

Cuban Spies Linked To Shootdown Indictment Says Ring Tried To Manipulate FBI, Legislators

Sun-Sentinel-May 8, 1999

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A federal grand jury on Friday linked a South Florida-based Cuban spy ring to the shootdown of two Brothers to the Rescue planes in 1996, saying the spies acted on orders from top Cuban officials in plotting the fatal encounter that killed four Miami exiles.

The network of spies, uncovered in a spectacular bust last fall, appeared at the time to be low-level operatives with little cash to spare.

But Cuban President Fidel Castro's comrades may have had more influence than authorities originally thought. The indictment, filed in federal court in Miami, says the Cuban agents tried to manipulate the FBI and an unidentified member of Congress, who unwittingly tried to help one spy's wife enter the United States.

The news confirmed what many in the exile community long have suspected. It sparked a rush of bittersweet tears from Mirta Mendez, the sister of one of the four fliers shot down by Cuban MiGs on Feb. 24, 1996.

"We've always known that Cuba was responsible for this," Mendez said. "Finally, slowly, the American government is realizing what happened that day -- that our relatives were murdered by Fidel Castro and his people."

The two Cessnas belonged to Brothers to the Rescue, a humanitarian group that searches for rafters off the coast of Cuba. Their shootdown triggered an international incident.

"The fact that the U.S. government is bringing to court some of the people involved in the shootdown is good news," said Brothers to the Rescue leader Jose Basulto. "However, we would like to see not only the mechanics of the murder, but the architects of the shootdown. I'm talking about (Cuban President) Fidel Castro."

The superseding indictment filed Friday adds four men to the group of 10 alleged Cuban spies charged last September. One of the original defendants, Gerardo Hernandez, was additionally charged with conspiracy to commit murder in connection with the shootdown, an assignment allegedly code-named "Operacion Escorpion" or "Operation Scorpion" by the Cubans. Hernandez, the spy network's South Florida supervisor, was known in the community as Manuel Viramontez. His codename was "Giro."

According to the indictment, about six weeks before the fatal confrontation, Hernandez was ordered by "Superior Headquarters" to flag other spies in Miami not to fly with Brothers from Feb. 24-27, 1996. The shootdown occurred on Feb. 24, 1996.

Castro's web of South Florida spies, now 12 men and two women, reportedly infiltrated U.S. military bases, Brothers to the Rescue and other exile groups. Many of them operated under the aliases of U.S. citizens who had died in childhood.

One of the new defendants is Juan Pablo Roque, a dashing pilot who once flew for the Cuban military. He was a familiar figure in the dawn rescue missions over the shark-infested

waters between South Florida and Cuba. Roque disappeared one day before the attack and soon reappeared on Cuban television with the announcement that he had defected back to his homeland.

In the United States, Roque had traveled the halls of Congress and befriended several Cuban-American congressmen.

Richard Nuccio, a former Clinton policy adviser on Cuba, said Roque's involvement in the shutdown indicated that Cuba may have planned the incident expressly to disrupt its relations with the United States.

"Something that appeared to have been accidental, all of a sudden had elements to it that looked as if they had been planned by Cuban authorities," said Nuccio, who left the administration in 1997.

It was Nuccio who received intelligence from law enforcement sources in Miami that Brothers might be planning to provoke Cuba's military by entering Cuban air space. The night before the shutdown, a concerned Nuccio sent an e-mail to the White House national security deputy about the potential for "an attempt to shoot down or force down the planes."

The message was not read until the next day, after the shooting, which killed Carlos Costa, Pablo Morales, Armando Alejandro and Mario de la Pena.

The head of Cuba's intelligence allegedly said the Cuban military's commander-in-chief -- possibly Castro or one of his closest aides -- had twice personally discussed follow-up strategy to the operation, but gave no more specifics.

According to the indictment, the military commander declared that the South Florida-based spies "had dealt a hard blow to the Miami right."

Cuban authorities conveyed to Giro on April 1 that his "outstanding" achievements were noted in his comrade's service card. And on June 6, he was promoted to the rank of captain.

The 31-page indictment pulls in figures from the United Nations and Capitol Hill. One of the defendants engaged in an April 1998 handoff with an official at the Cuban mission to the United Nations, court papers show. The two men were in a bathroom of a Wendy's restaurant in Nassau County, N.Y. A State Department official confirmed on Friday night that the UN official was one of the three expelled from the Cuban mission seven months later, in December, for alleged links to the South Florida Cuban spy ring.

And the indictment alludes to, but does not identify, a lawmaker who unwittingly tried to help the wife of a spy enter the United States. The U.S. Attorney's Office declined to say which congressional members were approached by the Cuban agents. "They would no have reason to know they were talking to [spies]," said assistant U.S. Attorney spokeswoman Alicia Valle.

In a 1995 book Roque wrote, titled *Desertor* and chronicling his defection from Cuba, Roque is pictured with Cuban-American Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Miami and Robert Menendez of New Jersey.

The indictment states that Roque and other agents acted as informants for the FBI, tipping them about alleged drug smugglers, in an effort to infiltrate the agency.

According to indictment, this is how the fateful shooting of the Brothers to the Rescue planes unfolded:

The green light to plan the attack on the Brothers' planes was given on Jan. 29, 1996, by the Cuban Superior Headquarters. The Cuban Directorate of Intelligence immediately notified its spies in Miami of the impending confrontation. A week later, the directorate told "Giro" -- Gerardo Hernandez, known in South Florida as Manuel Viramontez -- and another agent known in South Florida as Albert Manuel Ruiz and codenamed "A-4," to make the operation a top priority and to obtain information on future Brothers to the Rescue flights.

By Feb. 13, the two agents told Rene Gonzalez, codenamed "Castor," who had infiltrated the exile group, to provide them with the anticipated Brothers' flight plans. They directed him not to join any of those flights. But if he could not avoid flying on the missions, they added, he should say "specified phrases into the [plane's] radio" to ensure his safety during the attack.

Four days later, the head of the Directorate of Intelligence, codenamed "MX," ordered Gonzalez and Roque not to fly with Brothers or any other exile group on Feb. 24-27.

On Feb. 22, the Directorate of Intelligence told Viramontes and Ruiz that a Cuban agent was providing support for Roque to travel from the United States via Mexico to Cuba.

On Feb. 23, Roque secreted his way out of Miami.

The cessnas were shot down the next day.

The trial is scheduled to begin in September in front of U.S. District Judge Joan Lenard.

"Castro agents have always moved around Miami trying to make Cuban exiles who are anti-Castro look bad, but the FBI has never done anything about," said Andres Nazario-Sargen, head of Alpha 66, the oldest anti-Castro paramilitary group in South Florida. "Maybe, finally, now they realize what we have been saying is true."

PHOTOS 11

ALEJANDRO ALONSO
RUBEN CAMPA
RENE GONZALEZ
ANTONIO GUERRERO
NILO HERNANDEZ
LINDA HERNANDEZ
LUIS MEDINA
JOSEPH SANTOS-CECILIA
AMARILYS SILVERIO-GARCIA
GERARDO HERNANDEZ
JUAN PABLO ROQUE
BOX: 14 CUBANS ACCUSED OF SPYING

Juan Pablo Roque

Code name: German

Roque infiltrated Brothers to the Rescue, married a Miami woman and led the life of a patriotic exile. He then disappeared and reappeared on Cuban television, where he denounced the exile community and admitted he was a double agent. Roque is accused of acting as an agent on behalf of Cuba, playing a key role in the shutdown of the Brothers to the Rescue planes. Lives in Cuba.

Albert Manuel Ruiz
Code name: A-4

He is charged with gathering information on the Brothers' flight plans during early 1996, passing that information to Cuban authorities as they allegedly plotted Operacion Escorpion, the code name for the attack.

Ricardo Villareal
Code name: Horacio

He kept tabs on Cuban exile groups, using a computer.

Remijo Luna
Code name: Remi

Collaborated with Villareal and Gerardo Hernandez in gathering information about exile groups.

Gerardo Hernandez, or Manuel Viramontez
Code name: Giro

A Cuban military officer who lived in North Miami Beach and supervised the spies in South Florida. For his role in the shutdown, Hernandez was promoted to captain. He is the only one of the 14 defendants who faces murder charges.

Luis Medina
Code name: Allan

An officer of unknown rank who lived in Hollywood.

Antonio Guerrero
Code name: Lorient

Became a civilian employee of the United States Navy and lived in Big Pine Key. He reported maneuvers and other activities related to combat readiness at the Boca Chica Naval Air Station.

Alejandro Alonso
Code name: Franklyn

Assigned to report on the Miami-based Cuban exile group, the Democracy Movement. A boat pilot, he lived in Miami and participated in exile protest flotillas.

Rene Gonzalez
Code name: Castor

A member of Brothers to the Rescue and undersecretary of the Democracy Movement's air group.

Nilo and Linda Hernandez
Code names: Manolo and Judith

They relocated from New York to the Miami area in 1992. They were said to have been sublieutenants in the Cuban government.

Ruben Campa
Code name: Vicky

Worked as a substitute agent for Viramontez and Medina when they were recalled to Cuba. He oversaw the attempted effort to spy on military installations, including Boca Chica Naval Air Base, MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa and the U.S. Southern Command in Miami-Dade.

Joseph Santos-Cecilia and Amarylis Silverio-Garcia
Code names: Mario and Julia

Lived just south of Miami International Airport. They were sent to Miami to assist Medina in the penetration of Southern Command. They compiled detailed reports and numerous photographs of the military complex while it was under construction. One covert report was entitled "Observations Around the Southcom Installation."

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Dateline: MIAMI
Record Number: 9905080032
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