

Benito Cortés Maldonado, age 41, was executed by firing squad on January 13, 1959 in Santiago de Cuba. He was a U.S. citizen.

Benito was a policeman and pilot, resident of Santiago de Cuba. His mother and father were both from Puerto Rico, where he was also born. The family was well off and his father had wanted to extend his enterprises to Cuba. So, Benito left with his father for Cuba to establish businesses there. They did very well, owned three coffee plantations, and even had their own private plane. Benito loved the police force and when he came of age, he decided to join. He married a Cuban woman and had five children. The family lived in Palma Soriano, near Santiago de Cuba.



Guillermo, his oldest child, remembered how he used to hear his plane circling their home from above and how excited he used to get knowing his father was coming to get him. Benito was very dashing and loved being a policeman. He had to serve under Batista, as he was in power, but his family says he was a good and well-respected man who harmed no one.

When the revolutionaries came to power on January 1st 1959, a fellow policeman who had gone into hiding asked Benito to join him. He declined, insisting he had nothing to fear, was well known and highly regarded, had always done his duty and never committed any crimes. Yet, he was detained and on January 11th or 12th, taken to Santiago de Cuba and falsely accused of raping a woman. Raúl Castro had decided to have scores of “batistianos” killed and many had fabricated charges. On the night of January 12th and into the next morning, 71 men were executed. They were taken to an old airfield and, in pairs, stood in front of freshly dug trenches and shot. A witness who later turned against the government told the family that Benito had fallen, shot in the leg, and a lieutenant had walked over and shot him on the head. Once the massacre ended, a bulldozer filled the mass graves as some of the victims were still alive.

Guillermo was fourteen and at the boarding school Escolapios of Guanabacoa when they notified him of his father’s death. His family left Cuba in 1960 for New York. Guillermo enlisted in the Army, served during the Cuban Missile Crisis, married, had children, and became a Protestant Chaplain. He adored his father and all his life he wanted to be like his father, becoming a pilot, like him; he even lived in Puerto Rico for ten years. He often serves a chaplain on cruise ships that circle Cuba and stares at the island with deep grief in his heart. He could not enter Cuba, as he was on a government black list.

In 2004, when he attended the Memorial Cubano in Miami and saw the cross with his father’s name, he broke down, sobbing. He had never had a chance to mourn his father at his tomb.

Source: Personal and telephone interviews with Reverend Guillermo Cortes, Benito’s son, 2006 and 2007. Copies of birth and death certificates. <http://database.cubaarchive.org/case-record-simple-search/329/>

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