

The Trailer Truck Massacre of 1961

Nine victims of the massacre: Alfredo José Cervantes Lago, José Daniel Vilarello Tabares, Hermilio Benjamín Quintana Pereda, Jose Ignacio Maciá del Monte, Santos Ramos Alvarez, Pedro Rojas Mir, René Silva Soublete and Moisés Santana González.



José Santos Millán Velasco, age 31

José, “Pepe,” was born in Mexico City unexpectedly, as all his family was Cuban. His mother, Isabel, had given birth prematurely while accompanying his father, José, during a tour as a professional jai-alai player. Pepe studied law at University of Villanueva in Havana and was an avid sportsman, competing in both crew and swimming. After college, he followed in his father’s path and became a professional jai-alai player. In 1955, he married his neighbor Myrna Pardo. They had two children in short order, Myrna María and José Ángel.

Myrna’s father had been a member of Cuba’s House of Representatives, belonging to a party that had supported Batista in the last elections held in Cuba before Batista’s coup d’etat. Even though he had opposed Batista’s takeover, the alarming wave of violence that followed the triumph of the Revolution on January 1, 1959 convinced him to seek refuge in Miami. Batista supporters, real or suspected, were being rounded up and sent to prison and the firing squads in large numbers. In February 1959, he and his wife left for exile in Florida. A few months later, she, Pepe, and the children went to Miami to visit them. They had planned to return to Cuba, but Pepe decided they had to stay, as the situation in Cuba was getting worse and he had been concerned about Communist influence within the Rebel Army. Myrna was shocked to find herself so unexpectedly leaving behind their beloved Cuba and their small beachside home with all of their belongings. But, as most people who were leaving, they thought the situation in Cuba would soon be resolved and they would be able to go back home.

In Miami, their daughter, Delia Isabel, was born and Pepe was hired to play jai alai. Although in Cuba he had not been politically active, in exile he soon became involved in several political groups. His concern for his country’s future grew as the Castro regime committed itself to a communist path. Because he wanted his children to grow up in Cuba, when the 2506 Brigade was formed to invade the island and overthrow Castro, Pepe convinced Myrna that he had to help free Cuba. They both felt, as devoted Catholics, that it was their Christian duty. Pepe had also long admired the United States for its role freeing Europe during the first and second world wars.

Pepe left in January of 1961 to train with the Brigade in Guatemala, although his family, like those of all Brigade members ignored his whereabouts. He trained in the Heavy Arms Battalion and rose to the rank of Mayor. His letters to his wife speak about how he attended mass and took communion daily and how he felt entirely in the hands of God.

From the camps in Guatemala, the invaders went straight to Cuba. Early on April 17th 1961, the invasion landed on the southern coast of Cuba, at the Bay of Pigs. That night, as the men headed to the beachhead, Myrna had a dream that Pepe had called her on the telephone. When she asked if they had won, he responded: “We have neither lost nor won but be calm. Whatever you hear, be calm, be calm.”

President Kennedy had made last minute decisions to conceal U.S. involvement that crippled the invasion plan. After three days of arduous fighting, it was clear the effort had failed. Pepe was in a small group attempting to reach the Escambray Mountains to the north, seeking to join the resistance there. Exhausted and disheartened, on April 21st they were taken prisoners while gathering water at a nearby pond. They were taken to small shacks that were part of a local tourist beach facility at Girón beach. Castroite militias spit on them, hurled insults, threatened to execute them, and brutally attacked some of the prisoners. Pepe was beaten despite having visible battle injuries to the head.

A few fellow Brigade members were executed on the spot. Early on the following day, they were loaded with over a hundred other prisoners onto a forty-foot sealed trailer (“rastra”) used to transport frozen merchandise. Several dozen of the men were injured; most had not eaten or slept for days. They were to be taken to a prison in the capital city of Havana, 250 miles to the northeast. Despite the sweltering heat, the refrigeration system was not turned on. The men were lined up and those whose names were called were thrust into the trailer. Commander Osmani Cienfuegos, Cuba’s Minister of Public Works, was in charge of transporting the prisoners. To the protests that the trailer had no ventilation, he is reported to have responded: “Why would we care if they all asphyxiate to death? That would spare us of having to execute them. Bring me forty more pigs!” Once it was impossible to shove more men into the trailer, the doors were forced shut for the trip to Havana. It had already been three hours since the first men had been led into the trailer. Survivors estimate that between one hundred and one hundred sixty men had been piled into the trailer.

Inside the rolling prison, a terrifying version of hell unfolded. In total darkness and blistering heat, air was soon lacking. A rising tide of sweat and urine covered the floor and condensed into a hideous mist over their heads. The stench was unbearable. Soon, men began to pass out on top of each other. Some prayed aloud, others became crazed. The truck, moving at a grueling pace, stopped several times along the way, presumably for the guards to eat and rest. Each time it stopped, the prisoners tried to turn the truck over by pushing against the sides. But the guards ignored the knocks and screams coming from inside. The leisurely pace was perhaps premeditated, intended as the slow delivery of a death sentence.

With their belt buckles, some men managed to carve small holes that allowed for a minimal amount of air to seep in. Some of those who were near death were passed from shoulder to shoulder to place them near the small cracks, in desperate attempts to revive them. But, men began to die. Pepe was next to fellow Brigade member Emilio Valdés Calderón. It took several decades for him to muster the courage to face Pepe’s family and tell them what he witnessed. Pepe had been praying the rosary. Suddenly, he jumped up and hit him on the face unintentionally. He then told him his name, said he had a wife and children in Miami, whom he loved dearly, and asked for him to tell them how he died. Pepe told him he had Christ in front of him and knew he was about to die but that they (presumably those next to him) would be saved. Moments later, he fell dead.

Another Brigade member, Carlos Bravo, has recounted how Pepe was next to him, unable to stand due to the injuries he had from the beatings. In the dark chaos and desperation inside the trailer, Pepe was praying the rosary and asked God to forgive their killers, as Christ had done on his cross. Moments before his death, Bravo heard him cry out smiling that he saw the cross. When his body was carried out from the truck, the guards could not yank from his hands the rosary he was still clutching.

Eight to nine hours after it left the Bay of Pigs, when the truck reached its final destination at Havana’s *Palacio de los Deportes* stadium, the doors were finally opened. Pepe and eight others lay dead. Shortly after their arrival, another man died. The survivors could barely walk, many had to be carried out. At the stadium, members of the Cuban military who witnessed what had happened did not hide their displeasure.

Back home, the family was desperate for news, distraught over the failure of the expedition. Pepe’s name had appeared on a list of survivors published in a Cuban newspaper on April 21st delivered to the family in May by someone who had brought it from Cuba. The initial relief turned to crushing sadness when they received a letter from prison by a survivor and learned not only of his death but also of the horrific circumstances.



Myrna, Pepe Millán's widow and their children.

The young widow and their three children -ages four, three, and a few months old- were left in dire economic straits and emotional turmoil. Pepe's parents were devastated and died just a few years afterwards in exile. The oldest daughter insisted on mailing her drawings to her dad, as she had done when he was in the training camps. The younger daughter kept asking why they couldn't at least talk to him on the phone. And, when the son who had been three when his father died was about seven, he said that what he wanted when he grew up was to go to heaven with his daddy.

Alfredo José Cervantes Lago

Cuco had been an executive at Standard Oil in Cuba. He had become an activist in the struggle against Batista, but turned against the Castro government soon after the Revolution came to power, realizing it was putting in place a Communist dictatorship. At age 27 he married Rosa Maria ("Ia") Fryere, who was only eighteen. They left Cuba in 1960, exiled in Miami with their daughter Rosita, who was just a few months old. As other Cubans who left, the government allowed them to only take \$150 and the jewelry they were wearing. Like most other exiles, they thought they would be going back soon, believing the United States would not allow a Communist dictatorship just 90 miles from its shores.

In Miami, Cuco and Ia's brother Tito, who was only eighteen, decided to join the 2506 Brigade. Ia remembers how she believed it was heroic and beautiful and never thought things would turn out like they did. Cuco, who suffered from asthma, died in the trailer truck. At first Ia thought it was a lie but his parents in Cuba identified the body. She had just turned twenty, had a small child, and was overwhelmed by sorrow. Her sister Conchita urged her to confront her pain with dignity, telling her "You have been given a cross and a hardship. Today you must choose between being admired or pitied. It is in your hands." Those words stayed with Ia forever. Conchita died just a few years later of leukemia.

Pedro Rojas Mir was from Victoria de las Tunas.

René Silva Soublete was 22 years old and an engineering student.

José Ignacio Macía del Monte was 38 years old and a father of four; he was a sugar cane grower.

Hermilio Quintana Pereda, 34 years old, was a graduate of Havana's School of Journalism and worked for Cuba's electric company.

**See a short video interview with José Ignacio Macía del Monte's daughter, Cecile Macía de Sánchez, in the Multimedia section of the Truth and Memory section of this website.*

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