

An Interview with Gerardo Hernandez, Leader of the Cuban Five

Infiltrating Alpha 66

By SAUL LANDAU

This conversation took place on April 1, 2009. Our film crew received Justice Department approval to talk with “the prisoner,” with a prison official in the room. Before his 1998 arrest, Gerardo Hernandez directed the operations of the other Cuban State Security agents who infiltrated violent groups in the Miami area for the purposes of stopping them from carrying out terrorist attacks on tourist sites in Cuba. We took complete and careful notes.

Saul Landau: What was your mission and why?

Gerardo Hernandez: In the US in general and Florida specifically, many groups contemplated and carried out acts of terrorism in Cuba. We were collecting information on Alpha 66, the F4 Commandos, the Cuban American National Foundation, and Brothers to the Rescue. Many years have passed and I hope that nothing has escaped me but I think those were the principal groups in which we were working [infiltrating].

SL: What did you learn through your infiltration?

GH: The first thing that struck me was the impunity with which these groups operated, violating the laws of the US: The Neutrality Acts [of the 1790s] that supposedly means no organization can use American soil to commit terrorism against another country.

In the case of Alpha 66, the operatives would take a fast boat and shoot at targets along Cuba’s coast. When they would return to Miami, they would hold a press conference lecture and openly say what they had done.

And when someone would ask, “Hey, doesn’t that violate the neutrality laws,” they would reply: “Not really, because first we went to one of the Keys somewhere in the Caribbean and then we went to Cuba. So technically, we didn’t leave from the US.” They did this openly and no US agency took responsibility.

SL: In what years?

GH: This has been going on since 1959. I personally began dealing with this in the 1990s. Since I’ve been here in prison in Victorville [California] about 3 years ago, I think in 2005 they arrested a Cuban right here in this county with an arsenal, all kinds of weapons in his house. And the first thing he said was, “Well, I am a member of Alpha 66 and I’m using these weapons in the struggle for Cuban freedom.” That was his defense.

SL: Were the Cuban Five all volunteers? How does one prepare to infiltrate an enemy group in an enemy country? And then act as if you were enemies of your country and friends of them?

GH: Yes, all volunteers. In my case, I'm not a career military man. I studied to be a diplomat. It took me 6 years to complete my degree in International and Political Relations. Afterwards, I went to Angola, as part of a voluntary international mission. And while I was in Angola it seems I sparked the attention of the Cuban intelligence services, and when I got back, they approached me with this mission. They said, "We know you studied to be a diplomat, but you know our country has a certain situation with these terrorist groups that are coming from Florida to commit all kinds of crimes and we need someone to go and fulfill these tasks."

I could have said "No, I studied diplomacy, I want to be a diplomat," but Cubans, those who were raised with the Revolution, know that during the past 50 years our country has faced almost a war environment. In Cuba, he who doesn't know personally a victim of terrorism, at least knows about the plane that exploded over Barbados, killing 73 people [October 1976]. Who doesn't know about the bomb [in 1997] that killed Fabio di Selmo [an Italian tourist and guest at Havana's Hotel Copacabana detonated by a Salvadoran who said he was hired by Luis Posada] just to mention a few acts? There was a pre-school where the counter revolutionaries lit a [gas] tank on fire. These actions are part of the Cuban conscience. So, I told the Intelligence officers, "Yes, I am prepared to fulfill this mission."

SL: How did you manage to infiltrate these groups? How did you convince them, people like Jose Basulto [head of Brothers to the Rescue], for example?

GH: For Cubans in this country, everything is connected. Cubans in the United States have enormous privileges, ones that no other citizens of the world have. Cubans arrive by any route, including with false passports, and the only thing they have to say is, "I come seeking freedom," and right away the US gives them all the documents they need. So, in the case of Basulto, for example, one of our comrades who infiltrated Brothers to the Rescue had originally "stolen" a plane from Cuba. Rene [Gonzalez, another of the Cuban Five] flew his plane here and, as is the custom, he was received as a hero. He got lots of attention and, later joined the Brothers. His job was collecting information about that organization.

So, if you ask me how, I say that we used as our foundation for infiltration the very privileges all Cubans receive when they arrive in this country; even those who took others with them, and have hijacked airplanes, or have put a gun up to a pilot's head. Look at people like Leonel Matias, who [in 1994 he hijacked a boat in Cuba and killed a naval officer in the process] killed someone on a boat, arrived here on that boat, with his gun -- and the body was even discovered. But despite all of that, he didn't have to face any processes in the U.S. justice system. Those people are automatically pardoned. So using exactly that kind of advantage, we were able to penetrate to a certain level, these organizations.

When I mention Brothers to the Rescue, some might think, “This is a humanitarian organization that rescued balseros [rafters].” On the contrary, while their activities were limited to rescuing balseros, they had no problems with the Cuban authorities. What people tend not know is that Jose Basulto, the head of that organization, has a long record as a terrorist. He trained with the CIA, and infiltrated Cuba in the 1960s. In 1962, he came to Cuba on a fast boat and fired shells at the Cuban coast, including targeting a hotel. Even Basulto, with all his known history, had no problems while he limited his actions to rescuing balseros. In 1995, however, the United States and Cuba signed migratory agreements specifying that boats intercepted at sea would no longer be brought to the United States; rather they would be returned to Cuba. At that point, people stopped contributing money to Basulto and his organization because, they said: “Why are we going to give money to Basulto’s organization? When he calls the coast guard, they are just going to return those balseros to Cuba?”

So, when Basulto saw his business in danger, he invented this invasion [in 1995] of Cuban airspace as a way to keep people donating money. We presented this evidence in our case. If the press hasn’t wanted to pay much attention to this...well, they don’t want to touch such material. It doesn’t behoove them. I am referring to the corporate press. The documents are all there showing how Basulto and the Brothers to the Rescue were trying out handmade weapons in order to introduce them in Cuba.

When Basulto testified at our trial [2001], our attorneys asked him what he intended to do with all those weapons. All this is in the trial record, though no one seems to want to pay attention to it. People tend to talk about the Brothers to the Rescue as if they were a humanitarian organization, omitting the part about terrorism; like they omit the facts that the FBI had penetrated that organization as well. The FBI had someone inside the group giving them information on the Brothers’ activities. Why would the FBI penetrate a humanitarian organization?

Saul Landau is currently making (with Jack Willis) a film on the Cuban Five. His other films are available on DVD from roundworldproductions@gmail.com. He is a fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies and autho of [A BUSH AND BOTOX WORLD](#) (Counterpunch A/K).