

Basulto testifies on role as anti-Castro operative

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The Miami Herald

March 13, 2001

Brothers to the Rescue founder José Basulto took the stand in the Cuban spy trial Monday and shared with jurors his history as a 1960s anti-Castro CIA operative and his admitted cannon assault on a Cuban hotel nearly 40 years ago.

"Terrorist attack!" defense attorney Paul McKenna labeled the hotel incident. But Basulto, firmly unapologetic, called the assault a "Cold War" mission justified by a phalanx of Russian missiles pointed toward the United States.

That exchange, coming on the first day of Basulto's long-anticipated testimony, reflected McKenna's strategy to cast Basulto as a cold-hearted terrorist and agent provocateur rather than a proud patriot.

McKenna's client, accused spy ringleader Gerardo Hernández, faces a life prison term if convicted of murder conspiracy for helping Cuba shoot down two Brothers to the Rescue planes in 1996.

More recent events posed a greater challenge to Basulto's memory, however. He said he didn't remember a federal aviation official warning him in the summer of 1995 – seven months before the Feb. 24, 1996, shutdown that killed four Brothers fliers — that Cuba could shoot down his plane if he invaded Cuban airspace.

"He may have; I don't recall," Basulto said.

Charles Smith, a retired Federal Aviation Administration enforcement officer, testified Wednesday that he gave Basulto just that warning, and that Basulto responded, "You must understand I have a mission in life to perform." That mission, according to Basulto's history, was to rid Cuba of Fidel Castro.

A native of Santiago de Cuba, Basulto testified that he was a young Boston College student when he joined the CIA-led war against Castro. Basulto trained in Panama, Guatemala and the United States and was infiltrated back into Cuba — posing as a physics student at the University of Santiago — to help prepare the ground for the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Under questioning, Basulto acknowledged that he was trained in intelligence, communications, explosives, sabotage and subversion.

Although the invasion failed, Basulto adopted the number 2506 for his airplane — the number used by the brigade that stormed Giron Beach on the Bay of Pigs on April 15, 1961.

"You're proud of your Bay of Pigs involvement?" McKenna asked.

"I'm proud of all my participation in Cuba," Basulto responded.

Under CIA sponsorship, Basulto infiltrated Cuba again in 1961 for a commando operation intended to sabotage a missile site. He said he used fake identification documents. The mission was canceled.

In August 1962, Basulto testified, he took a boat to Cuba and fired a 20mm cannon at a hotel full of Russians, who "were invaders, as far as we were concerned." He also carried a machine gun. "We fired the gun at the hotel 16 times," opening holes in the facade, he said.

Asked if that mission's objective was to assassinate Fidel Castro, Basulto said it was "far-fetched" to think that would have happened. But it would have been a welcome outcome, he said, adding that the goal was to "promote democracy."

"I think it was in the interest of my country, Cuba, and of the United States," he said.

In the '80s, Basulto flew medical supplies to the Nicaraguan contras.

Despite repeated questions from McKenna, Basulto denied any linkage to the CIA for those contra flights or any other activities since the 1960s. He denied working in Brazil in 1963 against guerrilla leader Ernesto "Che" Guevara, one of the founders of Cuba's revolution, who was killed in 1967.

However, Basulto acknowledged he was friends with ex-CIA agent Félix Rodríguez, who took the phone order to execute Guevara and then stepped back as a Bolivian sergeant shot Guevara in the chest.

Basulto, who became a prosperous builder-engineer in Miami, said he founded Brothers to the Rescue as a humanitarian rafter-rescue group. The group is credited with rescuing some 4,300 Cuban rafters.

But Basulto acknowledged that the group's focus shifted after changes in immigration policy meant rafters got sent back to Cuba.

Brothers didn't see a single raft between August 1995 and March 8, 1996, Basulto acknowledged.

Without rafters, the money dried up, Basulto agreed.

Brothers to the Rescue tax returns showed that the nonprofit charity raised more than \$1.1 million in 1993 and an additional \$1.15 million in 1994. In 1995, contributions dropped to \$320,455. Basulto took a salary most years.

On July 13, 1995, Basulto violated Cuban airspace and threw leaflets about human rights from his plane as part of a flotilla with the Democracy Movement.

At the time, Basulto called the flight over Havana "an act of civil disobedience" to signal "to the people of Cuba that civil disobedience is possible."

In his testimony, Basulto insisted there was no advance plan to overfly Cuba that day.