

## Armando Cañizares Gamboa, age 28, member of the 2506 Brigade missing in action, presumed killed on April 21, 1961 at Bay of Pigs, Cuba



My father lived and died for his beliefs

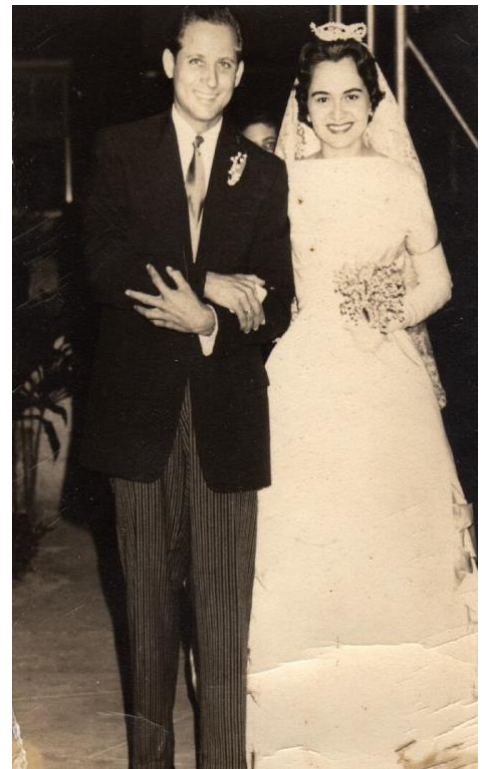
By Maria C. Werlau

My father, Armando, was a native of Camaguey, Cuba. He had fought in the Sierra Maestra under Che Guevara. He and his two brothers, Francisco and Julio, had joined the Rebel Army to help free Cuba of the Batista dictatorship. Although they were only in their twenties, their commitment to restore democracy and constitutional rule was deep. My father was particularly anti-Communist and, in fact, told as much to Ché Guevara during a conversation they had in the mountains. Later, in his memoir on the fight against Batista, Che wrote that the Cañizares brothers had returned "to fight as traitors in the invasion."<sup>1</sup>

The three brothers left the mountains with a large group that took leave in protest over the handling of the cold-blooded assassination of a young member of the Rebel Army. A high-ranking Che protégé, Lalo Sardiñas, had shot the young recruit, who was of very humble origins, for taking off his boots despite orders to keep them on, even to sleep. Fidel and Che had stepped in to override the legal code of the Rebel Army and the deed had gone unpunished. After hiding for a few months inside Cuba, my father, his brothers, and a friend were able to leave for exile in the United States. While in hiding in Havana, he had met my mother. She was a member of the 26th of July opposition movement, and was supporting the fight against the Batista dictatorship within the urban underground resistance movement. They married in Miami on November 17, 1958.

On January 1, 1959, at dawn, Batista fled the country and the revolutionary forces assumed power. My parents arrived on one of the first planes to land in Cuba with the leadership of the 26th of July movement in exile. My mother, several weeks pregnant, was carrying me in her womb. My father took a high-level position at Cuba's Institute for the Stabilization of Sugar (ICEA), a government agency of importance to the economy. Yet, my parents immediately became very concerned with the turn of events and were particularly appalled at the executions and summary trials initiated by the new Castro government.

Realizing Castro had no intentions to restore democracy, my father joined the underground opposition quickly mounting against Castro, whose ranks were filling with old-timers from the anti-Batista struggle. Eventually, a former comrade-in-arms from the Sierra tipped my father off that a case was being prepared to arrest him. In those days, people caught conspiring against the government were quickly executed. So, in May of 1960 we left the country in a hurry, arriving in Miami. I was only eight months old. My mother was six months pregnant with my brother.



<sup>1</sup> Ernesto Che Guevara, *Pasajes de la Guerra revolucionaria (Serie Popular Era)*, México: Ediciones Era, 1969, p.147.

That fall, a military force of Cuban exiles was organized and trained covertly by the United States to invade Cuba and topple Castro. My mother pled with my father for him not to join. They had two babies and, newly exiled, very little money. But he insisted that, because he had helped put Castro in power, his moral duty –to his children and to Cuba– was to help get him out.

My uncles Julio and Francisco, as well as my aunt's husband, José, joined the Brigade. Four wives and seven small children stayed behind in the United States, praying and waiting. My father left for the training camps in Guatemala on January 18, 1961. We never saw him again. Luckily, my uncles made it back. The invasion began on April 17, 1961. At the Bay of Pigs, my father and his brother Julio were part of a small group that fought intensely and had managed to avoid capture for four days. Dismayed at the lack of promised air support, outnumbered many times over, they were being clobbered by Castro's airplanes that were to have been disabled. Knowing the invasion was doomed, they were attempting to break through surrounding revolutionary forces to join the insurgency in the Escambray mountains. Exhausted and hungry, they fell asleep. A group of militiamen shot at them and a gunfire exchange ensued. He and a friend, Manuel Rionda, were badly injured with grenade shrapnel and gunfire. Their captors refused to call in medical attention and forced the rest of their group to leave them. Manuel and my father were never seen again.

The government undertook mass round-ups of civilians as soon as the invasion began. My grandparents in Camaguey had been confined with thousands of Cubans suspected of counter-revolutionary sentiments. After their release, when my grandmother learned of my father's likely death and my uncle's imprisonment, she was consumed by grief and suffered a heart attack. Luckily, she survived. My father's death –real or presumed– had fallen on her birthday. The families in Cuba desperately searched for Manuel and my father. The Cuban government refused to provide information or confirm their deaths despite insistent pleas, including those channeled through the International Red Cross. Manuel's mother was extorted of a considerable sum of money, hard to come by in Cuba in those days. The promised return of both bodies for burial was only a scam by a member of the Cuban military preying on a grieving mother.

While my uncle Julio was held with the rest of the Brigade captives, more suffering was showered on the families of the prisoners. Visits by family members still on the island were opportunities for the Castro government to humiliate and abuse them. My grandmother later related how the women would be stripped, searched disrespectfully, and mocked. Among the appalling things she witnessed female prison guards tossing about the breast prosthesis of an older woman who had gone to visit her son.

Back in Miami, ample turmoil surrounded our lives. My mother and her parents, with almost no money, had two infants and several traumatized teenagers in their care. Cousins had been sent from Cuba without their parents to escape Communism as part of a Catholic Church sponsored program known as "Peter Pan." Many of my mother's



best friends were going through the same situation, their husbands captured and/or injured or killed. Many didn't even die in combat. They were hunted down after their ammunition was gone or executed on the spot. Nine Brigade members were murdered by asphyxia –their captors had viciously piled over a hundred men into a sealed, unventilated, trailer. Their oven of death had taken eight hours to reach Havana as the men desperately cried for mercy.

A few weeks after the invasion, my mother was at a doctor's office in Miami seeking treatment for chronic headaches, likely brought on by stress. She picked up a Life magazine with a photo report of the invasion. There, she found a picture she just “knew” was my father, seemingly dead.<sup>2</sup> When my uncle was released from

<sup>2</sup> Life magazine (Spanish edition), May 29, 1961, p. 19.

prison, he confirmed that he had tied my father's tag to his pants, as it had been broken off by the bullets, as seen in the picture. I learned of the existence of this photograph when I was seventeen. My mother refused to show it to me. She didn't even keep it at our house. I went to the library at the local university and found it, but didn't tell her.

Years later, in 1981, I received information from a very persistent man living in Las Vegas that my father and his cousin were alive in a prison in Cuba. He described my father's deep green eyes, knew he was from Camaguey, and spoke of him and his two brothers by name. This news had a huge effect on me and I frantically tried to confirm it. Because I wouldn't submit my mother to the emotional turmoil, I called my uncles for help. After an investigation, they learned that the man was a suspected Castro spy living in the United States. We assumed he just wanted to prey on anyone he could find, probably following standard orders. My mother didn't learn of this incident for years, but this cruel prank could not have been more ill-timed. Just a few months earlier, my family had suffered a devastating loss -my beloved only brother, Armando Cañizares III, had been killed in a car accident by a drunken driver.

My brother was nineteen when he was taken from us. My grief was deep at many levels, but one of the things that still hurts most is knowing he had needed a father more than I had -and I had a great deal. The loss of my father also marked his parents and siblings forever. I can't even speak about what it did to my mother, it is too painful. The extended family and many friends also grieved. Time again, I have witnessed how the effect of these losses is like a drop in a pond, reverberating as in concentric rings, causing pain to many, many, people at varying levels of intensity depending on their closeness to the mourned person. This theme permeates my work at Cuba Archive with the loved ones of those who've died. While the highest price is paid by those who've lost their lives, there are many more victims at many levels.

My paternal grandparents managed to leave Cuba and came to the United States in 1965. Their country's fate was sealed -a system sustained on hatred and by an iron fist now seemed irreversible. They had suffered the loss of their son, the separation from all their children and grandchildren, and the defeat of the best attempts to liberate Cuba at the Bay of Pigs and through the Escambray rebellion. Their land had been taken over in the confiscation of all private property by the Communist state. With nowhere else to go, they had to stay in their house at what used to be their ranch, facing daily humiliations and watching as inept state cadres destroyed their lives' work. I remember vividly when my grandparents arrived at the airport in Miami. I was six years old. It was a big day, my brother, my cousins, and I were very excited -we had never met them. We even got to miss school! My grandmother had a reputation for being very strict and strong of character; the thought of being in her presence scared me. Yet, since our very first meeting, we bonded. She would often tell me that looking at me was like seeing my father. Indeed, I did find out she was a very strong woman, yet tears always came to her eyes when my father's name was mentioned.

I know that my uncle Julio, who was with my father at the Bay of Pigs, has never gotten over his death and the trauma of their failed effort to make Cuba free, ...still, after all these years. They adored each other and were always together. One of my earliest memories is seeing my uncle sitting on the front steps of his home in Miami, wearing a short-sleeved plaid shirt, recently released from a Cuban prison, watching his small daughter and my brother and I play. I must have been just three years old, but I could already grasp that he was very, very, sad. My other uncle, Francisco, died in 2005. After the invasion, he had risked his life repeatedly as part of the infiltration teams organized and funded by the Kennedy Administration to support the resistance inside Cuba. My mother always treasured a beautiful seashell he brought back for her from one of the trips.

My four grandparents are all long gone and never saw their homeland again. My maternal grandmother, who died in 1998, had the most upbeat personality imaginable. She endured her many sorrows in private, never complained about anything, and was fun and funny until the very last day of her 91 years. Yet, the last words she uttered, as she lay dying, were pining for her native Santiago de Cuba, which she had last seen 37 years before: "Ahhh, the streets of Santiago..." In her hand, she held on tightly to the miniature silver statue of the Virgen de la Caridad, the patron virgin of Cuba, one of the few things she had managed to take into exile.

My uncle, my mother's only brother and my surrogate father, also never returned, sadly succumbing to cancer much too young in 1999. We always talked about Cuba. An engineer with the noblest of characters, he had a deep love for his country and, among his many projects, was developing a plan for the reconstruction of the island's infrastructure.

My mother never remarried. She and my father had been very much in love. She was passionately committed to seeing Cuba free and worked tirelessly on human rights issues, including as Director of the group Mothers Against Repression (M.A.R.) and of the Free Society Project, for which she helped found the Cuba Archive project. She succumbed to cancer in July of 2008 after a year-long battle with the disease. Her love for country and freedom, her commitment to world harmony and justice, her deep faith in God, and her stoicism in the face of profound trials and suffering, constantly inspire me. But, it always pains me to think of the profound sadness and frustration she endured most of her life over the continued survival of the totalitarian regime in Cuba and the prolonged saga of the Cuban people.

All these good people, whom I loved so, left this world with a heavy heart for not seeing their beloved homeland free and for not being able to return. Theirs is the story of so many Cubans who've endured the deepest of sorrows. And, in many ways, as my mother would say, we have been the lucky ones, because we escaped and can live in freedom; people on the island have it much worse. The shared pain weighs heavier because this long nightmare is not over.

One day, I believe, Cuba will be free and the Cuban people will finally forge their destiny -in peace, and with hope in their future. Meanwhile, that dream lives on. It is our duty to make it come true.

New Jersey, April 2006, updated November 2009.

*Maria Werlau is Executive Director and co-founder of Cuba Archive.*



*This is the only picture I have with my father*

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