

Bizarre Sea Chase In Cuban Waters



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IN A DRAMATIC sea chase, an armed Cuban fishing boat last year ran an undercover U.S. Customs ship out of Cuban waters.

The skipper of the Cuban craft, brandishing a pistol in the swashbuckling style of the blackbeards who used to sail the Caribbean, tried to board the Customs vessel and take it into custody.

But the Customs crew ducked for cover and made a run for freedom. With a crackling of gunfire, the Cuban boat followed in "hot pursuit" for two hours. It broke off the chase just before U.S. Coast Guard planes arrived overhead in response to emergency "mayday" calls.

The bizarre episode may have set back the Cuban-American thaw. It certainly upset the Coast Guard, whose planes nearly became involved in an international incident. And on Capitol Hill, Representative John Murphy (Dem-N.Y.), chairman of the House Coast Guard Subcommittee, is conducting a secret investigation.

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THE DETAILS have been swept under a secret stamp, but we have had access to the classified Coast Guard account of the misadventure.

Customs rented a shrimp boat for undercover work, which we have agreed to keep confidential. We also agreed to omit the name of the vessel and the date of the incident. Off the Cayo Bahia de Cadiz, states the Coast Guard report, the shrimp boat "violated Cuban waters (and) a Cuban vessel was dispatched to arrest the U.S. craft."

"The crew aboard the (Cuban) vessel was motioning to the Americans to turn their fishing vessel and head toward the Cuban coast," continues the Coast Guard account. "The Customs boat did not alter its course . . ."

"U.S. Customs officer Manny Marin went to the stern of the (shrimp boat), (and) the Cuban fishing vessel skipper informed Marin in Spanish, 'We represent the armed forces of Cuba. You are under arrest. Follow us to land.'" For emphasis, the skipper waved a 9mm revolver.

After a whispered conference, the Americans decided to try to escape. They agreed tersely that if they should be caught, they "would throw their radio and U.S. Customs investigative credentials overboard to prevent the Cubans from discovering the fact they were United States officials."

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THE AMERICAN helmsman wheeled the shrimp boat due north toward the U.S. coast. In response, "the Cuban skipper fired two warning shots with his pistol." Everyone on board the Customs ship ducked below decks as the chase began.

"Sharp noises were heard," declares the Coast Guard report, "but they could not be definitely determined gunfire or boat engine noises." Afterward, bullet holes were found in the boat's hull.

After the two-hour "hot pursuit," the Cubans gave up. A few minutes later, Coast Guard aircraft, alerted by the "mayday" calls, came to the rescue.