

Pigs Bay Story Errs, Robert Kennedy Says

By David Kraslow

Copyright, 1963, Knight Newspapers, Inc.

No United States air cover was ever planned or promised for the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in April, 1961, Robert Kennedy says.

Nor was the inability to control the skies the only thing that doomed the U. S.-backed Cuban refugee brigade.

There were several "major mistakes." Perhaps 10 times as many men were required for a successful operation.

Kennedy insisted repeatedly that responsibility for the failure rests with the President. But it seems clear that the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency, both of

whom approved the invasion plan, virtually ignored what proved to be a crucial element in Premier Fidel Castro's arsenal.

These and other disclosures by the Attorney General, made in an interview requested by the Knight newspapers, broke the Kennedy Administration's long silence on one of the most embarrassing episodes in American history.

It must be presumed that Robert Kennedy had the approval of the President to

See CUBA, A7, Col. 2

speaking for the record, to acknowledge officially this Government's role in the attempt to liberate Cuba, and to explain finally what went wrong.

For some 20 months, while the Cuban refugees who were crushed at the Bay of Pigs languished in Castro's prisons, the President chose restraint rather than retort.

Now, largely because the ransomed prisoners are free in the United States, the Kennedy Administration feels it can reply to what it regards as grossly inaccurate accounts—published and spoken—of the Bay of Pigs disaster.

Autopsy Performed

Few people can match Robert Kennedy's knowledge of the affair. At the direction of the President, he and three others performed the autopsy. The report of their investigation led to shakeups in the CIA and the Pentagon.

During the interview, Kennedy referred critically to several national magazine articles that purported to tell the inside story.

One widely held belief is that the President reneged at the last moment on promised U. S. air cover for the invaders and that this guaranteed failure.

"There never was any plan to have U. S. air cover," Kennedy said. "There never

was any promise. Not even under Mr. Eisenhower was American air cover in the picture."

Begun Under Ike

(The recruitment and training of Cuban refugees for an invasion of their homeland was begun in the Eisenhower Administration. A force was already in being when President Kennedy took office in January, 1961.)

"From the beginning the President said no American forces would take part in the operation. It was made absolutely clear that under no condition, under no condition whatsoever, would Americans be used in the invasion.

"And it simply cannot be said that the invasion failed because of any single factor. There were several major mistakes. It was just a bad plan. Victory was never close.

"A great deal more manpower and material was needed. Pepe San Roman (Jose A. Perez San Roman, the brigade commander who visited the Attorney General in Washington recently) says they might have succeeded if they had 15,000 men instead of 1500.

"And all 1500 fought bravely," Kennedy emphasized. "The investigation showed that they all fought with such determination and courage that

this is how I became so committed to freeing them. These were not mercenaries. These are brave volunteers with a mission to free their country."

Role of Trainers

The bitterly ironic, and vital, role played by three or four T-33 jet trainers at the Bay of Pigs relates to one of the "major" errors in the American plan.

Ironic because these were American planes given to former Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista and inherited by Castro when the Batista regime collapsed.

Vital because the T-33s easily mastered the only air cover which Kennedy said had been planned for the invaders — antiquated World War II B-26 bombers piloted by refugees.

The T-33 is a training device. But armed with rockets it proved to be a highly effective instrument of war at the Bay of Pigs.

"We underestimated what a

T-33 carrying rockets could do," Kennedy said. "It wasn't given sufficient thought. They caused us a great deal of trouble."

Present in Vicinity

One possible explanation for the apparent misconception on the question of U. S. air cover has to do with the presence of American warships, including an aircraft carrier, in the vicinity of the Bay of Pigs.

If the ships transporting the invaders from Nicaragua were spotted by Cuban planes before they reached the target area, they had orders to turn back.

If the ships were attacked on the high seas on their way back to Central America, Kennedy said, the American forces in the area were under orders to give them protection.

Kennedy said the invaders "got all the air cover the plan called for." But the second of two planned advance raids by B-26s intended to knock out Castro's air force on the ground was postponed, he said.

The first raid, on Saturday, April 15, was not very successful, he said. It didn't do anywhere near the damage the planners had hoped for.

Story Distributed

(When the raiders landed their B-26s in south Florida later that day a "cover" story

was distributed through the Immigration Service in which the pilots said they had just defected from Castro's air force.)

Not only was the element of surprise now gone insofar as the second strike was concerned, but the repercussions from the first raid were loud and immediate.

"The President received one call (Robert Kennedy would not identify the caller, but said it was not United Nations Ambassador Adlai Stevenson) informing him that the first raid was causing us serious problems at the U. N. and elsewhere," the Attorney General said.

"It was suggested that the second raid be postponed. That raid was to take place early Monday morning (April 17—the day of the invasion).

On Objections

"The President said that if those who had the responsibility for the plan had strong objections to postponing the raid, they should let him know. No strong objections were registered.

"The raid actually was made later on Monday, after the invasion was underway. It did not accomplish much."

Kennedy confirmed that the invading force appealed to the U. S. warships for help when they were pinned down on the beach. He declined to say whether the appeals were relayed to the President.

"The decision was made that there would be no change in the ground rules," Kennedy said. "There had been a firm understanding always, accepted by everyone, that there would be no U. S. forces in the invasion under any condition. We stayed with that."

Why, he was asked, since

the prestige of the United States was committed, did the President not also commit American forces from the beginning to insure success for the operation?

In Critical Stage

"If it was just the Cuban problem alone," Kennedy said, "there would have been no difficulty. We would have ended it right there.

"But the Berlin issue was in a critical stage at the time. And there were difficulties in Viet-Nam and Laos, among other places. We just could not commit our forces in Cuba. Even in retrospect, I think this was the wise decision."

Kennedy said no invasion plan had been completed during Mr. Eisenhower's term.

"There was just a general concept," he said. "The logistics and the details were worked out after the President took office.

"The President has taken responsibility for the failure and that's as it should be. He approved the plan. But it's not true that he sat down with two or three civilians and worked out this plan at the White House.

"The plan that was used was fully cleared by the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was war-gamed at the Pentagon in whatever manner they do these things.

Accepted Advice

"The President inherited people with major reputations and he accepted their advice.

"There was not sufficient air cover at the beach. That was a mistake. There were not enough men and equipment. That was a mistake. Underes-

timating the T-33s—that was a serious mistake. The planning was inadequate, just inadequate."

Mr. Kennedy might just as well have said that the entire plan was a mistake.

The strategy behind the invasion, Mr. Kennedy explained was to establish a

firm enough beachhead so that a Cuban government-in-exile could function on Cuban soil. Mr. Kennedy did not say so, but presumably the United States later would have formally recognized that exile government.

Mr. Kennedy also said that no Americans were killed in the invasion. (Reports circulated after the ransomed prisoners arrived in Miami that two Americans who had helped train the brigade died at the Bay of Pigs.)

This is not the whole story. Kennedy backed off from exploring various details.

He pondered a request for additional information for several moments. "I don't think so," he said finally. "It wouldn't serve the national interest."