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Impressions of the Bay of Pigs Assault

-Larry Di Donato-

3813 Wooded Creek Dr.

Dallas, Texas 752244

I was not quite eighteen when I graduated from boot camp and walked across the gangplank of the USS Conway on a hot August afternoon in 1960. The Conway was a converted WWII Destroyer that had been re-conditioned after the Korean war to meet the threat of Russian submarines that were plying our east coast at the height of the Cold War.

I joined the Navy right after High School out of patriotism, and I was not ready for college. There was no immediate land war, so I thought any action would be on the high seas. At that time in my life I guess I was looking for adventure, but I never had to look very far on the Conway. Plus, I liked the Navy uniform, and the thought of seeing the world. Leaving the little gritty industrial town where I was raised was very alluring to a teenager. College could wait. I did graduate from College in 1970; went on to become a VP for a division of the Stanley Works, and am currently a small businessman - married with three grandchildren.

-The USS Conway-

The Conway was an old ship in comparison to the bright and shiny new ships being added to the fleet at that time. Her keel had been laid in 1941. There was no air conditioning, no privacy, no ice cream, no music, no amenities, two soda machines for 200 guys, chain fall bunks for us enlisted men, and the bathrooms (if I can call them that) were tight and small. This was - after all - meant to be a warship. The advantage we had for the Bay expedition was her shallow draft. The ship was designed for "close in" support as required for its mission in WWII.

We carried three five inch cannons and two twin double action three inch AA guns, plus an array of anti-submarine weapons, along with torpedoes. My assignment was to work as an Electricians Mate and my battle station was in the after-steering compartment. I mention this because there was one hatch leading out of the compartment to the fantail of the main deck, and I had a panoramic view of everything that was going on at the Bay of Pigs. Because I was in the aft steering area, my headphones were tuned into the bridge where I could hear communication between engaged parties; including the Combat Information Center or CIC, and men ashore.

I was to be in Conway for a short period of time to await my orders for an Electricians mate school ashore, and during this time, the Conway's mission was to cruise from Norfolk north and into the stormy North Atlantic searching for Russian submarines going to Cuba. We were in Task Group Alfa which was a top notch "search and destroy" force. I might add we were fortunate enough to bring at least one to the surface by threatening to use our "hedgehogs" or depth charges. It was astounding to see the submarine rise slowly to our starboard side within throwing distance to our ship. Once surfaced they identified themselves as an "eastern bloc" submarine and all on board were smiling and waving hello while we were not smiling and used our hands in a far different manner as we escorted them out of our sea limits. We also were involved in the Mercury space shuttle program, and rescued a freighter named the Pine Ridge in a howling storm in Cape Hatteras. But the mission that really defined my Navy career - and my future ideology - was the Bay of Pigs assault.

-Bay of Pigs-

The first hint I got of trouble was when we were in port in Norfolk taking on provisions. We were really loaded up. We were putting canned goods in fan lockers and using every space possible for dry goods. The next day we steamed out of our berth in the cover of darkness and instead of heading straight out into the Atlantic we turned up a tributary of the James River where the Naval Ammo station was and loaded up more shells. Then we loitered in the area during the day while crew members painted over our hull number (507), and painted over the ship's name on the fantail. We did not fly the flag as defined by Navy regs. All of this was most unusual as it didn't tie in at all to the rumors running around the ship about visiting New Orleans during Mardi Gras, or partaking in another space shot. Also, as we steamed out of the James we headed south rather than north, which meant we weren't going to be involved in our regular sub hunting exercises. Rumors as to our destination were rampant and even the Officers who were normally stingy about communicating our missions were even more so. Perhaps they didn't know either. Commands were obviously given from the highest levels of Government.

As we headed south we steamed far enough out so that we couldn't be observed from shore, nor did I see any of the other destroyers in our task group. This was all very strange and the weather kept getting hotter and hotter, but we were not allowed to sleep topside as we sometimes did in the heat. We had to remain down below as much as possible during the night because we were running "darken ship". A lit cigarette could be seen for miles away. We seemed to have more drills for Repel Borders and Battle Stations and got to a point where we could be on station within two minutes. A new record. Without being able to see much ashore, we had no idea where we were; but by dead reckoning many of us deduced that we were entering Cuban waters. It seemed as though the Captain was getting a "fix" on things because the day before the attack we did enter as close to the Bay as possible. We all went topside for a good look, and could feel the sand hitting the bottom of our sonar dome. Also for the first

time in my life I saw a great white shark. It must have been at least eight feet long and was accompanied by a small "pilot fish" and probably sensed he was in the right place at the right time. The water was infested by sharks.

At sunset on the evening of the attack we witnessed three black, darkened ships on the horizon. As they got closer and we steamed south to meet them, our Division officer called us to the fantail and briefed us on our mission. I determined later that many details were left out; but we knew that at four a.m. the following morning, we were going to General Quarters, or battle stations to escort these ships into the Bay. I had a hard time sleeping that night. It was incredibly hot below decks and I could feel the sweat running down my chest. But I was not frightened given the youthful feeling of invincibility. I was also confident we would knock out any initial resistance with our guns. I mean what the heck were we there for if not to provide fire support. Really, we had never lost a war.

I wondered about the men on those ships, and how they must have felt.

Gongs rang out loud and clear at Four am. This was the real thing." General Quarters, General Quarters, All men man your battle stations, this is NO drill" A thrill ran up my spine. Talk about a wake up call. We were at our stations in no time at all. We came in fast . I knew this because my station was right between the two screw shafts and they were working hard. The communication from the bridge was "garbled " and I couldn't make out a word. I was waiting for the five inch gun over my head to open up. There is absolutely no mistaking the crack and thunder of a Five inch 38 going off over your head. But there was no fire. The men were going in alone. I climbed the ladder of the hatch for some air and heard loud fire coming from the east. We were within less than a mile to the beach. The Brigade was in the jungle. I thought that was a bad move as dead in front of me was a pristine beachhead leading right to the top of sea wall. There was much chatter on the mike. I could hear ground forces talking to our ship and asking for fire support, or air defense. They were getting shot up! Who the hell was running this operation anyway? The sound of airplanes overhead was encouraging but they weren't ours. They looked like WW11 era bombers. That was really a bad sign. All the while fire rained down on the jungle from the top of the seawall, not only from the bombers. It had to be a meat grinder down there. What the hell next? Why were we not turning our AA guns on those guys. I could see our sister ship, the Eaton to my left or west of the jungle as silent as a church mouse. Guns pointed toward the jungle. Were we there for show? We stayed "on station" for about four hours and then we manned our two whale boats. There was a junior officer with what I thought was a Tommy gun. I wondered if he had ever fired it. In that boat also were three enlisted Gunners Mates armed with archaic M1 rifles and .45 caliber pistols. Was this to be our landing party? Could we win this battle with a couple of whale boats with eight guys and a Tommy gun? No, they were sent out to talk to the men who came out of the jungle in rubber rafts. I had no idea what the conversations were like but I could imagine. Meanwhile it seems that things were slowing in the jungle. I hopped out of my station to get a better view. All was grim. There was no doubt that the guys ashore were in a very bad situation. There were no smiles on our ship.

None of the normal wisecracks. We only talked about our situation and why were we not doing anything.

All at once I heard the sounds of jets overhead. Ours. Thank God. One of the jets came so close and so slow over our mast that I could make out his features as he waved to us below. He was a ray of sunshine. The first smile of the day. Finally we were going to go in to help these guys. Then perhaps we would let them have our fires. No again. I watched our jets go in and circle the jungle as Castro's air force fled the scene. None of our planes fired. Not one.

Late in the day of the 17th, we steamed out of the bay until we couldn't see Cuba any longer and sidled up next to an Assault Aircraft carrier loaded with Marines in full battle dress. We were there for re-fueling. The Marines clambored over the sides to watch us and we looked up at them as well. Again, there was not the usual wisecracking, or name calling or any show of rivalry between us. They were grim too and I knew that every one of them were wishing they were as close to the action as we were. It was then I realized that not only had we the firepower from the destroyers, the air power from two aircraft carriers, but thousands of Marines just itching for their orders to attack. We had enough firepower there to wipe Castro's forces off the map and forever change history. But we didn't do it.

On the morning of the 18th we went to General Quarters again and were on station and heading into the Bay. This time our whaleboats were the first off and went around in circles until they landed on the beach, hopefully expecting some members of the Brigade to show up. They waited for a good long time. Did some of the Brigade members think this was a Castro trick? Was our ship a trick also? Then the rescue attempts started. I knew we had lost this battle and knew the reason why. Every one of us could feel the loss of pride for our country, and sorrow for the men left in the jungle. I thought about how angry they might have been at us.

It was here that I learned that free men will die for democracy. That honor, dignity, loyalty and bravery are not just mere words used at a party. These men were fighting and dying for these ideals.

Now some were coming out again in rubber boats but this time not so many. The whaleboats were coming back to the ship with some of the guys as were the rubber rafts. I was among those who helped these men, or "boys" like me, onto the ship and into our welcoming arms. They were sick, tired and wounded. The most obvious sign of physical ailments were the mosquito bites. Their faces were swollen to a man. I'll never forget that sight. We treated them as brothers and even though we were on "water rations" we helped them into our showers and helped them clean up, and lent them clothes to wear while our crewmen washed their torn clothing. We fed them well.

At about 2pm that day I was up in the bridge changing out some fuses. I had just finished and was starting to walk down the port ladder to the main deck when once again came the load gongs and the call to General Quarters, this is no drill. I literally flew down the ladder by the handrails not even

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touching the stairs and ran back aft to my station. Our guns were already swinging back and forth. The ship was ready. Apparently our radar had picked up signals indicating that one or two of Castro's bombers were headed our way and fast.

This situation lasted for about ten minutes and the call to "secure" from General Quarters" came over the speaker. The rumor was that one of the planes had been shot down by our sister ship. We couldn't talk to them about it so I'll never know if that was true or not. I'd like to believe that it was. We needed *some form of retribution to raise our morale.*

Early that evening we steamed out of the Bay but returned for two nights searching for survivors in the shark infested waters. We found none. On the night of the 19th we turned the Conway around and headed to Florida at Flank (high) speed. That was the last we saw of the Bay, and the many brave men we left behind.

As a result, the U.S. came the closest ever to Nuclear war with the Soviets and the Castro brothers remain a stigma in the eyes of many in the United States.