditch effort, a desperate mission to save the guys on the ground," recalled Col. Joe Shannon, '76, one of the few surviving pilots from the group. "We were so close to the [exile] Cubans, their cause sort of became our cause. And in a last moment of desperation, they [the CIA] let us fly."

By the time Ray took off from the Nicaraguan base at 3:55 a.m. on April 19 for the 700-mile flight to Cuba, the invasion had failed. Initially, the CIA blamed the lack of air cover, but the CIA inspector general's report blamed the CIA itself, its "almost willful bungling." Cuban Gen. Oscar Fernandez Mella described in a recent interview how Ray's

B-26 was shot down after several daring strafing runs. "The airplane fell in a cane field. We ran toward it. Then there was an explosion and fire."

Ray and flight engineer Leo Baker had escaped and run into a cane field. Baker was found holding a grenade; a Cuban soldier shot him. Another soldier found Ray, wounded but armed. He said he killed Ray in self-defense.

Baker, whose features appeared Latin, was buried along with other unclaimed Cuban invaders soon after. But Ray, whose features did not, was sent to Havana's Institute of Forensic Medicine, where it was embalmed.

In the late 1970s, Bailey and Weininger sent 100 questions to the CIA under the Freedom of Information Act, asking to explain Ray's fate. The agency never answered in writing.

Instead, it sent two agents to meet them in Selma, Ala., in the spring of 1978. There, Bailey and Weininger recalled, the agents told the truth about Ray and handed over two medals and a citation posthumously awarding Ray the Distinguished Intelligence Cross, the agency's highest award for valor.

The families of the three other Alabamians received similar honors. "But they told us not to mention anything about it to anyone," Weininger said.

Weininger and Bailey say, and the CIA papers confirm, the agency set up a front company in Miami that paid each dead pilot's family a regular stipend and financed college educations, including Weininger's. Relatives were told the money was from a private company. The damage, though, was not financial.

Weininger said, "Everybody has to confront pain in their own way. No one gets out of it without scars, but the difference is how those scars heal."