

Vets Return to Bay of Pigs

Cubans Who Fought on Both Sides Visit '61 Battle Scene

By KEVIN SULLIVAN
Washington Post Foreign Service

PLAYA GIRON, Cuba, March 24—Under perfect blue skies next to a tranquil sea, veterans of the Bay of Pigs invasion gathered today to lay flowers of reconciliation at the beach where 40 years ago a momentous battle took place that helped shape the places of the United States and Cuba in the Cold War and the world.

The veterans, exiles who made up a CIA-trained invasion force that was crushed here by President Fidel Castro's defenders, shared moving moments along the crystalline body of water and along the beach called Playa Giron, whose entrance is still marked with a sign saying: "Giron, site of the first defeat of Yankee imperialism in Latin America."

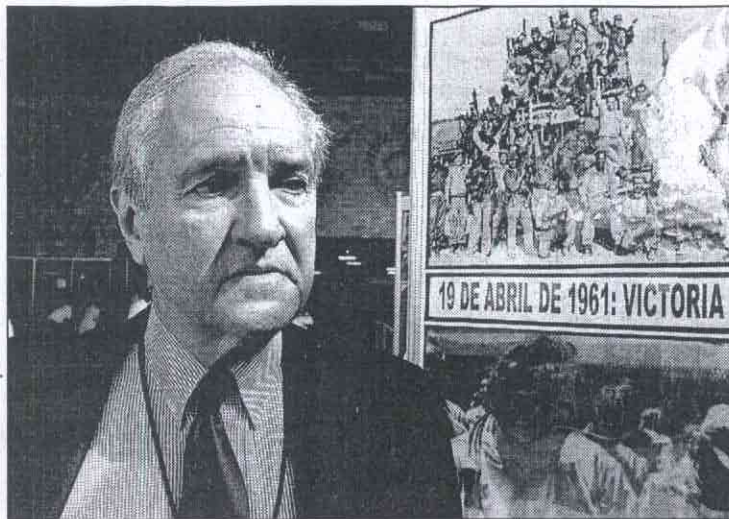
"This is just very emotional and very powerful for me," said Alfredo Duran, 64, who fled Cuba when Castro took power in 1959 and then returned as a member of the 1,500-man 2506 Brigade that came ashore here just after midnight on April 17, 1961.

"I am here at Playa Giron to pay homage and tribute to all the Cubans on both sides who died on these beaches," he said as he laid a floral wreath on a monument to the battle. "I am of the hope that such a tragedy as this will never repeat itself in the history of our country."

Duran, who was taken prisoner and released after 18 months, has come with four other brigade veterans to join about 50 people—including senior Kennedy administration officials, former CIA leaders and Cuban soldiers and officials, including Castro—for a three-day examination of the invasion that turned into a disaster for the United States and a triumph for Cuba.

The conference, cosponsored by Cuban officials and the National Security Archive, a private organization based at George Washington University, was organized as an academic analysis of previously classified documents and interviews with those who participated in the invasion. But for Duran and the other veterans, the gathering, culminating with today's seaside ceremony on the southern coast of Cuba, turned into a deeply emotional event.

"As I walk these beaches, I realize how many people I knew died here," Duran said. "They were people I



BY ADALBERTO ROQUE—AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Alfredo Duran, whose unit invaded the Bay of Pigs and was held prisoner for 18 months, met the officer who kept the unit pinned down for two days.

grew up with. They were my friends."

Duran said a highlight for him was shaking the hand of the Cuban officer who led an artillery bombardment that kept Duran and dozens of other invaders pinned down for more than 48 hours in the nearby town of San Blas. "We both knew instinctively that we needed to shake hands," said Duran, now a Miami lawyer. "Forty years have passed since we had Cubans fighting Cubans in the battle of the Bay of Pigs. I hope that never happens again."

Jean Kennedy Smith, sister of President John F. Kennedy, who ordered the invasion and was humiliated by its stunning failure, said she felt moved while visiting the site of one of her brother's most crushing defeats.

"I know that my brother felt very badly about the Bay of Pigs," she said. "Not just because it was a failure, but because of the people who were taken prisoner and the people who were killed. He was very sad about that."

The Bay of Pigs invasion and the Cuban missile crisis of the following year set a tone in Cuban-American relations that has remained virtually unchanged for 40 years. Kennedy ordered an economic embargo of Cuba that remains in place today. Despite worldwide condemnation of its Cuba policy, the United States continues to ban almost all travel and trade with Cuba in an attempt to strangle Castro's Communist government.

Over the past few days, however, conference participants from both nations generally set aside current political disputes and focused on the battle that took place here in 1961. But they could not get together on a joint wreath-laying ceremony, leaving only Duran and his four companions to make the gesture.

Both sides agreed that the participation of Castro, who attended about 20 hours of meetings over two days but did not come to today's ceremony on the beach, was critical to understanding relations. Privately, many said that the voluble Castro was almost too helpful, talking to the assembled group perhaps more than everyone else combined.

"Fascinating, but numbing," said one participant.

Castro gave an animated narration of his role commanding the Cuban troops, standing before the group using a microphone, a pointer and a large map. All said Castro was charming; some said his intensely detailed accounts were overwhelming.

"I didn't know anyone could talk so long and so intelligently about everything from world affairs to the most trivial details," said Robert Reynolds, who was the CIA station chief in Miami at the time of the invasion. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., a top Kennedy aide during the invasion, said Castro displayed "an endearing sense of humor" and "an extraordinary memory."

"This conference is as much about the future as it is about the

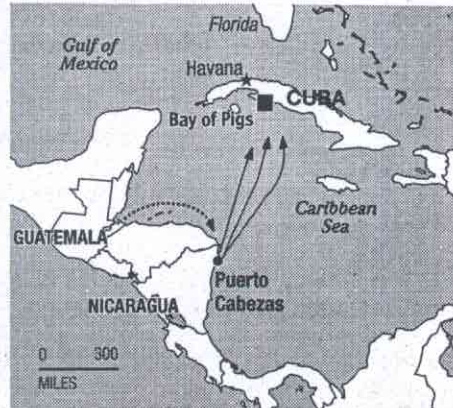
The Bay of Pigs Debacle

The 1961 CIA-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion by Cuban exiles was aimed at the overthrow of Fidel Castro's government. The exile force tried to establish a beachhead that would be used to launch a counterrevolution. But Washington's determination to preserve deniability of its involvement hampered the operation, and it failed.

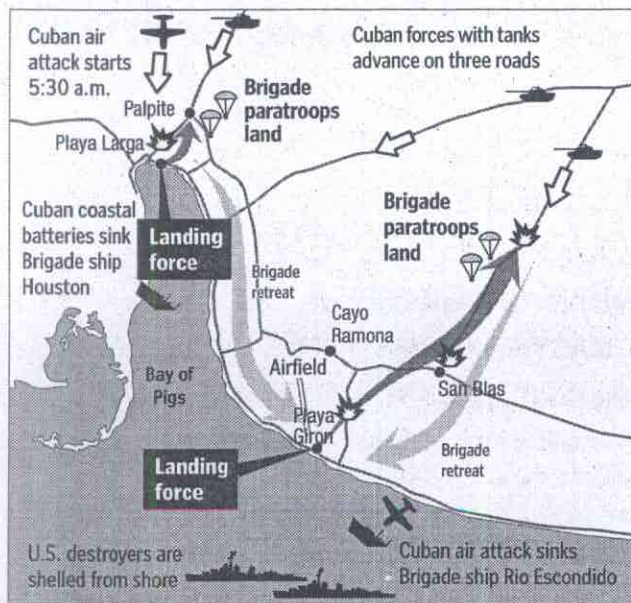
1 April 15: B-26s, based in Nicaragua and flown by Cuban exiles, bomb Cuban air force with limited success.



2 April 16-17: Exile invaders, called the 2506 Assault Brigade, assemble overnight.



3 April 17: The attack starts at 12:30 a.m. Brigade begins landing at 3 a.m.



4 April 18: Retreat of invaders begins at 7 a.m., and ends April 19 at 2 p.m.

The invaders

- 1,543 men of the 2506 Brigade
- 5 converted freighters
- 2 converted World War II landing craft: Blagar, Barbara J.
- 16 B-26 bombers

U.S. escort forces

- 2 destroyers
- Aircraft carrier Essex and support ships in region
- Observation planes overhead
- Destroyers helped in evacuation after defeat
- The invaders had counted on U.S. airstrikes, but they never came

Casualties and Damage

Invasers	Defenders
1,214 taken prisoner	151 fatalities
100 fatalities (approx.)	4 planes lost
2 ships sunk	
9 planes lost	

SOURCES: "Bay of Pigs" by Peter Wyden; "Bay of Pigs Declassified" by Peter Kornbluh; Associated Press; 2506 Assault Brigade Web site

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past," said Peter Kornbluh, the chief organizer of the conference for the National Security Archive. "The coming together of all sides is a beginning in healing really deep wounds, not only personal wounds suffered by the combatants but political and national wounds as well."

Jose Ramon Fernandez, a Cuban vice president who was Castro's top military commander here, was something of a tour guide today. He walked participants through a tour of the Australia sugar plantation,

some 30 miles from the beach, where Castro directed the counter-offensive. He highlighted the black crank telephone Castro used and a memorial of a young Cuban fighter who scrawled "Fidel" on the wall in his own blood as he lay dying.

From there, he took the group in buses to Playa Larga, one of the key battle sites, then a few miles more here to Playa Giron, now dominated by a hotel and restaurant next to a palm lined beach.

Near the beach, Fernandez ad-

ressed the gathering and vowed that Cuba will continue to defend "the same thing we will always defend: the right to our self determination and the right to our sovereignty. Our people without any concession are willing to maintain that at any price."

"I don't mean to offend anyone," Fernandez told the group, "but this is my truth. It is the truth of those of us who fought here. It is the truth of people fighting for their sovereignty."