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Anniversary recalls Congo rescue by Miami Cubans

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A group photo of Cuban CIA paramilitaries, who were part of a mission that rescued two dozen American and European hostages during fighting in the Belgian Congo 50 years ago. HANDOUT PHOTO / EMILY MICHOT

Fifty years later, the Congo jungle now receding into the mists of memory as he sits in a Miami living room, Juan Tamayo is looking forward to meeting the little blond girl who sat so silent and still in his lap while he blazed away belt after belt of ammo with his .30-caliber machine gun.

“Does she hear OK?” he wonders softly. “I always worried that her hearing was damaged.”

A thousand miles north in Nashville, the little blond girl — now a 54-year-old college administrator whose hearing is perfectly fine — is excited at the prospect of meeting the man who kindly draped his kerchief over her head to protect her from the hot cartridges showering from his machine gun. Even though she’s going to have to admit in embarrassment that for nearly five decades, she thought he was a mercenary.

"I never had any idea he was from the CIA," Ruth Reynard says with a laugh. "At the age of 4, I don't think I knew what the CIA was. And a Cuban! Imagine that — a Cuban in the Congo."

Scores of survivors of one of the Cold War's strangest and least-known chapters — a vicious, bloody proxy war in Africa between rival Cuban armies supported by the United States and the Soviet Union — will gather Sunday in Miami for a reunion.

More than 200 people, including family members, are expected at the event. They'll include not only CIA shadow warriors who've spent a lifetime keeping quiet about what they did, but more than a dozen members of hostage missionary families they rescued during the conflict's single most dramatic moment.

"When I first heard about the rescue at Kilometer 8, chills went down my spine," says Janet Ray, daughter of a CIA pilot killed at the Bay of Pigs and the organizer of the reunion. "I just think it's tragic that these men have never gotten the recognition that they're due."

The CIA sent about 120 Cuban exiles to fight communist-backed guerrillas during the political violence that wracked the country now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo from 1962-67, says Frank R. Villafaña, author of *Cold War in the Congo*, virtually the only history of the role of Cubans in the conflict. Fidel Castro supplied about 200 soldiers to the other side.

The rival Cuban forces discovered one another's presence during a CIA bombing raid on guerrilla positions when ground troops and pilots began cursing one another in Spanish. Later they would fight face to face, when CIA-backed Cubans in patrol boats attacked Castro's troops along Lake Tanganyika's shores.

"That was the story that got me interested," said Villafaña. "When I heard it, I thought it was just typical Cuban exaggeration, but it's all true. I don't know why the CIA has kept it so secret. All the documents were supposed to be declassified after 30 years, and here we are 50 years and it's still all secret."

The secrecy extends beyond official documents to cloud even the eyewitness accounts of some of the Cuban CIA operatives, now all in their late 70s and beyond. Tamayo, the burly man with the machine gun, is amiable as he shares his recollections of the rescue operation. But, asked about his employer, he turns adamant.

"I don't know *nothing* about the CIA," Tamayo insists.

Technically, perhaps, the Kilometer 8 rescue was not a CIA mission. The Cuban exiles had fought their way across the Congo for three days to take part in the rescue of another set of hostages, five American diplomats (several of whom, unknown to their abductors, were CIA officers) being held in the U.S. consulate in what was then known as Stanleyville, now Kisangani.

The diplomats were among several hundred hostages seized three months earlier by rebels who called themselves Simbas, from the Swahili word for lion. The Simbas were just the latest in a series of guerrilla groups who had fought against the Congolese government after it declared its independence from Belgium in 1960.

They were pursuing everything from colonial grievances against the Belgians to ancient tribal rivalries to out-and-out banditry. In another time and place, their attempt to topple the government might have remained purely a local affair, but in the early 1960s, the Cold War was at its most frigid. The Congo's rich supply of uranium and other minerals crucial to the manufacture of nuclear weapons had turned its political convulsions into an international struggle pitting the United States (supporting the government) against the Soviets and Chinese (supporting the rebels).

When the Simbas captured Stanleyville in August 1964, they took several hundred Westerners — diplomats, businessmen, missionaries — as hostages. After three months of bluster and threats, the Congolese government and its allies sent a 3,000-man force to liberate them. The troops included Belgian and Congolese soldiers, mercenaries from Rhodesia and South Africa and, secretly, the CIA's Cubans.

Cuban pilots had been flying missions in the Congo for the CIA since 1962. But the 20 or so ground troops had just arrived in September, specifically to free the American diplomats.

"They didn't tell us where we were going, or why," says Angel Benitez, 76, who like the rest of the men had joined the CIA (for a very un-James-Bondish \$250 a month) to help fight its ongoing war against Castro. "All they said was, we'd be going thousands and thousands of miles, but we'd still be fighting communism. So we said, sure."

It was only in the final 30 minutes of three days of flights in military transports with blacked-out windows that the CIA commander, a larger-than-life Texan named Rip Robertson, pulled out a map of the Congo to reveal their destination.

"It was marked with different colors to show the parts controlled by the government and the parts controlled by the rebels," Benitez recalls. "And I saw the rebels had three-quarters of the country, and I thought, 'Oh, my.'"

The original plan, known as Operation Flagpole, was for the Cubans to land in a helicopter just outside the U.S. consulate in Stanleyville and burst in to snatch the diplomats while other aircraft strafed their Simba guards. But the idea was scrapped when it was discovered that the Simbas had built a camp right next to the consulate. "It would have been suicide," says Villafaña. "Eighteen men against 2,000."

Instead, they joined the larger force headed for a general assault on Stanleyville. But by the time the Cubans, who were moving on the ground, fought their way into the city, the diplomats had been freed by Belgian paratroopers. Now the Cubans were men without a mission.

Not for long. A lanky American missionary, freed from his Simba captors by the assault, was moving among the various uniformed groups, begging for help. Twenty-five Western missionaries, mostly Americans, and family members were being held at a mission compound about eight kilometers — five miles — outside the city.

"I need your help to go out and get them," said the missionary, Brooklyn-born Al Larson, the country chief for a non-denominational Christian group called the Unevangelized Field Mission.

The Congolese army said no. So did the Belgians and several mercenary commanders. But Rip Robertson, after a brief conversation in Spanish with his men, said, "We'll do it."

"He didn't really explain to us who these people were or why they needed help," remembers Benitez. "But that's always the way it is with the CIA, they don't tell you much. He said some people needed to be picked up outside town, not too far, but inside enemy territory. For us, 'the enemy' meant communists, and that's who we were there to fight, so we were all OK with it."

The Cubans set off in two jeeps with their tops removed and machine guns mounted in the rear, along with a pickup truck. They had fought off repeated ambushes all across the country on their way to Stanleyville, so they were expecting combat. But they had no idea they were driving into a five-mile-long cloud of bullets. They hit their first ambush half a mile outside the city and after that their guns were rarely silent for more than a minute or two.

Miraculously, few of the Simba shots seem to strike home. “One bullet went through my door and hit Ricardo Morales, who was firing the machine gun in the back,” said Benitez. “It got him in the back, right near his spine, but he kept shooting.”

Under all that fire, the little CIA convoy slowed to a crawl. “I don’t know how long it took us to get there, but it seemed like forever,” remembers Tamayo. “Maybe an hour, I don’t know.”

And at Kilometer 8, that was an hour too late.

Many of the 25 hostages at Kilometer 8 didn’t really realize that’s what they were. Fourteen of them were children who mostly thought their three months in the compound were a gigantic lark. They were under a rather loose form of mostly unsupervised house arrest, and even when the Simbas stopped in to check on them each day, the kids treated them more as an adventure than as a threat.

David McAllister, Ruth Reynard’s older brother (and still a missionary at age 60), recalls a morning when the Simbas were angry, firing their rifles in the air and threatening that if the U.S. government didn’t listen to them, the next volley of bullets would be into the hostages’ bodies.

“And in all this threatening behavior, I well remember picking up the empty casings at the rebels’ feet as they were shooting in the air,” he says. “Very strange how a youngster, or at least myself, can be really afraid, yet stupidly excited, all at the same time.”

Their fears were only heightened when, on the compound’s transistor radio, they heard the Simba-controlled station in Stanleyville call on rebels to slaughter all the hostages being held in their territory. “Men, women and children, have no scruples, kill them all,” an announcer shouted in a broadcast also monitored by journalists in Stanleyville.

“We knew this was it,” remembers Ken McMillen, now a surgeon in Minneapolis, then 17 and with a better grasp of the situation than the younger children. “The adults were expecting something, and I don’t think they were surprised when the rebels guarding us came over from across the street. They were agitated, angry, and they accused us of somehow using a radio in the house to call the planes.”

The four Simbas – certainly drunk and possibly stoned on the local variety of hemp – shouted for the hostages to line up between two buildings. “We’re going to shoot you now!” one of the Simbas cried. Still the air of unreality remained.

But even the most stoic of the kids were taken aback by little Ruth Reynard's loud whisper to her dad, Paul: "Daddy, are they going to kill us now?" Replied her preternaturally calm father: "Well, Ruthie, we'll just have to see."

As it turned out, they weren't ... yet. The Simbas lowered their rifles, marched the hostages into the house and told them to sit down. Two guards stayed, kicking over furniture and looting the home of food and valuables, while two others took the men out into the yard.

Loaded with their swag, the two guards inside the house headed for the door. Abruptly one of them spun around and began firing his pistol into the crowd of women and children. Some hostages heard four shots, some seven, and some about a million.

"They were shooting *everywhere*," says Marilyn Wendler, now a retired nurse in Los Angeles, 11 at the time. "Afterward, there were bullet holes all over the walls." But only two struck hostages. Ken McMillan had been hit in the hip, his younger brother Paul scratched on the cheek by a bullet fragment. Neither wound was serious.

But now there were more shots from the front yard, followed by the frantic shout of Ruth and David's father Paul: "You've killed my best friend!" After another burst of gunfire, there was only silence.

The hostages inside the house, fearful the Simbas were still outside and feeling trigger-happy, waited for a while before going outside. There they found Ken McMillan's father, Hector, dead in the driveway. Paul McAllister also had been wounded, but survived by playing dead.

The wounded Ken and the women nursing him stayed in the house, hoping for help to arrive. Most of the rest of the hostages forged into the jungle to hide.

The hostages heard the Cubans long before they saw them, the convoy arriving to the sounds of a staccato symphony of gunfire. Though the hostages had no idea whatsoever who the Cubans were, they didn't bother asking; they trusted anybody in the company of Al Larson. The Cubans, aware that the CIA's presence in the country was a well-kept secret, mostly kept their mouths shut. And everybody wanted to get out of there before more Simbas arrived; the convoy left within 15 minutes of its arrival.

"To us, again, it was just fun, getting put in a jeep and stuff," says Ruth. Without the slightest fear, she found herself sitting in the lap of the giant Tamayo.

"I don't know who, exactly, handed her to me," he remembers. "She was so tiny. I kept my left arm around her, and I fired my machine gun out the right."

McAllister was one of the few hostages who could see what was going on. Everybody else had obeyed instructions to lean forward and shelter their heads. But McAllister, awed by the massive fire the Cubans were directing out of the vehicles, began grabbing loose bullets and loading spare clips for their rifles.

His sister Ruth, though quiet, winced from time to time as hot spent cartridges cascaded onto her head. Tamayo pulled a red kerchief from his head — the only black man among the Cubans, he was wearing it so nobody would mistake him for a Simba and shoot him — and put it over her.

The convoy's luck held; no one was hit by Simba fire. The Cubans inflicted some casualties on the Simbas, but nobody remembers — or, at least, will admit he remembers — how many.

"I never knew, and I didn't *want* to know," says Benitez. "We never talked about it. I don't talk about with the other guys and I don't talk about it with my wife. I think this, right now, is the first time I've ever talked about it."

The firing died down as the convoy approached Stanleyville. The hostages arrived at the airport and almost immediately boarded a flight leaving the country, evading a horde of waiting reporters and ensuring that the story of their rescue would be lost to history.

They left, mostly, without thanking the men who saved them. "At the airport, they just kind of faded into the crowds, and they were gone," Ruth Reynard says, a note of bafflement still in her voice after all these years. The Cubans departed Africa the next day.

But they had their memories, and some souvenirs. So do the former hostages. When a story in a British newspaper mentioned that Ruth had to leave her doll behind at the compound, she was deluged with 500 new ones by well-wishers. And Ken McMillan, who thought the bullet in his hip was removed by a surgeon in a Congolese hospital, learned 35 years later — after getting X-rays following a tumble while stringing Christmas lights — that his surgeon had only removed a piece of shrapnel. The bullet had traveled into his pelvis, he said, where it remains today.

"It's coming to the reunion, too."