

FBI: Spies Among Us Suspects Attempted To Blend In

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Call it spy vs. the FBI - and the 10 alleged Cuban agents lost this battle.

Now jailed, the 10 tried to blend into fast-paced, capitalist South Florida. The suspects lived in small apartments, worked blue-collar jobs, raised children, joined exile groups and often wrote that their ultimate boss - the Cuban government - did not pay enough. Call it espionage on a budget.

``I have never seen anything like this in all my years in law enforcement," said Hector Pesquera, the head of South Florida's FBI office. ``This is a significant blow to the Cuban government. Right now they are in total disarray."

Despite the suspects' frugal appearance, prosecutors said they used two-way radios, scanners, laptop computers, computer diskettes, code names, phony accents and false names to infiltrate Cuban exile groups - and they hoped - local U.S. military installations. The purpose: send intelligence information back to the island.

``This was a very sophisticated group," Pesquera said.

Those arrested are: Manuel Viramontes, 31, of Northeast Dade; Luis Medina, 30, and Ruben Campa, 33, who shared a Hollywood apartment; Rene Gonzalez-Sehweret, 42, of Miami-Dade; Antonio Guerrero Jr., 29, of Big Pine Key; Alejandro Alonso, 39, of South Dade; Nilo Hernandez-Mederos, 44, and his wife Linda Hernandez, 40, of Miami-Dade; and Joseph Santos, 37, and his wife Amarylis Silverio, 36, of Flagami.

This is their story, culled from federal court files, neighborhoods interviews and public records:

* Viramontes, aka ``Giro" or ``Giraldo." Prosecutors called him the mastermind, pasting his picture atop the organizational flow chart for hundreds of reporters to record Monday afternoon.

Viramontes was the kind of neighbor people liked - quiet and polite. He resided in apartment 305 at 18100 Atlantic Blvd. in Northeast Dade. ``Very nice, very intelligent and a very good person," said his neighbor, Victor Fonseca. ``He spent a lot of time writing and spoke perfect English."

He paid \$580 a month for the one-bedroom apartment. Normally clean, the apartment Monday looked ransacked. A box of unused red FBI evidence tape sat on a glass table, dresser drawers were atop a sheetless bed, revealing men's clothes, clothing for a baby girl, winter gloves and a box for a tape recorder.

Above the bed was a picture frame with the image of Jesus, undisturbed.

``Look what they did to him, they took everything," said Henry Raisman, the building manager. ``I don't believe he is a spy. He is a nice guy. I never have problems with him."

Viramontes, a captain in the Cuban military, arrived in the United States in 1992. His orders: infiltrate the U.S. Southern Command and discredit Cuban exile groups by manipulating the media and political institutions through a smear campaign.

FBI agents say Viramontes is not his real name.

The job also was no James Bond movie. For a spy, Viramontes sometimes fell on hard times. ``He didn't have money sometimes to pay the rent," Raisman said.

``In one communication with Cuba, Manuel Viramontes . . . was advised that `because of the economic state of our country, headquarters has been obligated to reduce the budget for all the comrades there," wrote Raul Fernandez, the lead FBI agent.

* Gonzalez-Sehweret, aka ``Castor" or ``Iselin," is the best known of those arrested. He was assistant director of air command for the Democracia Movement.

Democracia founder Ramon Saul Sanchez called Gonzalez-Sehweret a ``quiet type." He credited the alleged spy with saving his life earlier this year. During Pope John Paul II's visit to Cuba, several members of Democracia were returning from a flight to the Bahamas when a wing on their aircraft broke. Gonzalez-Sehweret managed to land at Homestead Air Reserve Base.

``He was one of my chief pilots," Sanchez remarked. ``I am shocked."

Gonzalez-Sehweret was born in Chicago, but in 1961, his parents moved to Cuba.

In Cuba, Gonzalez-Sehweret spent six years as head of the aerial sports section of the Patriotic Military Education Society, an institution run by the Revolutionary Armed Forces and the Union of Communist Youths that offers military and civic training for troubled youths. In 1988, Gonzalez-Sehweret lost his job but maintained good relations at the institution, where he was able to obtain an airplane for his defection to the U.S. two years later.

In December 1990, Gonzalez-Sehweret stole a 1947 AN-2 Colt that was used for crop-dusting and flew to Boca Chica Naval Air Station near Key West. Upon landing, Gonzalez-Sehweret showed officials his birth certificate and other documents to prove his U.S. citizenship.

Gonzalez-Sehweret also flew sometimes for Brothers to the Rescue.

On February 24, 1996, Cuban MIGs shot down two Brothers planes over international waters killing four volunteers. Gonzalez-Sehweret was one of the first to arrive at the group's hangar at Opa-locka Airport to offer condolences.

Gonzalez-Sehweret had a high-profile assignment in Miami, monitoring Brothers to the Rescue, Movimiento Democracia, Militares y Profesionales Por La Democracia, Comandos United for Liberation, PUND (National Democratic Unified Party), Comision Nacional Cubana and the Cuban American Pilots Association.

A Miami-Dade resident, Gonzalez-Sehweret often communicated with Viramontes by exchanging computer diskettes, according to the indictment.

Gonzalez's wife arrived in December 1996 after a cover plan that "enlisted the assistance of unwitting Cuban American U.S. Congresspersons" to obtain her "humanitarian release."

Gonzalez-Sehweret also played double-agent, posing as an FBI informant providing information about alleged drug smugglers in hopes of monitoring any FBI cases against the Cuban government. Pesquera said the information was bogus.

* Guerrero, a.k.a. "Lorient," lived in Big Pine Key. He worked as a civilian employee of the U.S. Navy, assigned to the public works department at the Boca Chica Naval Air Station, near Key West.

In the past, according to the indictment, Guerrero reported to Viramontes, who was told by Cuba to go to Key West every two weeks if necessary to pick up information from Guerrero. Surveillance tapes show Guerrero meeting with Viramontes and exchanging bags.

Guerrero's job was to report any "unusual exercises, maneuvers and other activity related to combat readiness" at the Naval Air Station.

He reported detailed information about daily activities at the Air Station, including, through the use of beeper codes, the types of aircraft being deployed there; precise physical descriptions of the interior and exterior of a structure on the air station that he suspected of being prepared for top-secret activity; the use of supposed "electronic warfare" aircraft believed to be deployed to activities of exploration and tactics against our country"; and the addresses of certain military officers assigned to the base.

Guerrero was directed to "continue with the gathering of military information and at the same time . . . search for new relations and tightening of the ones he already possesses, with the aim of achieving broader penetration and gathering of information at the base".

* Campa, aka "Vicky," celebrates his 35th birthday today in federal detention. Known among his fellow spies as "the famous Vicky." A computer expert and close associate of Viramontes. He lived with Medina in a small apartment in Hollywood.

* Medina, a.k.a. "Allan, Johnny or Oso" - the latter is Spanish for bear. Medina, a senior Cuban intelligence officer of unknown rank, had reported on operations at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa since 1992. He was transferred to Miami to lead the infiltration of U.S. Southern Command.

His landlord remembers him as a friendly tenant who claimed to be a Mexican dishware salesman.

"There were always two friends coming over to visit - he said they were Mexican too," said Olga Bojko, 73, manager of the North Lake Garden Apartments where he lived until October 1997. "I can't believe he had anything to do with spies. He never talked politics or even mentioned Cuba."

Authorities confiscated computers, disks and taped conversations dating back to 1992 from Medina's apartment, number 3G in the Townhouse Apartments, 1776 Polk

Street, which overlooks Young Circle in downtown Hollywood.

* Alonso, a.k.a. "Franklyn," is a resident of South Dade. According to the indictment, Alonso was once chastised for failing to quickly return a call to his pager by Viramontes and was told he needed to maintain "full combat readiness status."

Records reflect repeated directions from the Cuban government that Alonso participate in and report information about the Movimiento Democracia (to be "the eyes of the [Cuban government] in the Movimiento Democracia"). A boat pilot, Alonso traveled on flotillas organized by the Movimiento Demcoracia, including one in July 1996.

Alonso's report, according to the indictment, named people participating in the flotilla, described Coast Guard activity during the flotilla, and provided navigational information. He also reported plans for a flotilla to occur near Cuban waters during the Pope's visit in January 1998 and a proposed concert by a popular singer on boats off the Cuban coast.

* Hernandez, aka "Manolo," and his wife Linda, aka "Judith." One of two alleged husband-and-wife spy teams. The couple moved to Miami from New Jersey in 1992.

Nilo Hernandez owns an export business that sells computer equipment and medical testing kits. Although the couple were lower-ranked agents, both were in a position of trust and assigned special projects by Cuba.

The Hernandezes, also known as the Juniors, also were entrusted with the identities of other Cuban operatives in the United States. They were assigned to conduct counter-surveillance projects and undertake a long-term surveillance mission of two Cuban agents thought to be at risk of defecting to U.S. authorities.

Hernandez was asked to infiltrate the Latin Chamber of Commerce (CAMACOL) and Linda was to do the same with Alpha 66, a paramilitary anti-Castro group. Both were asked to investigate a local telecommunications company and to develop closer relationships with a former Navy employee to see if he would turn informant.

The Hernandezes were asked to mail anonymous, misleading and threatening letters to political figures within the United States, including communication in the guise of an anti-Castro figure threatening an unnamed U.S. senator for his political position.

A search of the Hernandez residence revealed photographic developing equipment and chemicals, three portable two-way radios, shortwave radios, city and transit maps of New York, Miami, Las Vegas, Houston and other cities, wigs, hair attachments and coloring, colored contact lenses, telephone numbers and locations of pay phones and other items.

In Hernandez's car, there were two mini-recorders with adapters to run off the cigarette lighter, a microphone running from a recorder and clipped to the rearview mirror and a \$200 receipt for a mini-recorder from Spy World.

Neighbors said they were surprised - even angered - by the arrest. One neighbor, Guido Lopez, spent 14 years as a political prisoner in Cuba.

"I suffered a lot in jail," he said. "Anyone who does this kind of thing should have

his head cut off. Freedom comes at a high price, but to some people, that just doesn't matter."

The Hernandezes, who have a son, mostly kept to themselves.

* Santos, aka ``Mario," is a U.S. citizen and married to Silverio, aka ``Julia," a resident alien. The couple lived in an modest apartment at 355 NW 72nd Ave in the Flagami section of Miami.

The couple moved to Miami from New Jersey in mid-1996. Agents found financial records of Viramontes that indicated the spy-couple received \$4,800 for ``operational expenses and financial help" but then the Cuban government reduced the budget.

A woman answered the door Monday afternoon at Joseph Santos' third-floor apartment, but declined comment. ``We are not doing very well right now," she said.

Neighbor Gertrudis Lopez said Santos worked two jobs: at Sazon Goya and cleaning the Miami Arena. ``I am very surprised and sad, but until someone proves it for sure, I won't believe it," she said.

Lopez spoke fondly of the wife and their five-year-old daughter.

``We're laundry-room friends, so to speak. Every night I talk to her in the balcony when she has a cigarette after dinner. I invited them to my house, to my son's birthday party. They just seem like very decent, hard-working people. There has never been any doubt or suspicion in my mind. Their daughter is very upset. She's very attached to both of them."

According to the indictment, the couple's assignment was to infiltrate the new U.S. Southern Command headquarters in West Dade. ``Mario and Julia should start working against it . . . they shall both have as their fundamental assignment the penetration of the headquarters of said command . . . both comrades should stay apprised and immediately informed, everything there [sic] public information or secret."

Recently, the organization suffered a setback when someone stole Medina's laptop computer from a hotel room, Campa told Viramontes, ``The problem is that they took the disks. The whole story is there."

Herald Staff Writers Adam Ramirez, Damaris Ocana, Marika Lynch and Ana Acle contributed to this report.

Senior Agents:

- Manuel Viramontes

* aka Giro, Giraldo

* one of the three senior agents, with oversight for infiltration by his sub-agents of domestic anti-Castro groups in the Miami area.

* Received reports from, and provided payments to, their respective sub-agents and conveyed to the sub-agents instructions from Cuba.

* Captain in Cuban military

* Directly supervised: Rene Gonzalez, Alejandro Alonso, Nilo and Linda Hernandez.

- Ruben Campa

* aka Vicky

* Substituted for Viramontes and Medina when they were temporarily recalled to Cuba for other missions.

- Luis Medina

* AKA Allan, Johnny, Oso

* One of the three senior agents, with oversight for the attempted penetration of, and reporting on, U.S. military installations and activity in South Florida, including Boca Chica Naval Air Base in the Lower Keys and the Southern Command in West Dade.

* Officer in Cuban Directorate of Intelligence.

* From 1992 to 1996, reported on operations at MacDill Air Force base in Tampa.

* Transferred to Miami in 1996 specifically to lead the infiltration of the U.S. Southern Command.

* Supervised Nilo and Linda Hernandez, Antonio Guerrero and aka Gabriel (unknown)

Two other Cuban agents, Ricardo Villareal (aka Horacio) and Remijio Luna (aka Marcellino) also exercised managerial or supervisory functions over sub-agents at times relevant to the affidavit. Both men, however, have left the U.S. for other operational assignments.

Sub-Agents:

- Rene Gonzalez

* aka Castor, Iselin

* Reported on the activities of anti-Castro political and humanitarian groups and individuals in Miami's Cuban exile community, including Brothers to the Rescue, Movimiento Democracia, Militares y Profesionales Por la Democracia, Commandos United for Liberation, PUND (National Democratic Unified Party), Commission Nacional Cubano and the Cuban American Pilots Association.

* Posed as an FBI informant, ostensibly supplying information about drug smugglers as a means to obtain info on the activities of the agency.

- Alejandro Alonso

* aka Franklyn

* a boat pilot, was ordered to ``be the eyes of the Cuban government in the Movimiento Democracia" by participating in flotillas, reporting on Coast Guard activity and providing navigational information concerning courses and locations of the flotillas.

- Nilo Hernandez

* aka Manolo

* Held military rank of sublieutenant

* Married to Linda; couple collectively referred to as the Juniors or Jrs. They were in positions of heightened trust and responsibility and were assigned special projects by Cuba.

* Exporter of computer peripherals and medical testing kits

* Asked to infiltrate CAMACOL, the Latin American Chamber of Commerce. Also ordered to investigate an unnamed ``local telecommunications company."

* ``Juniors" also ordered to carry out assignments involving the mailing of anonymous, misleading and threatening letters to political figures within the United State.

- Linda Hernandez

* aka Judith

* Held military rank of sublieutenant; married to Nilo

* Directed to infiltrate Alpha 66, a Cuban exile anti-Castro paramilitary group

- Antonio Guerrero

* aka Lorient

* Reported to Luis Medina; assigned to help infiltrate Southern Command.

- Joseph Santos

* aka Mario

* Naturalized U.S. citizen, married to Amarylis Silverio

* Sent to Miami to assist Luis Medina in the penetration of Southcom

* Employee of food producer located near Southcom.

- Amarylis Silverio

* aka Julia

* Permanent resident alien; married to Joseph Santos

* Sent to Miami to assist Luis Medina in the penetration of Southcom

Missing Senior Agents:

* Two other Cuban agents, Ricardo Villarreal (aka Horacio) and Remijio Luna (aka Marcellino) also exercised managerial or supervisory functions over sub-agents. Both have left the U.S. for other operational assignments.

Color photo: Manuel Viramontes, Luis Medina, Ruben Campa,

Antonio Guerrero, Joseph Santos, Amarylis Silverio, Nilo Hernandez, Linda

Hernandez, Rene Gonzalez, Alejandro Alonso (all-a); Color map: Florida

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