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Brothers plane shoot-down a Castro trap?

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Five years after the downing of two Brothers to the Rescue planes by a Cuban MiG, evidence is emerging in a Miami courtroom suggesting the shoot-down was no crime of opportunity, but part of a carefully plotted trap meant to discredit and destroy the anti-Castro group.

Today marks the fifth anniversary of the shoot-down -- a moment that comes just as testimony in the Cuban spy trial begins to underscore the deep suspicions Castro foes in Miami long harbored about Cuban government intentions.

Documents submitted by federal prosecutors as evidence, like once-secret computer and radio messages between the alleged spies and their Havana handlers, chronicle efforts by Havana's agents to sabotage Brothers to the Rescue and pave the way for an ambush in which two Brothers pilots and two rafter spotters were killed.

CONSPIRACY?

In fact, U.S. prosecutors say, evidence points to a conspiracy involving Havana and one of the alleged spies to set up the Brothers pilots.

The charge also seems to validate a theory initially floated by Brothers leader José Basulto days after the shoot-down that the event was the outcome of a Cuban covert operation to connect Brothers to anti-Castro terrorism. According to Basulto, Cuba had planned to claim that the Brothers planes had been shot down while en route to an airstrike on Cuba.

Basulto is a witness in the trial in which five alleged Cuban spies are fighting charges of trying to infiltrate U.S. military

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installations and Cuban exile organizations including Brothers to the Rescue for the purpose of harming U.S. national security.

"What is clear from the trial is that Brothers to the Rescue were set up and that murder was committed," said Joe Garcia, executive director of the Cuban American National Foundation, which also was allegedly targeted by the spy suspects. "The trial shows an ongoing effort by the Cuban government to create dissension and strife among those who fight for freedom and democracy for Cuba."

FIGHTING TERROR

The accused spies claim they were merely working to protect their homeland from acts of terrorism by the Brothers.

One of the defendants, Gerardo Hernández, is charged with conspiracy to commit murder in the shoot-down. Attorneys for Hernández and his co-defendants do not dispute that their clients worked for the Cuban government. But they told jurors that the men spied on military installations and infiltrated exile groups to protect Cuba -- not to compromise national security.

One of Havana's spies inside Brothers, Juan Pablo Roque, reported to one of his Cuban handlers and the FBI that Basulto had mentioned plans to manufacture a "secret weapon" for delivery to island-based anti-Castro foes, according to prosecution evidence. The court document says neither Cuba nor the FBI took the report seriously.

Most of the evidence submitted by the prosecution portrays Brothers to the Rescue as a target for the Cuban government.

The recently declassified computer and radio messages between the alleged spies and their Havana handlers, for example, detail elaborate efforts to set up Brothers for the shoot-down -- including arrangements for Roque's secret return to Cuba on the eve of the shoot-down.

SIMILAR TO THEORY

The operation laid out in the messages resembles Basulto's theory that Cuba shot down the Brothers planes to smear the group's reputation. Basulto says Cuba had planned to present Roque, the infiltrated Brothers pilot, as sole shoot-down survivor and have him describe details of the "terrorist" mission.

The only reason the plot failed, Basulto said, is that he survived the shoot-down by turning off his plane's transponder and flying into a cloud to evade a pursuing MiG.

Roque disappeared from Miami on the eve of the Brothers' fateful flight -- reappearing in Havana after the shoot-down and disclosing that he had infiltrated Brothers to the Rescue. Roque is now a fugitive in the spy case.

As it unfolds, evidence emerging suggests that Cuba may

have dispatched spies to South Florida after concluding that Washington was not taking seriously its demands to crack down on exile "terrorists" and incursions into Cuban airspace by Brothers planes.

CUBAN FEARS

The creation of Brothers to the Rescue in early 1991 and Basulto's role in the group played a major part in Havana's fears. Many exiles who had received paramilitary training in the early 1960s when the CIA financed the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion went into action again in the 1990s.

Some sponsored raids against the Cuban coast. Others staged attacks at tourist sites. Still others opted for nonviolent protests such as pro-democracy flotillas -- and among organizers of the first flotilla on May 20, 1990 was Basulto -- a Bay of Pigs veteran.

Cuba's suspicions about the organization intensified and soon thereafter, the suspected spies were deployed to South Florida.

One of the first to arrive was René González, now a trial defendant, who landed at Boca Chica Naval Air Station in 1990 aboard a stolen crop duster.

CLOSE TABS TO HAVANA

One of González's targets was Brothers to the Rescue which he successfully infiltrated, becoming one of its pilots. Another spy suspect, Roque, also penetrated the group and became a pilot as well. Their code names were Castor, for González, and Germán for Roque.

Roque and González kept close tabs on Brothers and reported on the group to Havana -- and the FBI.

Both Roque and González often gave the FBI information, but never told the agency they were also Havana's men in Miami or that Havana was preparing some sort of retaliation against the group, according to memos confiscated by the FBI after their arrest.

Radio messages from Havana, submitted as evidence, indicate Cuba began planning retaliation in December 1995 or January 1996 to deter further incursions of Cuban airspace by Brothers planes.

By Jan. 29, the messages show, Cuba had approved Operation Scorpion -- the official response against Brothers.

REPEATED WARNINGS

In February 1996, Havana repeatedly warned González and other agents to avoid flying Brothers planes in the Florida Straits -- especially between Feb. 24 to Feb. 27.

Days after those warnings, pilots Carlos Costa and Mario de la Peña and rafter spotters Armando Alejandro and Pablo Morales were killed when a Cuban MiG rocketed their unarmed Cessnas as they flew over the Florida

Straits.

Their deaths will be commemorated today with a memorial flyover by Basulto and other Brothers pilots over the shoot-down area.



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