

9 January 1977

CIA Linked to 1971 Swine Virus in Cuba

By Drew Fetherston
and John Cummings

Newsday

NEW YORK—With at least the tacit backing of Central Intelligence Agency officials, operatives linked to anti-Castro terrorists introduced African swine fever virus into Cuba in 1971. Six weeks later an outbreak of the disease forced the slaughter of 500,000 pigs to prevent a nationwide animal epidemic.

A U.S. intelligence source told Newsday he was given the virus in a sealed, unmarked container at a U.S. Army base and CIA training ground in the Panama Canal Zone, with instructions to turn it over to the anti-Castro group.

The 1971 outbreak, the only time the disease has hit the Western Hemisphere, was labeled the "most alarming event" of 1971 by the U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization. African swine fever is a highly contagious and usually lethal viral disease that infects only pigs and, unlike swine flu, cannot be transmitted to humans. There were no human deaths involved in the outbreak, but all production of pork, a Cuban staple, came to a halt, apparently for several months.

A CIA spokesman, Dennis Berend, in response to a request for comment, said: "We don't comment on information from unnamed and, at best, obscure sources."

Why the virus turned up in Cuba has been a mystery to investigators. It had been assumed that the virus entered Cuba in garbage from a commercial airliner or in sausages brought in by merchant seamen.

However, on the basis of interviews with U.S. intelligence sources, Cuban exiles and scientists concerning the outbreak—which occurred two years after President Nixon banned the use of offensive chemical and biological warfare—Newsday was able to piece together the following account of events leading up to the outbreak.

The U.S. intelligence source said that early in 1971 he was given the virus in a sealed, unmarked container at Ft. Gulick, an Army base in the Panama Canal Zone. The CIA operates a paramilitary training center for

career personnel and mercenaries at Ft. Gulick.

The source said he was given instructions to turn the container with the virus over to an anti-Castro group. The container then was given to someone in the Canal Zone, who took it by boat and turned it over to a fishing trawler off the Panamanian coast. The source said the substance was not identified to him until months after the outbreak in Cuba. He would not elaborate.

Another man involved in the operation, a Cuban exile who asked not to be identified, said he was on the trawler when the virus was put aboard at a prearranged rendezvous point off Bocas del Toro, Panama. He said the trawler carried the virus to Navassa Island, a deserted, tiny, U.S.-owned island between Jamaica and Haiti.

From there, after the trawler made a brief stopover, the container was taken to Cuba and given to other operatives on the southern coast near the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay in late March, 1971, according to the source.

The source said he had no direct knowledge of whether the virus that came from Ft. Gulick was responsible for the outbreak in Havana, 500 miles northwest of Guantanamo.

A paper prepared by the Cubans for a scientific conference in Mexico City said the first sick pigs were found about May 8, but no precise location was given. A non-Soviet bloc agricultural technician then in Cuba said the disease easily could have gone undetected for months. The virus can be transmitted rapidly through the food or water supply.

The source on the trawler, who had been trained by the CIA and had carried out previous missions for the agency, said he saw no CIA officials aboard the boat that delivered the virus to the trawler, but added: "We were well paid for this and Cuban exile groups don't have that kind of money."

He said he suspected, but never knew for sure, what was in the container. "When I asked about this stuff all they told me was, 'It's from Gulick,'" he said.

He said he was revealing the information because he is a member of an exile group being investigated by the United States in connection with terrorist activity in Florida.

His account was confirmed by another intelligence source in Miami. This source said he had no proof that the operation was approved by CIA officials in Washington, but added: "In a case like this, though, they would always give them [CIA officials in Washington] plausible deniability."

The investigation referred to by the operative on the trawler involves a federal inquiry into terrorist acts allegedly carried out by Cuban exiles. These include bombings and assassination attempts in the United States and Venezuela. Trained originally by the CIA for operations against Cuba, the exiles have become more restive as they view what they believe to be an increasing move toward rapprochement between Premier Fidel Castro and the United States.

Congressional sources with access to some CIA records said the swine fever operation was not mentioned in the list of approved covert operations. But Congress' efforts to probe CIA activities in chemical and biological warfare have been frustrated. The Senate intelligence committee said in its final report last year that the Army and the CIA had entered into a special agreement to build biochemical agents and delivery systems, but that written records of these activities were destroyed.

According to the Cuban scientific paper, presented in August, 1971, the country's entire production of pork came to a halt until the disease was confined to Havana province and eradicated by slaughtering the infected pigs and incinerating their remains. Cuba reported that about 500,000 pigs were slaughtered.

The non-Soviet bloc agricultural technician then in Cuba said that at the time of the outbreak there was a chronic shortage of meat and any Havana resident who could was keeping a pig in his backyard. Because of this situation, highly unusual for an urban area, the "disease could have existed months before it was found," the technician said, adding that it was impossible to pinpoint the source of the epidemic.

In a speech on July 26, 1971, Castro said: "The origin of the epidemic has not yet been ascertained. It could be accidental or it could have been the result of enemy activity. On various occasions the counterrevolutionary

continued

wormpit [anti-Castro groups based in Miami] has talked of plagues and epidemics; however, we cannot yet say categorically that it was either."

Ft. Gulick, where the U.S. intelligence source said he was given the container with the virus, was built during World War II to protect the Panama Canal. It is headquarters for the Army's school of the Americas, which trains army officers from 17 Latin American countries. Unofficially, according to intelligence sources, it is a staging area for covert operations in the Caribbean and Latin America.

Former CIA official Victor Marchetti, author of the book "The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence," told Newsday that the CIA had its own base near Ft. Gulick where it trained its own operatives. He said Ft. Gulick also was used to train mercenaries and career CIA personnel in paramilitary operations.