

■ The Alabama Air Guard pilot died during ill-fated Cuban invasion attempt. For years, the CIA hid his fate from his family. Havana, meanwhile, kept his body frozen.

By MARK FINEMAN
and DOLLY MASCARENAS
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

HAVANA—When Thomas "Pete" Ray's B-26 bomber was shot down by Cuban anti-aircraft batteries near Playa Giron on April 19, 1961, he wasn't there.

So said the CIA.

And for decades, the U.S. government publicly denied that a top-secret squadron of civilians recruited from the Alabama Air National Guard ever existed, let alone was on a CIA mission to bomb Cuba in one of the agency's best-kept and most humiliating secrets. It was the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, in which, officially, no Americans were involved.

But Ray was there. The 30-year-old Center Point, Ala., pilot was shot to death—pistol and knife in hand—by one of Fidel Castro's soldiers. They also killed his flight engineer, Leo Baker, after the two had bombed targets near Castro's field headquarters. Two other Alabamians also died when their plane was shot down during the invasion, which included napalm bombing by U.S. aircraft.

They were on a mission that Col. Joe Shannon, one of the few surviving pilots from the group, recently recalled was "a last-ditch effort" that, through its very secrecy, would change the course of many lives for decades to come.

Castro was so determined to prove the Americans were there that he froze Ray's remains—for more than 18 years.

For Ray's wife, mother and two children, those years were haunted by silent confusion and fear, as the U.S. government knew, but refused to tell, the whereabouts of a man who had simply vanished from the face of the Earth.

For the CIA, Ray's secret involved national security and image. To admit that the pilot was one of theirs was to concede the depth of the agency's involvement in a disastrous invasion that it insisted, until last year, was the work of dissidents within Cuba.

And for the Cuban government,
Please see CASUALTY, A10

COLUMN ONE

LATIMED
3/15/68

Bay of Pigs: the Secret Death of Pete Ray

Continued from A1

which spent thousands of dollars preserving Ray's remains, the case was both frustrating and mystifying: How could any government lie for so long to the family of a soldier? After all, it had announced to the world on the day Ray died that it had the body of an American pilot.

In December 1979, after the Cubans learned of a personal mission by Ray's daughter, Janet Ray Weininger, to find his body—and after 19 months of painstaking diplomacy with a U.S. government that still did not want to claim him as one of its own—the Cuban government returned the pilot's body to Alabama.

The CIA still has not publicly admitted that it knew where his remains were all along. Just last month, however, the agency released a document confirming that U.S. pilots were, in fact, shot down over Cuba in 1961.

And last week, in response to detailed inquiries about the Ray case from The Times, agency officials acknowledged publicly for the first time that the Alabama pilot was one of theirs.

"Thomas 'Pete' Ray made heroic contributions to the CIA and to this country, serving with great distinction," CIA spokesman Bill Harlow said. "Given the passage of time and recent declassification of historic documents from this time period, his affiliation with the CIA can now be acknowledged publicly."

Documents obtained by The Times from the Cuban government, combined with the recently declassified CIA memos, cables and confidential reports on the Bay of Pigs, solve much of this extraordinary Cold War mystery of the lost Alabamians.

Official Deception and Mutual Mistrust

It is a story of official U.S. deception and of a mutual mistrust between the United States and the Communist government 90 miles off its shores—a regime the CIA has spent hundreds of millions of dollars trying to overthrow since Castro came to power in 1959.

As for the men of the secret squadron, "these were vortex people—the most important people in the world for a few moments—and then the government just cuts the strings and cuts them loose to drift," said Thomas Bailey, Ray's cousin and an Alabama journalist. "You're the front line between communism and the free world. . . . Then, at the end, the government ignores you."

"If there's a message beyond that, it's about government, about human lives, about how lives are changed by one event. In some ways, these people were never the same again. Some better, some worse. But it marked that moment when we all, who believed in the government, began to lose faith in that government."

Added Weininger, whose mother died years ago and whose Miami home is filled with boxes of documents and photographs of her father: "If we had to go back and do it all over again, I just wish they would have told me the truth when it no longer needed to be a secret."

In its formal statement to The Times last week, the CIA also confirmed for the first time that Ray was posthumously awarded the CIA's highest honor for bravery—the Distinguished Intelligence Cross.

"We plan to add his name to the book of honor which identifies individuals for whom a star has been inscribed in the marble facade of the foyer of the CIA headquarters building," spokesman Harlow said.

Until now, Ray's star has been marked only by a number.

Cubans Call Costly Mission Humanitarian

In opening Havana's archives on the Ray case to The Times last month, Cuban officials asserted in interviews that their government originally froze the pilot's body to prove U.S. involvement in the invasion but that the costly maintenance quickly became a humanitarian mission.

"In our culture, we do not handle dead bodies insensitively, not even our enemies, our worst enemies," Cmdr. Manuel Pineiro, a former intelligence chief better known as "Red Beard," said in his last interview before he died of a heart attack after a car crash in Cuba last week.

"The only explanation that I have for keeping the body for so long was to return him to whoever claimed him, to his family," said Pineiro, who was venerated in the Cuban press after his death as "the CIA's nemesis" in Cuba.

Pineiro and other Cubans interviewed expressed shock that the U.S. government could turn its back for so long on one of its own.

"How does a country allow its own citizens—I refer to the families of these pilots—to live in doubt, not to know what happened to their loved ones?" he asked. "We told the world, the United Nations; we sent the list with the names we had. Why was it nobody answered?"

Another senior Cuban official used a recent interview to invite Ray's daughter to Havana as a state guest for what he said would amount to emotional closure.

But Weininger, 43, who has devoted her life to researching the case and who now participates in Cuban American exile events in Miami, politely declined.

After decades of trying to find out the truth and finally retrieving her father's body with the help of two members of the U.S. Congress who pushed the case with the State Department, she said she has become suspicious of nearly everyone.

"I don't want to go to Cuba and be involved in something bigger, to be used as a pawn between different political groups—there or here," she said. "I want to go to Cuba when it's a free country."

Yet Weininger added that she harbors no animosity toward the Cubans for keeping her father all those years. Just the opposite: "I blame my government. My government did wrong. They led these men into harm's way and then turned [their] back on them."

It is only within the past year that the CIA has admitted even that.

In more than 1,000 pages of recently declassified documents on file at the National Security Archives in Washington, and in a State Department volume published last fall, the spy agency has come clean about its role and its failures in the Bay of Pigs invasion.

The agency previously went to great lengths to keep the information secret. A document released last month, for example, was the sole surviving copy of CIA Inspector General Lyman Kirkpatrick's highly critical 150-page report, which had been kept in a CIA safe

Those documents, combined with others provided by the Cuban government and interviews with witnesses and with relatives of those who died in the invasion, tell a story not only of CIA bungling but of bitter betrayal.

Recruits, Secret Bases and an Ill-Fated Plan

The story begins about a year after Castro overthrew Cuba's U.S.-backed dictator, Fulgencio Batista, and marched into Havana in January 1959. In a plan hatched under President Eisenhower and executed in the first months of John F. Kennedy's presidency, the CIA plotted every ill-fated step of an invasion that was meant to appear entirely the work of dissidents within Cuba and of mutinous Cuban military forces.

The CIA recruited exile fighters from throughout the United States, set up clandestine training bases in the U.S., Guatemala and Nicaragua, and searched for planes that would match those in the Cuban air force—B-26 bombers that the agency could repaint and deploy to make it appear as if Castro's military had turned on him.

The only B-26s the CIA could find in the United States were in

the aging fleet at the Alabama Air National Guard in Birmingham. And there, the agency also found a more-than-willing co-conspirator in the local Air Guard commander, Maj. Gen. G. Reid Doster Jr., who hated Communists everywhere.

In January 1961, the CIA picked Doster to recruit local pilots to fly, along with Cuban exiles, the disguised B-26s during the invasion. Ray, an Alabama-born aircraft inspector at a Birmingham factory, was typical of Doster's unlikely Cold Warriors—weekend fliers who included the owner of a local pizza shop.

Weininger remembers the day her father left home for the last time: Feb. 5, 1961. She was 6. None

of the families of the dozen or so local pilots knew the men were heading to Nicaragua to prepare to bomb Cuba. The men's "cover story," Col. Shannon says, was that they were going to pilot training school.

"My dad was just an average guy who loved to fly," Weininger said. "But he firmly believed in what he did. He had told his mother that if he dies flying, he'll die happy. But he also said that if we don't stop

communism in Cuba, someday we might have to fight it in our own backyard."

Shannon concurred. The Birmingham resident flew another B-26 the morning Ray was killed; Shannon escaped a Cuban fighter jet that shot down his best friend, Riley Shamburger, that day.

"This was a last-ditch effort, a desperate mission to save the guys on the ground," recalled Shannon, now 76. "We weren't supposed to fly at all. We were told we wouldn't be able to fly even if we wanted to. But we were so close to the Cuban [exiles], their cause sort of became our cause. And in a last moment of desperation, they [the CIA] let us fly."

The declassified CIA documents show that the final invasion plan did bar the U.S. pilots from joining in the bombing runs. But the exile pilots, who had been attacking

Please see CASUALTY, A11

LOS ANGELES TIMES

CASUALTY: Failed Invasion

Continued from A10

Cuban airports and other targets for three days before the invasion collapsed on April 19, "were exhausted and dispirited," according to the documents.

By the time Ray took off from the Nicaraguan base at 3:55 a.m. on April 19 for the 700-mile flight to Cuba, the invasion already had failed. At the last minute, Kennedy canceled U.S. air cover in a further effort to deny Washington's role, and the 1,500 Cubans the CIA had sent to invade were being torn to pieces on the beachhead.

Initially, the CIA blamed the lack of air cover for the invasion's failure, but the CIA inspector general's report blamed the CIA itself—its arrogance, poor planning and "almost willful bungling."

A CIA telegram to its personnel in Nicaragua authorizing Ray and his colleagues to attack Castro's forces that day foreshadowed the decades of mystery that would follow:

"Cannot attach sufficient importance to fact that American crews must not fall into enemy hands. In event this happens, despite all precautions, crews must state [they are] hired mercenaries, fighting communism, etc.; U.S. will deny any knowledge."

And that it did—despite Cuba's best efforts.

Jet Downed After Several Strafing Runs

Cuban Gen. Oscar Fernandez Mell, who was in charge of field operations the morning Ray was killed, described in a recent interview how Ray's B-26 was shot down after it made several daring strafing runs.

"The airplane fell in a cane field. We ran toward it. Then there was an explosion and fire," he said. "I gave orders to recover everything inside the aircraft."

But Ray and flight engineer Baker had already fled their cockpit. Witnesses told Fernandez that the pair ran into a nearby cane field. Baker was found holding a grenade; a Cuban soldier shot him.

Another soldier told Fernandez that he found Ray hiding in a nearby forest, wounded but alive and armed. The soldier said he

killed Ray in self-defense.

Foreign Minister Raul Roa made headlines worldwide later that day when he announced to the U.N. Security Council that Cuba had the body of a U.S. pilot shot down during the invasion; "Proof of the Yankee Intervention," the daily *Revolucion* declared the following day.

The United Nations never pursued the issue after the U.S. publicly denied its involvement.

Baker, whose features appeared Latin, was buried along with other unclaimed Cuban invaders soon after. But Ray, whose features did not, was sent to Havana's Institute of Forensic Medicine, where mortician Juan Menendez Tudela, now 75, recalls embalming him.

Menendez says he placed the body in a freezer, where it remained at about 5 degrees below zero for 18 years and eight months.

"I never questioned why he was there; there were orders about him, and that was enough for me," said Menendez, who cared for the body the entire time. "Of course, I knew he was an American pilot, but my orders were to take care of him, to watch over him."

Cuban officials conceded that they did not know the identity of the body until soon after they learned of Weininger's search for her father. That information came through diplomatic notes sent to Cuba's Foreign Ministry from the U.S. Interest Section, Washington's diplomatic mission in Havana, which opened in 1977, 16 years after the United States broke off diplomatic relations with Castro and closed its embassy.

The only identification found at Ray's crash site in 1961 was fake CIA documents for Baker.

It wasn't until 1979 that Cuban and FBI officials positively identified Ray's body by matching it with fingerprints and dental records.

The day after Ray's death, a Defense Department spokesman in Washington flatly denied rumors that the Alabama Air Guard had taken part in the attack. President Kennedy, under fire from U.S. allies and enemies alike, told reporters only: "I think that the facts of the matter involving Cuba will come out in due time."

Though shattered and forever changed, the survivors of Ray's

small group of Guardsmen quietly went home to Birmingham and kept Kennedy's secret—for decades. The word went around town that Ray and the others had died in a cargo plane crash in an unrelated operation.

"They were about as good of secret keepers as you'd want to have," said Bailey, the cousin who joined forces with Ray's daughter. "The community soaked them back up, and the community helped them keep their secret."

Asked why, Bailey said: "First, you've got the South, the way we are. . . . We're not always very forthcoming. Then, I think there's the issue that the government scared the crap out of these people."

"The fear of God was just put in a lot of people here; the CIA came to the houses of every one of my grandmother's 11 kids and interviewed every one of them to see what they knew."

Among the stories that made the rounds in the family but were never confirmed by the U.S. government, Bailey added, was that Ray's wife was told that she would be committed to a mental institution for life if she continued pressing to learn her husband's whereabouts.

"But thirdly," Bailey said, "sometimes you handle the pain of something like this by just not talking about it."

Families Petition to Get Real Story

In the late 1970s, Bailey and Weininger sent 100 questions to the CIA under the Freedom of Information Act, asking it to explain Ray's fate.

The agency never answered in writing. Instead, it sent two agents to meet them in Selma, Ala., in the spring of 1978. There, Bailey and Weininger recalled, the agents told the truth about Ray and handed over two medals and a citation posthumously awarding Ray the Distinguished Intelligence Cross.

But when the agency did provide the posthumous award, Weininger said, "they told us not to mention anything about it to anyone."

Even after Ray's body went home the next year to a funeral that drew many of the Air Guard

★ SUNDAY, MARCH 15, 1998 **A11**

veterans, along with Cuban survivors and even one of the CIA agents who had briefed Bailey and Weininger, the CIA did not acknowledge publicly that Ray and the other men had ever served their country—until its statement to *The Times* last week.

Weininger and Bailey say—and the CIA papers declassified last month confirm—that documents they have accumulated show that the agency set up a front company that paid each dead pilot's family a regular stipend and financed children's college educations—including Weininger's. Relatives were told that the money was from a Miami company—not the government.

One of the CIA documents states that the fake company created to settle "the legal and moral claims

arising from these [airmen's] deaths has been costly, complicated and fraught with risk of disclosure of the government's role."

The document adds: "In spite of the invasion failure, the story of the American pilots has never gotten into print, although its sensational nature still makes this a possibility. In dealing with the surviving families, it has been necessary to conceal connection with the United States government."

Clearly, however, the costs were not financial.

As for her own life, Weininger said: "You can say it's an obsession, but to me it's an opportunity to look through somebody's window at a moment of history and then be able to share it with people.

"Everybody has to confront pain

in their own way. No one gets out of it without scars, but the difference is how those scars heal."

For Cuban officials, who say Castro's forces lost far more lives in the Bay of Pigs than did the invaders, the CIA's recent admissions are a vindication. But the case of Thomas "Pete" Ray, most say, remains one of sadness.

"To me, dead people—even enemies—make me feel sad and sorry," said retired Lt. Col. Arnelo Loynaz, who was assigned to check on Ray's body in the mid-1970s.

"I feel sorry for him, and for his family."

Times staff writer Fineman reported from Havana, Washington, Miami and Birmingham, Ala. Times researcher Mascarenas reported from Havana.



Associated Press

A Cuban soldier on plane downed during failed Bay of Pigs invasion.



Thomas "Pete" Ray was 30 years old when his B-26 bomber was shot down April 19, 1961.