

Pete Ray, an American who loved freedom



Thomas Willard (Pete) Ray, age 30, was executed April 19, 1961, after his plane in support of the Brigade 2506 was shot down over the Bay of Pigs area.

From an early age, Pete Ray had dreamed of being a pilot. As a small boy growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, he lived up the hill from the Air National Guard's base and watched planes take off or land all day long. The pilots took notice of his presence year and year, and when Pete became a teenager, they would bring him on certain flights.

Convinced that flying was what he wanted, Pete played football in school and was class officer. Though not the brightest student, he was dedicated and persistent about his work. When one of his teachers asked why he was so enthusiastic about his studies, he said he wanted to become a pilot. On his last day of high school, Pete did not even wait to receive his diploma. He was already making his way to Texas for military training. Too young to join, he had lied about his age.

Back in Alabama after training, Pete married his high school sweetheart, Margaret Rebecca Hayden. They soon had two children, Thomas and Janet Joy. From 1950 to 1952, Pete served in the Air Force. In December of 1952, he started working as an inspector for an aircraft modification company, the Hayes International Corporation. Meanwhile, he kept up his piloting skills flying for the Alabama National Guard.

In 1960 he took leave from Hayes and was in active duty, transitioning from flying with the Alabama Air National Guard to training to fly helicopters for the Army. He was approached by the CIA to train Cuban pilots for three months in secret Guatemalan and Nicaraguan bases and then fly bombing raids for the Bay of Pigs Invasion itself. He left without telling his family where he was going.

The invasion of Cuba by the exile Brigade 2506 started on April 17th 1961. Pete flew a B-26 World War II-era bomber and wore no uniform to satisfy the U.S. government's illusion that Americans were not involved. When President John F. Kennedy changed the plan at the last minute, the American fighter jets scheduled near Cuba to escort his fleet abandoned him. Pete and three other Alabamian pilots were left alone to carry out their part of the invasion. Without the expected U.S. air support, the situation was an obvious death trap. Whether Pete knew of the last-minute orders to keep the Americans out is unknown. But, it is certain that the decision to fly or to stay in Nicaragua was his. And, he flew.

Back in Alabama, Pete's family received word of his disappearance and presumed death. On that fateful day of April 1961, six-year old Janet was at recess at Tarrant Elementary, across the street from her maternal grandparents' house, when a shiny dark car pulled up at their house and three men dressed in suits got out. She knew something was unusual. When school was out that day, she rushed back home to find her grandfather there looking somber and as if had been crying. Her mother looked distraught and was barely able to talk. Janet recalled the events for the Palm Beach Post: "And what I didn't realize is that it was that day that my mother slowly started to die. The bright, beautiful woman that I knew that was rated 'most poised' in her high school yearbook slowly began to die."

Her mother told her to stay close to home because she had something important to tell her. Janet later that the men in suits, U.S. government operatives, had come to tell her the story would be released to the press the following day. All they said was that Pete had died in the Caribbean Sea, providing no other details. Finally, she and her brother were told that God had come to take Daddy, who was now their guardian angel. After sobbing all day, she and her brother slept in their mother's bed, all crying and crying.

They had last sent Pete three weeks before the invasion, when he had come home for a visit. Now, their lives were forever changed. The family lived secretly, they would not answer the phone, and she and her brother were not allowed to play outside. Janet felt marked and isolated at school, where the sight of the railing adjacent to the school courtyard looked to her like prison bars, reminding her she had heard Castro kept people in jail.

Forever marked by her father's disappearance and the mystery surrounding his whereabouts, Janet grew up unwilling to accept her father's death unless she found substantiating evidence. She was determined to find the truth and, most importantly, justice. The U.S. government, however, denied any involvement in the invasion and declared that any American involved had been a mercenary. But, Pete's wife knew the government was lying to the public. Before leaving, he had told her of his work for the CIA. The Ray Family was horrified that their beloved Pete had died in service for his country, a country that was now denying him rightful recognition for his honor. Worse yet, they grew increasingly frightened as strangers made threats when they tried to uncover the truth.



Janet Ray

Pete's mother contacted the general in charge of the Air Base to try to find out more about her son's death. The following day, a man was hired at the JC Penney where she worked. He walked up to her in the lunchroom and told her she would be in trouble if she didn't stop asking questions about the Bay of Pigs and what had happened to her son. Several months later, when she quit, he quit.

Eighteen months after the invasion, Castro began releasing some of the prisoners. One day, as Janet was on her way home from school, a strange man stopped her and asked her, "Is your daddy coming home today?" When she heard this, she dropped her books and ran home apprehensively. As the prisoners were flown into Homestead Air Base in Miami, Florida, Janet watched the television coverage in hopes of coming across her father's familiar face, a face she so dearly longed to see. Her father was not among the men coming home...

Janet's love for her father and her loyalty to him led her on an eighteen-year search to find him and to find out what had happened to him. As she got older, she would leave her tape recorder around the house to catch the adults' conversations. The eavesdropping provided her the names of other pilots or some of her father's friends. She carefully wrote them down in a spiral notebook so she could find them later on. She saved newspaper articles on any related subject matter. When she was older, she would go to the local library to look up more information. She carried with her everything she collected on her father, including an impression of his teeth. She knew that if she lost that material, it would hinder her search.

Beginning at age fifteen, in 1970, Janet wrote monthly letters to Fidel Castro seeking information about her father's body. She wrote over two hundred letters during nine years without receiving a response. When she got her driver's license, her investigation gained momentum. She traveled to libraries or to people's homes. She made calls to those whose names she had gathered. But, she was only met with refusals, as government officials had also threatened them.

The need for security before the Bay of Pigs operation might have been understandable in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. But, once Robert Kennedy publicly conceded in 1963 the role of the United States and of the CIA in planning the invasion, it was hard to comprehend the continued cloaking of the story of the four Americans.

As a college student on Spring Break, Janet traveled to Miami with a few of her friends. While they went to the beach, she wanted her questions answered. She roamed the streets of Little Havana in hopes of finding someone who knew of her father. She gathered information piece by piece. The one thing she was told consistently was that her father had been a good pilot. During more trips to Miami and visits with Cubans in exile there, Janet found comfort in sharing the pain that engulfed her. She felt an instant kinship with the children of Cuban pilots who had never returned from the invasion. She was finally with people who understood her. And she realized why her father had given his life in an attempt to liberate Cuba. Her trips to Miami also provided a new wealth of information on her father. She heard there was a body as well as photographs taken after his death. There were also rumors that a morgue in Havana was housing an American's body.

As her hunt continued, Janet met her future husband, Mike Weininger, a pilot-in-training with the Air Force. She immediately felt comfortable -the smell of fuel and the flight suit reminded her of her dad. Though she didn't talk much about her father with Mike, he fully supported her dedicated pursuit. With the help of her cousin Tom Bailey, a Birmingham News journalist, Janet began to persuade politicians to help her. While she sent telegrams to the presidential palace in Cuba, she held a local letter writing campaign. She met Senator John Sparkman, whom she persuaded to work on the case, helping her write letters to Washington and to other influential people. She told Sparkman that the families of the four Americans had been promised medals by the CIA that were never awarded. Shortly afterwards, the family was presented the highest awarded medal, the CIA's Distinguished Intelligence Cross, and the Exceptional Service Medallion. Finally, Pete's government had honored his "devotion to duty and dedication to the national interests of the United States." The family had been told to keep it in secrecy, but Janet had her cousin journalist snap pictures of the men who came to deliver the award.

Janet continued to push for answers from government officials. While living at the Hahn Air Base in Germany with her husband, on the 18th anniversary of her father's death, she received an envelope from Peter Wyden, who was writing a book on the invasion and had interviewed her months earlier. During the interview, he had mentioned coming across a picture taken by the Cuban government of two dead American pilots. The envelope contained a picture of her dead father.

In the summer of 1979, the Cuban government finally caved in to the pressure. Confirming it had Pete Ray's body, it agreed to return it. For eighteen years it had remained frozen, intact, at a Havana morgue. They sent the Ray family a bill of over \$30,000 for storage charges. Janet refused to pay. The body was still shipped back. Pregnant with her first child, Janet waited at Birmingham Municipal Airport for the plane carrying her father's body. Coincidentally, this was the same runway her father had taken off from some eighteen years prior. At the morgue at Cooper Green Hospital, Janet, her husband, her cousin Tom Bailey, her brother, and her father's brother sat in front of Pete's coffin. Before the autopsy was performed, Janet insisted on seeing the body. She had traveled to far in her quest, she wanted to see for herself. She needed closure.

Thomas (Pete) Willard Ray was buried on December 8, 1979 with full military honors. There was a twenty-one-gun salute and four jets flew overhead in his memory. Janet tucked a five-page letter she had written him into the pocket of her father's uniform. It spoke of her happiness over his return home and how proud she was of him. In it, she wrote to him that at first she didn't understand why he had risked his life to fight in

someone else's war. But, after years of talking to Cuban veterans and their families, she knew he had done it for the sake of freedom.

On July 21, 1980, Janet gave birth to a baby boy whom Mike and Janet named Pete in memory of her father. Several years later, they had a daughter, Christina. Over time, the story of what happened to Pete Ray was pieced together. On the second day of the invasion, his B-26 had been hit by fire from a Cuban T-33 fighter just as it had finished a run bombing Castro's headquarters at the Australian sugar mill. In a forced landing, the copilot, flight engineer Francis Baker, was killed. Pete had survived the crash landing and had disembarked the plane with his pistol in hand, firing. He was hit by automatic gunfire in the abdomen and right hand. As Cuban medics tended to his wounds at a Cuban medical installation, one of Castro's militiamen, following orders of the Castro brothers, shot him pointblank to the right temple. The body had been kept in a freezer at a morgue and exhibited as a war trophy, pulled out on occasion to kick and spit on it.

In 1998, Janet went to the remote mountains of northern Nicaragua with the families of two Brigade 2506 pilots who died during the Bay of Pigs invasion on the return flight to the base in Nicaragua. Her quest to bring home the pilots to their loved ones, for a burial with honor and dignity, she had secured funds from the CIA for a mission led by the U.S. Army after another persuasion campaign, knocking on doors of government officials, politicians, and other influential people, and repeatedly traveling to Washington. She helped recover the remains near the village of San Jose de Bocay in the Department of Jinotega.

When the mission was completed, Janet's heart was broken with grief. She had to say good-bye to the local people who had lived and fought a war and now were forgotten, living in extreme poverty in a remote and rough terrain. So, she founded Wings of Valor Inc. (wingsofvalor.org), a non-profit organization "dedicated to rebuilding lives torn apart by war, poverty, and disaster." Over several years, she has delivered tons of humanitarian assistance to Nicaragua and other Central American countries.

After Hurricane Mitch devastated Central America, Janet persuaded Delta Airlines to provide an airplane for her to bring aid to a remote area where no other humanitarian organizations are helping even today. When the well-funded humanitarian organizations weren't willing to help in the remote areas, Janet called for the Calvary. The USAF Reserve unit at Homestead answered the call and volunteers mobilized the youth of the community to participate in Operation Backpack, a school relief project where schools were asked to donate those items that would have been throw away. Some of Wings of Valor other projects include Operation Tambourine, a music relief project; Operation Team Spirit, a sports relief project; Operation Medic, a medical relief project; and Operation Needle and Thread, a sewing relief project. In some cases, the Organization of American States (OAS), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health (MINSa) gave aid and transportation. Once at the destination, teams travel by mule into areas where no roads exist to reach those in need.

In the Spring of 2003, as the Castro government cracked down on dozens of peaceful dissidents and writers, Janet decided she would present a wrongful death case against the Fidel Castro and the Cuban government to seek some justice for its deeds. As 75 Cuban dissidents were sentenced to an average of 20 years in prison, Janet knocked on doors again and found a legal team that would represent her. In November of 2004, she was awarded nearly \$87 million for the execution of her father and the desecration of his body. \$65 million were in punitive damages and another \$18 million as compensatory damages for pain and suffering. More than \$3.5 million was awarded to her father's estate, for which Janet is the representative.

But, the funds for compensation, Cuban government funds held frozen for over four decades in U.S. bank accounts since the U.S. embargo was imposed, were not made available by the U.S. government. In November of 2006, a New York federal judge ordered J.P. Morgan bank to turn over \$23.9 million in the frozen funds

to Janet and \$66 million to the family of Howard Anderson, which had won damages in 2004 against the Cuban government.

The plaintiffs used a 1996 law that allows victims of designated terrorist states to sue for damages. The 101-page ruling marked the first time that a 2002 anti-terrorism statute was applied to allow the terrorism victims to recover damages from blocked assets of a designated terrorist state. And it marked only the second time that families who sued the Cuban government for wrongful death claims could collect from the country's frozen U.S. bank accounts. The families of Brothers to the Rescue pilots murdered by Cuban Air Force MIGS in 1996 had won judgments and had been compensated with frozen Cuban funds released at the order of the Clinton Administration.

Janet says the award could never fill the void left by her father's death and plans to set up a foundation to help the children of Castro's victims, those whose parents and grandparents never came home. The Cuban government issued a statement in January 2007 calling the awards to the Anderson and Ray families illegitimate and contrary to international law and declaring the funds "stolen" by the U.S. government.

Today, Janet lives in Florida. She has a son, Pete, a daughter, Christina, and two grandsons.

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