

~~TOP SECRET~~

C. Four for A Cause -- 19 April 1961

In an attempt to meet the needs of the Brigade on the beach on 19 April, two C-46's were scheduled to make air drops in the Playa Giron area -- one drop to be on the airstrip and the other in the city area; and a C-54 was supposed to make a drop over Blue Beach itself. It was reported that all three missions either aborted or were recalled because of the presence of Castro aircraft in the target areas; but examination of the cable traffic and other available information indicates that the aircraft did not abort, but for one reason or another all of the drops went astray. Messages indicated that the attempted drops at the airstrip had been blown away and that the C-54 drops at the beach had gone into the sea.

The only successful resupply mission on 19 April resulted from appeals by the ground force commander, Jose Perez San Roman ("Pepe" San Roman), for a C-46 to land at the Playa Giron air field with supplies and to evacuate Brigade wounded. A C-46 flown by Manuel Navarro, with Jose E. Pellon and Robert H. Hoffbuck as co-pilot and navigator respectively, put down at the airstrip and discharged 8,500 lbs. of

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

assorted ammunition, medicines, radio gear, and other items needed by the Brigade.* Although he talked to the Brigade medical doctor, Dr. Juan Sordo, and was told that the Brigade wounded could be brought from a hospital to the aircraft in an hour or two, Navarro made the difficult decision to fly the C-46 out of Cuba before the FAR fighters destroyed it on the ground. The only person to be evacuated was Matias Farias, the B-26 pilot who had survived the shoot down and crash landing at the Playa Giron airstrip on D-Day. 59/

In addition to outlining the program for resupply of the Brigade, Gar Thorsrud also forwarded to Headquarters the plans for tactical air operations in support of the Brigade ground forces on 19 April. The B-26's were going to go out in pairs every two hours to work-over the roads leading into the beach-head area, and a C-54 was being loaded with 55 gallon drums of napalm in an attempt to provide additional attack capability on the roadways. Thorsrud also informed Headquarters that American crews were going to

* Hofbuck is the alias for a North American contract navigator whose participation in this episode has not yet been made public. 58/

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

be employed on all missions because the Cuban crews were nearly exhausted:

Five or six stalwarts remain among Cuban B-26 crews that we can count on. They are Ponzoa, Herrera, Zuniga, Rene Garcia, Soto, and Varella. Others nearly finished. May fly, but would abort or make quick pass in target area. Cuban C-46 and C-54 crews holding up well. C-54 napalm run not launched, no spotting charges for igniters. 59a/*

The Chief of TIDE's air operations also expressed great concern about the need for effective USN air cover. On the 18th, according to Thorsrud, the B-26's were not being met by Navy air until they reached the 12 mile limit -- either inbound or outbound. Additionally:

Beach reports enemy aircraft made passes on beach while Navy aircraft remained at high altitude. If this procedure used in the morning [19 April] Headquarters can expect to lose some American crews. 60/

The first of the B-26's to take off from Puerto Cabezas for Cuba on 19 April was flown by Gonzalo

* A few hours after sending this message, Thorsrud's concern was borne out when he reported:

Cuban crews depleted and either refuse to fly or are exhausted. Two Cuban crews have just aborted on take-off. 59b/

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

Herrera, one of the truly dedicated pilots of the Brigade Air Force. The record indicates that Herrera departed between 0600Z-0700Z, putting him over the target area about 0930Z-1000Z (0430-0500 Havana/Washington). Between 0845Z and 0900Z four or five B-26's flown by US pilots headed for Cuba, and these were followed at 1045Z by two or three additional US piloted B-26's.* The Americans who piloted the B-26's were Billy J. Goodwin, Dalton H. Livingston, Thomas W. Ray, Riley W. Shamburger, and Joseph L. Shannon of the Alabama Air National Guard; and Doug Price and Connie Seigrist of the Agency's Far East proprietary, CAT. Two additional Americans from the Alabama ANG, Leo

* The question concerning the exact number of US piloted B-26's on 19 April arises from a difference between the Mission Summary Report prepared for the Taylor Committee in April 1961 and Thorsrud's revision of that Mission Summary Report in 1968 when he reviewed Persons's book, *Bay of Pigs*. The question was whether Doug Price flew as a co-pilot with Connie Seigrist -- as indicated in the early summary -- or flew a B-26 himself as indicated by the later report. Based on the need for B-26 pilots and the fact that non-pilot personnel -- Wade Gray, a navigator, and Leo Baker, a radio operator -- were riding the second seats, it is presumed that Price -- who had flown a B-26 during the attack on the Castro convoy on the 18th -- was piloting an aircraft not riding as a co-pilot. 61/ Moreover, it seems probable that if Price had been flying with him on 19 April, Seigrist would have remembered this and so specified in his correspondence with the author.

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

F. Baker and Wade C. Gray flew as observers for Ray and Shamburger, respectively. 62/ All of these American airmen were volunteers, and all recognized the risk posed by the FAR T-33's and Sea Furies.*

Of the B-26's that flew on 19 April, Herrera engaged a Castro convoy heading for Playa Giron from Playa Larga. Ferrer claimed that Herrera destroyed three tanks, three armored trucks, killed 83 and wounded 14, and left the convoy in a shambles -- and Herrera's B-26 with 37 bullet holes in it.63/ The validity of the number of killed and wounded is open to question, and if Thorsrud's Mission Summary for the Taylor Committee were the only other evidence available, the claims for Herrera would be in considerable doubt since the summary shows only that Herrera "encountered considerable opposition from AAA and aircraft." 64/ A message from TIDE on the 19th, however, stated that in an attack on a car-truck convoy, some 7-8 miles northwest of Playa Giron (presumably on the coast road), a single B-26 had partially destroyed

* In addition to those listed, the following members of the Alabama Air National Guard flew as B-26 crew members on 19 April 1961: Eldon Cross, Charles Hayden, Carl Sudano, and James Vaughn. Neither Cross nor Sudano had been recruited for overflights. 62a/

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

the convoy with two napalm bombs, eight rockets, and 2,160 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition. The plane had also decommissioned a tank 4 miles west of Playa Giron. In all probability this was Herrera's work. 65/*

Of the nine Americans who took off for the attacks against Cuba on 19 April 1961, four were killed in action when two B-26's were shot down. The cable

* To the author's knowledge, the number of killed and wounded in any given strike except for that on D minus 2 has never been revealed by Castro. Despite the fact that Ferrer also reported that "Don Gordon" (e.g., Doug Price) and Herrera were both involved in strikes on convoys, an assortment of gremlins apparently limited Price's ordnance to seven of his eight rockets -- neither napalm nor machine guns functioned. In fact, both Ferrer and Persons tell that Price landed with one armed rocket hanging half loose after it had failed to discharge properly. 66/ In addition, there is considerable confusion regarding Price's actual time of departure, but it is more probable -- certainly in view of the plan to fly the B-26's in pairs -- that it was about the same time as Herrera's rather than at 1030Z, as Thorsrud indicated in the revision of his Mission Summary (the 1968 review of Persons's book). Also according to Seigrist, all of the 1030Z flight was recalled before reaching the target:

I don't recall how many B-26's departed in flight with me later in the morning [of 19 April 1961] to support our troops, but we were recalled just before we were arriving on target. I do not recall how we received the message nor who sent it. 67/

Price, as noted, had expended his rockets on targets; and it does not appear that he could have been with this later group.

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

traffic detailed the loss of Riley Shamburger and Wade Gray as follows:

1. Regret report Riley W. Sibbets [Riley Shamburger] shot down by enemy T-33's on dawn attack east Blue Beach. At time Sibbets flying wing for Joe Safranek [Joe Shannon].
2. T-33's attacked [out] of sun. (No Navy air cover witnessed at anytime.) Riley called Joe advising, "We've been jumped." Both took evasive action, turning into the attacks. Joe observed T-33 almost flying wing with Riley and sliding out on overshoot of his final pass. White smoke trailing from Riley's aircraft. He last reported on fire, was observed headed for the ocean, dropped external tanks, and ditched about 3 miles off shore, 20 miles east Blue Beach. Long plume in the water and then a larger splash. Slim possibility may have survived. Have asked Navy (BAYY) for air-sea rescue, but do not have faith they will effect rescue, PBY enroute with orders not proceed in beyond 12 mile limit on pickup unless Navy provides cover. 68/

The information on the shoot down on Shamburger and Gray had been picked up by two of the Brigade B-26's -- probably Herrera and Price -- which had been in the beach area from 1010Z-1130Z and were en route back to TIDE. The time of Shamburger's loss was given as 1150Z. The FLASH message from TIDE to BELL further reported:

- 358 -

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

No, repeat no, Navy aircraft in area at that time. In light of above incident, TIDE cannot repeat not provide air support Brigade until effective air cover can be provided. 69/

Thomas "Pete" Ray and Leo Baker had been flying in the northwest sector of the combat area and had made at least one strafing pass at the Central Australia sugar mill -- the Cuban command center for the area -- when they were hit by ground fire. What occurred then is still subject to speculation. The initial messages from TIDE to Headquarters on the shoot down stated that Havana reported that an American -- reported variously as "Berliss," "Berles," and "Berllins" -- had been "captured"; and TIDE first speculated that he had parachuted from the disabled B-26. 70/* The Chief of the Cuban Armed Forces Medical Corps, Major Oscar Fernández Mel, however, was at the Australia sugar mill on 19 April 1961 when the B-26 was hit; and he reported that the plane made a crash landing in a cleared cane field. Major Fernández Mel stated that one charred body was found and that two others in the plane jumped out, but were later

* Headquarters quickly cabled TIDE to "Pls send names of US pilots who went down. Who was with Berliss [Baker]?" 70a/

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

"Found in an orange grove about 4 or 5 kilometers from the place where the plane crashed." 71/ Considering that Havana radio so quickly reported on the identification of Baker, it seems clear that he, rather than Ray, died in the crash.

That there was a third person in the B-26 with Ray and Baker can only be attributed to the imagination of excited ground observers, and there seems no reason to doubt that the pilot of the B-26, Pete Ray, survived the crash landing and attempted to escape. According to Cubans who were involved in the search for the survivor of the crash, he was armed with a pistol, hand grenades, and a knife; and he was killed in a gun fight when resisting capture. One Cuban report of 23 April 1961, also stated that no identification was found on the flyer killed in the gun fight; and to the author's knowledge the Government of Cuba has never publicly acknowledged Ray's identity. 72/*

* Some of those who were involved in the air operations believed that both Ray and Baker were murdered in cold blood by the Cuban militiamen. Both Gar Thorsrud and Sid Stembridge reported seeing a picture taken from a Havana newspaper which showed two bodies, believed to be Ray and Baker, which showed single bullet holes in their foreheads and no other apparent bodily injuries. This would suggest, of course, that the two had been
(footnote continued on following page)

~~TOP SECRET~~