

ABC / Nightline on the July 13, 1994 Tugboat Massacre January 20, 1998 (From Havana)

Transcript

TED KOPPEL Three and a half years ago, in the summer of 1994, something terrible happened out there, seven or eight miles out at sea, off the northern coast of Cuba. It was an incident that went all but unnoticed in the US media. The Cuban-American community protested but they protest a lot and as I say, we in the mainstream media all but ignored it. The Vatican, however, did not.

A letter of condolence speaking in the name of the Pope was sent by the Vatican's secretary of state to Jaime Ortega, the Archbishop of Havana, who passed it on to the survivors of the incident and to their families. And that created a ripple which caused a ground swell, the full impact of which is still building.

Liz Balmaseda is a columnist for "The Miami Herald" who specializes in Cuban affairs.

LIZ BALMASEDA What the letter from the Pope did was it really gave strength to the church in Cuba so the church, so that the archbishop could turn around and denounce this act.

TED KOPPEL (VO) What happened occurred at night at sea in the middle of July in 1994. The time is important because it wasn't all that long ago, not, in other words, in the bad old days of mass arrests and widespread executions. Seventy-two Cubans, men, women and children, slipped out of this harbor aboard a tug boat. They were bound for Florida. Their boat was followed out to sea by three Cuban fire boats. What happened next we learned from some of the survivors, two of whom ultimately made it to Miami, while the other two risked arrest by talking to us here in Havana.

SERGIO PERODIN (Miami) (through translators) This boat came directly for us, cut us off and attacked us without a word, without saying anything to us or telling us to stop.

MARIA VICTORIA GARCIA (through translators) They told us stay here and show them the children so that they don't shoot at us. One boat comes up behind us and they started ramming the boat.

JANETTE HERNANDEZ (Miami) (through translators) As we were showing them the children, they started spraying strong bursts of water at really high pressure, right at us.

SERGIO PERODIN (through translators) With the pressure hoses, they blew apart our boat's windows, its doors, they wrecked our radio and we knew then that their intention was to sink our boat.

MARIA VICTORIA GARCIA (through translators) Our tugboat started taking on water. We shouted to the crewmen on the boat, "Look at the children! You're going to kill them!" And he said, "Let them die. Let them die."

JANETTE HERNANDEZ (through translators) I remember the banging and the noises from inside as the boat was sinking. In the water, everything is louder. That is what I heard. And I still hear it at night in nightmares.

MARIA VICTORIA GARCIA (through translators) I don't know how to swim but I said I can't sink with this boat. I was holding onto a pipe and I had my son right in front of me and I held him and then I went down. I sank. When I made it to the surface again I found a body floating that I know was Rosa.

TED KOPPEL (VO) Maria and her son held onto the body of her friend. It was the only thing keeping them from sinking again.

REYNALDO CARRAZANA (Havana) (through translators) At the moment the boat sank, the survival instinct is the strongest. At that moment, I just thought of saving myself.

MARIA VICTORIA GARCIA (through translators) There was a boat just in front of me and it's showing its light on me and I said, "pull us up." And it was the same crewmen. And I said pull us up, pull up the boat because he's going to drown. And he said, "If you want to be rescued, wait for the Coast Guard boat." And he turned the boat around.

SERGIO PERODIN (through translators) They started going around us in a circle fast creating a whirlpool that sucked the people down to get rid of everybody because they didn't want to leave any witnesses to this tragedy.

REYNALDO CARRAZANA (through translators) I didn't know how to swim. I just floated. It seems that the boat's freezer was nearby and I hung onto it. And a number of people were there hanging onto it, too.

MARIA VICTORIA GARCIA (through translators) I tried to reach that group. When I get there I hold onto the board because they were holding onto a piece of wood. I tried to hold onto the piece of wood. It was the ice pot that had come off the tugboat. But there were many people hanging onto it and when I held onto it, it seems that my weight made the boat overturn and a lot of people fell on me. And it was then that I let go of my son and I tried to grab him again but I couldn't. It was so fast, he just went and I couldn't grab him.

SERGIO PERODIN (through translators) We saw in the distance a boat with a Greek flag that appeared to be what stopped them. It looked like the boat was watching what they were doing, the murder they were committing. So they stopped and decided to pick us up.

JORGE GARCIA (Havana) (through translators) When I asked my daughter, "What about Juan Mario?" "Papa, he's lost." "And Joel?" "Papa, he's lost." And Ernesto? "Papa, he's lost." And then we knew that other members of the family were all lost, 14 in all.

JANETTE HERNANDEZ (through translators) Fidel is the only one who could have given the order to sink the boat. And soon after the boat sank, the captain of one of the fire boats was decorated as a hero.

TED KOPPEL (VO) Jorge Garcia lost his son. In this picture, you can see a chain around his son's neck. Against all odds, it was brought back to the father.

JORGE GARCIA (through translators) This chain is a symbol for me. It preserves the sweat of my son. This chain was around his neck. It was brought to me through the generosity of a survivor. I will keep it forever. My wife gave this chain to my son. It has the image of the Pope. It has double significance for me, the memory of my son and the image of the Pope, who very soon will come to Cuba. (Commercial Break)

ANNOUNCER ABC News Nightline continues. Once again reporting from Havana, Cuba, Ted Koppel.

TED KOPPEL The Castro government had dismissed the tugboat sinking as an accident and insisted that no one in the government could have played any role. But then the church cleared its throat.

LIZ BALMASEDA I think the letter that came from the Pope really showed that there was an important international ring to this incident, that somebody at least, somebody as important as the Pope knew what had happened.

TED KOPPEL (VO) The letter from the Vatican's secretary of state read, in part, "It profoundly saddened the Holy Father to hear of the deplorable death of the families on a boat," and then, "I ask that you extend to the families the Holy Father's deepest sympathy and to express his concern and feelings of closeness."

JANETTE HERNANDEZ (through translators) He sent us his condolences for what had happened and when I received it, I said to myself, well, at least people knew about what happened.

TED KOPPEL (VO) Janette Hernandez and her husband, who also survived the sinking of the tugboat, went to sea again, this time on a raft, and made it to Miami, where they have created a new life. Maria Garcia, who lost 14 members of her family, also lost her job. She says she is under constant surveillance and risked arrest by talking to us.

MARIA VICTORIA GARCIA (through translators) I will be happy if the Pope, among his many concerns, mentions the question about the tugboat. What has happened about the incident with the tugboat? What has been done? I would like the Pope to ask Fidel that question.

QUANA CARRAZANA (through translators) I see him as a messenger of God and since God always wants the best for human beings, he's going to bring us that happiness we need, at least spiritually, so that little by little this comes to an end.

TED KOPPEL (VO) Quana Carrazana's husband, daughter and granddaughter were among the dead. She lives with her son in poverty and says she is also harassed by state security.

QUANA CARRAZANA (through translators) The jails are full of political prisoners. As a result of this interview, I may be arrested. But I'm not afraid if they arrest me, because I live for my son. If they kill me, I don't mind, because I'm already dead. If they actually kill me, I don't mind.

REYNALDO CARRAZANA (through translators) He's going to say mass. People are going to feel fine while he's here and then things will go back to normal. People will go back to their daily grind, live their day to day difficult life, sweat and toil and everything will be the same.

TED KOPPEL (VO) Reynaldo, Quana's son, had to leave school. He says he's periodically picked up or threatened. He supports his mother by making furniture by hand. His mother is afraid that Fidel Castro will warmly greet the Pope.

QUANA CARRAZANA (through translators) I don't want that moment to come. I would turn my face because it's as if God were embracing the Devil. God cannot embrace the Devil ever. The Pope's visit will help Fidel because it will look to the world as if Fidel has become more open. But for the Cuban people, nothing will change.

TED KOPPEL (VO) The men who survived were thrown into prison for several months. When they were released, Sergio Perodin made his way into exile in Miami.

SERGIO PERODIN (through translators) I have always been against those who travel to Cuba to attend one of the masses the Pope will say there. It has never occurred to me the idea of returning to Cuba as long as this dictatorship exists.

REYNALDO CARRAZANA (through translators) I'm planning to go. Let's see if they let me. They can warn me. Here they can warn you. They see you around, they can simply arrest you and that's it. They don't tell you don't go, but they say if you go, there might be consequences.

JORGE GARCIA (through translators) I'm planning to go see the Pope, go to the mass. Probably he will not know that I am there. I will just be one in the crowd. But I will go there because I have a debt of gratitude to the Pope that I want to pay.

TED KOPPEL I'll be back with a closing thought in a moment. (Commercial Break)

TED KOPPEL The Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin, once mocked the power of the Pope with his famous rhetorical question how many divisions does the Pope command? Fidel Castro has a more subtle understanding of the Popes influence.

By welcoming John Paul to Havana tomorrow, Castro may believe that some of the Pope's moral authority will rub off. But the newly revitalized Catholic Church of Cuba has already made it clear that the vicar of Christ will be here visiting the people of Cuba, not engaging in political dialogue with its leaders.

A simple letter of condolence from the Pope has already showed that it could make waves in this country. A Papal visit may yet stir up a storm.

That's our report for tonight. I'm Ted Koppel in Havana. For all of us here at ABC News, good night.

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