

The 1980 Canimar River Massacre: dozens killed for attempting to flee Cuba

Update of August 25, 2019

In 1980, a tourist excursion service was inaugurated using the *XX Aniversario*, a large boat with two decks of chairs and capacity for around one hundred passengers. It was to navigate for around five miles inland along the scenic Canimar river, that flows into Matanzas Bay, near Varadero beach.

Leaving Cuba was almost impossible for average Cubans; since the revolution came to power two decades earlier, it had been strictly controlled by the government. On 6 July, 1980, the excursion boat was hijacked by three youngsters seeking to flee Cuba for the United States –Roberto Calveiro León (16) and the brothers Silvio Aguila Yanes (18) and Sergio Aguila Yanes (19). Sergio was in the Cuban Armed Forces doing his obligatory military service and had taken several firearms for the hijacking.



Upon taking control of the vessel, the youngsters shouted: “To Miami!” amid screams of approval on the part of the surprised passengers. A security guard posing as a civilian resisted and pulled his gun. Sergio shot and wounded him. Concerned for his health, they placed him on a small boat and sent him back to shore; it was later reported that he had died. Upon arriving, however, he had alerted authorities. As the *XX Aniversario* was heading to open seas, Julián Rizo Alvarez, Secretary of the Communist party in Matanzas Province, set up a command post near the river bank. Two high-speed Cuban Navy patrol boats were dispatched with orders to

prevent the escape and sink the vessel if necessary. They opened fire on the boat and the youngsters fired back. Because the vessel was built with cement fiber, it proved difficult to sink and the patrol boat withdrew. Several dead and wounded passengers lay on deck. A Cuban Air Force plane then flew overhead. Parents held children up in the air, hoping this would prevent an attack, but it came back and opened fire, leaving more passengers dead or wounded. A huge boat used for heavy industrial work was then ordered to ram the *XX Aniversario*, which finally sank very close to getting to international waters. Sergio locked himself in the cabin as the boat was sinking and committed suicide by shooting himself; he had stated he would not be taken alive, as he knew that torture and execution would await him.

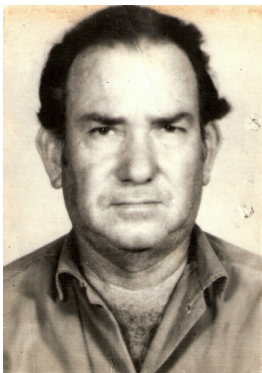
The surviving passengers, now in the water, were fired at and soon had to contend with sharks attracted by all the blood. Silvio Aguila and Roberto Calveiro dove into the water and saved several survivors from drowning, who were then taken ashore.

The collective trial was held around a year later and lasted just three days. A relative who attended reports that it was a farce, that those who commanded the attack were not there and that the government brought in a busload of alleged survivors whom the accused could not recognize. When a real survivor, a woman, showed her bullet wounds and demanded an explanation, she was removed from the court and never heard of again. Silvio Aguila and Roberto Calveiro were sentenced to thirty years in prison. They served long sentences at “Combinado del Este” prison in Havana, where they subjected to psychiatric torture with psychotropic drugs and at least Calveiro was held in isolation in dark cells for around four years (1983-1987). Both were released thanks to the intervention of

Spanish politicians and left for exile in Spain. Humberto Martínez, a young neighbor of Sergio Águila who had been party to the initial plan but had decided to not participate, was sentenced to 12 years of prison. Three other youngsters, including a woman, accused falsely of knowing about the plot, were sentenced to two to three years of prison. All five were subjected to court-mandated confiscation of all of their belongings.

The Cuban government claims the boat was sunk accidentally when waves forced the larger vessel into a collision. The only victim who had a funeral was the guard. Some bodies were reportedly recovered, but were not returned to the families for funerals or burials.

Survivors were ordered to keep silent and to never gather in groups with more than two of them present. They were threatened with trials as accomplices to the hijackings if they talked. For years, government agents monitored their activities while they and victims' relatives were offered gifts of televisions and appliances usually reserved for high government officials.



Vicente Fleitas, one of the victims who perished

Among the minors killed were: Delio Gómez age 17, Lilian González, age 3, Marisol Martínez, age 17, Osmany Rosales, age 9, and Marisel San Juan, age 11. The following also perished: Onelia Quintana, age 50, Sergio Águila, age 19, Mirta de Armas, Juan Domínguez, Luis Espinosa, age 34, Vicente Fleitas, age 56, and José Ramón San Juan, age 60.

Haydée Santamaría Hart, veteran of the 1953 attack on the Moncada Army barracks, Director of the “Casa de Las Americas,” and wife of the then Cuban Minister of Education, is said to have been an indirect victim of this tragedy. Already in despair over the “Mariel” boat exodus, she is reported to have visited survivors at hospitals in the city of Matanzas. Less than a month later, on July 26, 1980 (date of revolutionary importance), Haydée committed suicide. She left a very critical letter for Fidel Castro.

Sources include: *Testimony of brother of one of the hijackers, by telephone, Mar. 27, 2017; Interview with former official of the Directorate of Intelligence of Cuba, with relatives of survivors and, with one witness from Matanzas at the time of the massacre and knew survivors; Official record of the Provincial Court of Matanzas; "Cuba reportedly sank hijacked excursion boat in 1980," Associated Press, Washington D.C., Dec. 8, 1985; Joseph B. Treaster, "Radio Martí Says Cuba Sank Hijacked Boat in '80," The New York Times, Sep. 8, 1985; Tim Bower, Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea, Miami, 1993; Norberto Fuentes, ed. Modesto Arocha, Children of the Enemy, The International Republican Institute, Oct. 1996, www.sigloxxi.org/Archivo/children.htm; Jesús Duva, Llegan a España dos cubanos liberados por mediación de Fraga, El País, Mar. 21, 1992.*

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