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COUNTRY Cuba

REPORT NO. OO-EB, 167,805

SUBJECT Cuban Airfields: San Julian, Pinar del Rio, Mariel Naval Air Station, Antonio Maceo, Camaguey, and Trinidad

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DATE OF FO: Jan - Aug 60

SCOPE & DATE ACQ: Throughout Cuba/Jan - Aug 60

THIS IS UNEVALUATED INFORMATION

SOURCE: US national; former US Marine non-commissioned officer.

Source is a 23 year old ex-Marine who spent the period from February 1959 through July 1960 serving in the Cuban Army and the Cuban Air Force. He obtained his discharge from the Cuban Air Force in June 1960 and returned to the US via Mexico City on 30 Aug 60. According to source, he had been nominated by the US Marines to enroll in the Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps at a US university, even though he had not finished his high-school education. He reportedly did not accept this offer because he was much more interested in Special Forces type activity, and this led to his decision to leave the Marine Corps and a short time later to enlist in the Cuban Army. He appears to be a keen observer who has been well trained in small unit military tactics. While source's plans are indefinite, he should be available for further interview during the next few weeks (mid-October - November 1960).

1. In December 1959 I transferred from the Paratroop Regiment of the Cuban Army to the Cuban Air Force. While such a transfer would be unusual in the US, it was not at all out of the ordinary in Cuba because of the chaotic conditions in the Cuban military and the shortage of trained pilots in the Cuban Air Force. I spent the period December 1959 - June 1960 in the Cuban Air Force, and I was stationed at San Julian Air Force Base, Pinar del Rio Province, during this entire period. San Julian is located 15 miles east of the small port of La Fe and 10 miles north of the small town of Las Martinas. I am not a licensed pilot, but I had flown numerous aircraft and had had many hours of unofficial instruction during my tour in the US Marine Corps. The Cuban Air Force was so short on qualified pilots during my stay that I was allowed to fly F-47's, I-20 Beavers, and numerous lighter aircraft.

San Julian Air Force Base

2. San Julian, while not an operational Cuban Air Force Base during the period December 1959 - June 1960, was responsible for the defense of western Pinar del Rio Province. The province was divided by a line running roughly north and south through the city of Pinar del Rio. The defense of the area to the east of this line was the responsibility of the Naval Air Station at Mariel. Most of the aircraft at San Julian up to the time of my departure were derelict. The aircraft included three C-45's; two F-47's (both inoperative, but one had been flying during January-June 1960 until the brakes locked on landing and the aircraft ground-looped); two AT-6's (one operational and the other under repair); and one F-51 (inoperational due to lack of spares).

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The field has two runways (8/26 and 1/19), both seven-thousand ft long, 150 ft wide, and with excellent asphalt surface. The base is located on a relatively level plain surrounded on the west, south, and east sides by giant thorn bushes. One open hangar area is located on this base, plus a five-story control tower. Communications equipment (VEF and HF-CW) is located on the third floor of the control tower.

4. A civilian aeronautical technical school for mechanics is located near the tower at the center of the base. Since February 1960 this school served as the headquarters for the Rural Police Officers School and as late as August 1960 the base had from 500-800 rural militia based for training at San Julián. Discipline and training at this school were primitive. The head of the school was (and presumably still is) a Capt FNU Mata (a Cuban negro). He is the ex-adjutant to Argentine Communist Maj Ernesto "Che" Guevara who, in addition to his other duties, is the Cuban Army G-3 (chief of training). The driver for Capt Mata, and also his good friend, is a man named José "Peludo" García.
5. The HF-CW communications equipment at San Julián is a standard US Army field set. The VHF equipment is civilian equipment made by an unidentified US manufacturer. The VEF set uses crystals. San Julián Air Force Base also has an LF homing beacon which can be used in conjunction with aircraft radio compasses to home on the base. The keyed signal of this beacon was recently changed and I am not sure what the new signal is. The only other communications equipment at this base is an HF car phone set (a two-way radio similar to US police radios).
6. Communications between San Julián and Havana are intermittent. A routine communications check using the HF-CW is made with Havana every half hour. No one gets excited, however, if the check-in is missed because of the poor communications facilities at the base. Many times when we wanted to send a message to Havana we had to relay the message via the car phone to the town of Guane, where a large HF antenna is located. I believe the call sign at Guane is H-23. Guane, in turn, would relay the message to Pinar del Río where it was then transmitted to Havana.

Civil Airport -- Pinar del Río

A small civilian airport is located about one-half mile outside the city of Pinar del Río adjacent to the military headquarters for the province. This field has one five-thousand-ft asphalt runway sufficient for light aircraft. No crash equipment is available at the airport and the only cargo handling machinery is one fork lift of about one thousand lbs capacity. Utilities, both water and power, are municipally supplied and there are no alternate sources of power. Two small hangars are located at this airport.

A small dirt strip was built adjacent to the military headquarters building outside Pinar del Río. This strip was constructed at the request of Maj "Pepito", adjutant to the Commander of Pinar del Río Province, Maj Bernidio Escalona. The adjutant wanted to learn to fly light planes in order to travel more rapidly between his headquarters and Havana. The strip was extremely rough, however, and Maj "Pepito" cracked up a Piper Tri-Pacer while attempting to land. This dirt field was not used after the crash. The adjutant acquired a new Tri-Pacer in June 1960, but the aircraft is based at and flown from the Pinar del Río Civil Airport.

Maríel Naval Air Station

The following aircraft are located at this base: five Hawker Sea Furies (the only five such aircraft in the Cuban Naval Air Force); two TBF Avengers; one Cessna 180; a number of Cessna 170's; and I believe two H-19 helicopters. Facilities at the Maríel Naval Air Station are quite modern but I did not have the chance to look them over closely. I heard that most of the ground personnel at Maríel were US-trained, which would make them quite capable by Cuban standards.

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10. Mechanics from Bristol Aviation Co. visited Mariel for about five months in early 1960 to change the starting systems on the Sea Furies from explosive cartridge to electric systems. I talked to one of the British mechanics before he left and he said that there had been no problems in modifying these aircraft and that the Cuban mechanics at Mariel had performed well.

Additional Small Airfields in Pinar del Río Province

11. A number of small strips are scattered around Pinar del Río, all of which are kept blocked by palm trees laid on the runways. I noticed several times in flying patrols over the western region of this province that one or another of these emergency fields had been cleared of palm trees by counter-revolutionaries. Whenever it was found that a field had been cleared, a patrol would be sent out to reblock the field. I can only remember the specific location of one such emergency airfield, this one at Consolacion del Norte. This field is located about 20 miles east of the village of Dimas and about three miles inland from the coast. It is very near the highway connecting Dimas with Santa Lucia. The field has one grass-covered landing strip about three thousand ft in length. It normally is blocked with palm trees scattered at about 50-yard intervals.
12. In addition to the above-mentioned emergency airfields, most of the sugar centrals have two thousand ft landing strips for light planes. I know that both San Cristóbal and San Juan y Martínez have such strips. All these sugar central fields are dirt strips, but they can handle aircraft up to AT-6 size. The chief difficulty at these fields is the lack of facilities to handle aviation gas, which usually is supplied by truck and trailer or in much less efficient fashion by 55 gallon drums with hand pumps. In addition, the main highway between the towns of Cortés and Las Martinas can be safely used to land aircraft up to about the size of an L-20 Beaver. This highway, which is shown on some maps ending at Guane, actually forks some distance from Guane and the new fork continues on to La Fe, El Cayuco, Las Martinas, and Cortés.

Antonio Maceo Air Force Base

13. This field has one small hangar and is a maintenance base for C-47 aircraft. The airport facilities are being rebuilt but I do not know whether the job has been completed or just what changes were involved. The field has two auxiliary starting units for C-47's and I believe they have a "plug in" for F-47's. No jet engine starting units are available at Antonio Maceo. The landing strip is only five thousand ft long. Power for the field is supplied by the town of Santiago but an emergency power source is available at the airport. This emergency power equipment is maintained continuously. Water is supplied from a large tank (about 100 thousand gallons capacity, typical US Army-type construction) and also from a nearby reservoir. An unidentified civilian is in charge of the airport. Two Cuban Army technicians handle all communications.

Camagüey Airfield

14. This airport is still considered to be a civilian field. I believe they have a T-33 starting unit available but to my knowledge they have no jet fuel, only aviation gas. The landing strip is still just six thousand ft long.

I saw two ammunition bunkers located near the tower at Camagüey. These were typical US Army-type bunkers, all concrete construction, about 15' x 15', with a combination lock on the door. As I recall, the locks on both doors had been broken and the doors were closed and padlocked. I believe a number of 500 lb bombs were stored in these bunkers but I do not believe any of the bombs had tail fins. Approved for Release: 2020/04/21 C06841287

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Trinidad Airfield

15. This field is used only for charter flights and has no facilities other than a couple of shacks used as waiting rooms. No radio or tower equipment is available. The field has no crash equipment and no cargo handling facilities.

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