

The background of the entire image is a photograph of a serene landscape. It shows a calm body of water, possibly a lake or a wide river, shrouded in a thick mist or fog. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright, hazy glow that reflects off the water's surface. Dark silhouettes of trees and foliage are visible in the foreground and along the distant shore, adding depth and texture to the scene. The overall mood is quiet and atmospheric.

Our Reluctant Man in Cuba

Ken Donald

Our Reluctant Man in Cuba

From the Fletcher Memoirs (1956-63)

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For Jane

Explanatory Note

In this fifth offering from my uncle's memoirs he shares with us the time he spent in Cuba during one of the most dangerous periods in our recent history.

It begins in November 1956, shortly after Captain Fletcher had played a less than glorious role in the Hungarian uprising. He now finds himself forced to participate in yet another revolution, although he and Henry Biggins end up fighting with the communists.

As if this weren't astonishing enough, circumstances also contrive to draw them into the Bay of Pigs fiasco, where they can be found secretly working against the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States.

Incredibly Fletcher is still in Cuba after the attempted invasion of the country, and he becomes embroiled in the nail-biting events of the Cuban missile crisis.

Apparently, not only did Fletcher spend time with the Cuban revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro, he was also on friendly terms with the leader's brother, Raul Castro, and their fellow revolutionary, Che Guevara. As well as the Cuban triumvirate, he also meets General Curtis LeMay, one of President Kennedy's most senior military advisers.

He appears to insist that he was still an officer in the RAF at the time, as well as an unwilling member of the Secret Intelligence Service. Whatever his official title, he certainly must have been one of the few people to have met many of the key players at a time when the conflict between the two Superpowers threatened to throw the world into a nuclear war.

Once again I have checked my uncle's memoirs against the historical record and I have supplied additional notes.

K.D.

My little Garden of Eden

Those of you who have experienced the perfect delight of reading my previous memoirs will know that I'd been dragged into the doomed Hungarian uprising in '56. Fortunately I'd come away from the blasted mess whole and healthy, and I'd ended up ensconced in a comfortable Viennese establishment with the mouth-watering Anna Novak for company.

Life couldn't have been better, and I'd have been more than happy to see out the next few months whiling away the hours in bed with my gorgeous rebel but, alas, it wasn't to be. Within a fortnight my pretty revolutionary was getting itchy feet and making contact with the Austrian journalistic fraternity, hoping to drum up support for the downtrodden masses left behind in her homeland. A complete waste of time, of course, but she wasn't to be persuaded otherwise, no matter how much I did my best to wear her out in the horizontal belly shuffle.

Happily I had other ways to make constructive use of my time. You see, for the first time in our acquaintance my *quondam*, Mr. H Biggins, wasn't eager to spoil things. You may recall that the fat-faced virgin was besotted with his obnoxious little Eva, so he'd found a more exciting way to expend his repressed energies, instead of slaughtering every communist who had the bad taste to cross his path.

I couldn't face a bleak winter back in Blighty with the prospect of waking up to leaden skies every blasted morning and, no longer being on a fiddler's wage, I headed straight for my excellent little retreat on the pretty island of Antigua. Naturally I did my level best to get the stunning Anna to accompany me, but the ungrateful trollop insisted that her duty to her fellow countrymen had to come first.

"I'm destined for a higher purpose," espoused the mad bint, so I left her to it.

I would simply have to rough it with the local talent on my idyllic island paradise, I thought - which is exactly what I did, until a nasty surprise put a stop to my well-earned rest only a few short days later.

The unwelcome intrusion came in the shape of a Sunderland flying boat, which had the bad taste to land in the bay overlooked by my well-appointed villa - courtesy of a pretty drug-running double agent in Vietnam, God bless her. It wasn't so much the sight of the plane itself that threatened to reintroduce my breakfast to the fresh air, as what it contained.

When I looked through my binoculars, I recognised the figure alighting from the said aircraft as H Biggins esquire - and a mighty distressing sight it was too.

Even at the best of times his sudden appearance more often than not spelt trouble for your downtrodden correspondent and, to add to my feeling of dread, I'd convinced myself that he had no knowledge of my Caribbean retreat. I hadn't the foggiest notion how he'd found me, or why the Billy Barlow had gone to all the trouble in the first place.

I briefly toyed with the idea of running off into the interior before he found my villa, like some sort of escaped convict, but I soon thought better of it, and instead I decided to fortify myself with a large brandy, in spite of the early hour.

"My God, Biggins, how the devil did you find me?" I asked by way of welcome, once the maid had shown him through to my little Garden of Eden.

“Is that any way to say hello to an old friend, Fletcher? Aren’t you going to offer a man a drink?”

“Of course, old chap. Would you care for a brandy?”

“It’s a little too early for me, but a nice pot of tea wouldn’t go amiss.”

So I rang the bell and when the maid returned with Biggins’ brew, he eventually stopped ogling his surroundings.

“Well, I’ll say this for you, Fletcher, you certainly know how to live. How on earth did you afford a place like this?” asked the nosey parker before he’d even taken a sip of his tea.

“It was part of my inheritance. Seriously, Biggins, how did you know where I was?” I asked, quickly trying to change the subject before he started digging any further into the questionable nature of my personal finances.

“Honestly, Fletcher, after all your years with the Service I’m surprised you need to ask. All it took was a quick call to London and the backroom boys soon followed the paper trail of a house purchase and a transatlantic flight.”

I decided to damp the mug and took a healthy swallow of eau de vie to help steady my nerves. If he’d found my secret lair *that* easily, I thought, then the sudden appearance of a large wad of the Queen’s pictures in my Swiss bank account might not be as hush-hush as I’d hoped. I’ll freely admit he’d given me a fright, and for a brief moment I thought my light-fingered past might have caught up with me.

If I’d only known the real purpose of his visit, I might well have been screaming: “Fair cop, guv,” and grabbing for the hand-cuffs. Unfortunately I was to discover the reason for Biggins’ unexpected arrival soon enough.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” I asked, trying to sound like an old friend.

“The PM’s been after us, so I had to give my apologies to Eva and find you as quickly as I could.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. We’d only just come through the messy business in Hungary by the skin of our teeth, and I wasn’t looking forward to being thrust into some other Godforsaken hell-hole. I was racking my brain, trying to imagine what awful war-torn part of the world the PM could have in mind for us this time, when Biggins gave me a cryptic clue.

“As luck would have it, you happen to be in the part of the world where our services are needed.”

I helped myself to some more of my brandy, hoping to still my beating heart, and my confused look was the signal for Biggins to explain himself.

“The PM wants us in Cuba, Fletcher.”

“Cuba?” I asked, none the wiser. “Since when has Britain taken an interest in the Yanks’ neighbourhood?”

“In all honesty, I think he’s trying to make up for the Suez debacle. The Americans weren’t pleased with HMG and our French allies when we were intent on invading Egypt, and I rather think he’s hoping to make amends.”

“You’ve still lost me, Biggins. How on earth does Eden expect us to put him back in Eisenhower’s good books?”

“Really, Fletcher, I *do* wish you’d keep abreast of international affairs once in a while, instead of just sunning yourself and chasing after the nearest piece of skirt.”

“Save the lecture, Biggins, and tell me what’s going on.”

“As even *you* must know, the Americans have a number of important business interests on the island, and they’re rather eager to keep Batista firmly in charge.”

“Batista’s a bit of a thug from what I’ve heard,” I said, just to show I wasn’t completely ignorant in such matters.

“You may be right but that’s by the by. The point is, this Castro chap and his bunch of rebels look set to put a cat among the pigeons and challenge the regime. What’s more, Raul Castro, Fidel’s brother, is an admirer of the communists - and you can imagine how the Americans feel about that. The last thing they want is a friend of the Soviets living right on their doorstep.”

It sounded like the chaps at the CIA were starting at shadows from what I could see and I said so. But Biggins put me straight.

“Do you think so? Batista’s damned unpopular with a large section of the population in Cuba, and the revolutionaries could gain enough support to overthrow the government.”

“Well, what on earth does Eden expect the two of us to do about it?” I asked, prepared for the worst.

“The PM has explained how we’ve had dealings with communist leaders before and apparently the president was quite impressed. The hope is that this time we might be able to stop a communist takeover before it even gets started – sort of nip it in the bud, so to speak.”

“Sounds like a half-baked idea if you ask me,” I said, not overjoyed at the prospect of getting stuck in the middle of another blasted revolution.

“No, it’s all been arranged. The head of Batista’s intelligence service is expecting us. All we’ve got to do is discover the whereabouts of Fidel Castro when he returns to Cuba, and Batista’s men will deal with him.”

“Hang him out to dry on the leafless tree, you mean,” I said, totally unimpressed by the ridiculous scheme.

“If that’s what it takes. I’m surprised at you, Fletcher – since when have you been so squeamish?”

As usual Biggins had got it all arse-backwards. My concern was that when the shooting started, we’d find ourselves right in the firing-line. It all sounded damned risky to me and I decided to dig my heels in. It had been eight long years since the arson business when Biggins had held the threat of the Irish theatre over my head, and I was determined not to let him think he still had some sort of hold over me.

“You can count me out, Biggins. You’ve dragged me everywhere from Vietnam to Hungary – I’ve had enough.”

“I see,” he replied, and the smug grin that appeared across his ugly dial suddenly filled me with dread. His next words confirmed my worst fears.

“By the way, Fletcher, talking of Vietnam – that little drug-running tart you fixed yourself up with has been making enquiries as to your whereabouts. Naturally I said I had no idea where you were.”

“That was very obliging of you,” I replied, suddenly becoming very wary of where all this was heading.

“She even tried to offer us some information in exchange for telling her where you could be found.”

“Well, she always was a persistent little madam. I dare say the little darling’s just missing me.”

“Quite. The thing is, she claims there was rather more money in the suitcase we snatched than actually ended up in the Service’s coffers.”

And with those words he stared intently in my direction.

In spite of the cool breeze that drifted up from the bay, I realised I’d broken into a sweat and I cleared my throat, desperate to change the subject.

“I say, Biggins, when exactly are these Cuban chaps expecting us?”

Fat fingers in the Cuban pie

So before I knew what was really happening, I was a passenger on Biggins' flying boat and being whisked away to the bustling harbour of Havana, on the Cuban coast. Being British and totally indifferent to the political comings and goings in the Americans' back yard, I scarcely knew what I was letting myself in for. Apart from knowing the island had more than its fair share of fleshpots and gambling dens, I was totally in the dark.

Since you may well be in the same boat as my good self, please allow me to enlighten you as to the chequered past of this strange little island-nation. Don't concern yourself with the likelihood of being thrust into a long-winded history lesson – there isn't much to tell.

What indigenous population ever existed in Cuba was all but wiped out within a few generations after the 1400's. A combination of military conquest, enslavement and disease soon saw an end to anything resembling an 'original' Cuban. To further dilute their ethnic origins, the local women bred with their Spanish invaders, sometimes by choice, but more often than not they were forced into the arrangement.

The bullfighting mob was more concerned with its mainland empires in Mexico and Peru, but the Caribbean islands were strategically important because Spanish ships carrying gold and silver from the mines had to pass through. The Spanish had to watch their step, you see, what with Dutch, French and British pirates waiting in the wings to snatch a share of the booty. We Brits were gobbling up a lot of the small islands, of course, but the Spanish managed to hold on to Cuba, the largest island in the Caribbean, although the population was relatively small at the time.

Lacking gold and silver, Britain decided to earn its pay by importing millions of slaves to run its sugar plantations, but the Spanish didn't think of doing the same until the end of the 1700's. Mind you, once they'd started there was no stopping them, and slavery wasn't actually abolished until 1886. So today a large proportion of the people in Cuba are descended, at least in part, from those Africans treated by their European brothers like so much cattle.

When Cuba gained independence in 1898, the Yankee companies moved in to take over the sugar plantations, and they brought in their own workers from Haiti. Other sugar workers migrated from Jamaica, and refugees even flooded in from Europe - including Spanish republicans making a hasty escape from Franco's festivities, and Jews on the run from the Nazis.

Soon the Yanks owned huge swathes of rural land and most of the tobacco trade - not to mention the mines, the railroads and the electricity and telephone systems. So the Americans had their fat fingers in the Cuban pie, and everyone was happy until the crash in '21 led to a bank collapse. Prices and unemployment hit the roof, with the result that corruption became rife.

Governments came and went, as they were unceremoniously kicked out by one military revolt after another. That is until a university professor came along by the name of San Martin, who had the bad taste to run the country for the Cuban people and to hell with what the Americans thought.

Naturally the Yankee investors were none too pleased by this new state of affairs, and when San Martin promoted a certain Sergeant Fulgencio Batista, the U.S. ambassador was keeping a watchful eye on the proceedings. Mr. Welles privately cultivated the new colonel, explaining how America's commercial interests in Cuba were looking for protection. And guess what? The Yanks considered him just the man for the job.

Batista grabbed this golden opportunity with both hands, and in '34 he overthrew the government to put his own regime in place which, unsurprisingly, was immediately recognised by Cuba's rich neighbour to the north. He stepped down in '44, only to return with a vengeance in '52, offering a healthy diet of repression and making sure all opposition was banned.

You could say there were two Cubas by the time I arrived on the scene. On the one hand, there were the rural poor surviving on nothing more than rice, beans and sugar water. They passed their time breeding children with swollen stomachs - testifying to an unbalanced diet and infection from parasitic worms. And on the other, there were the rich Cubans who controlled half the country's income and used it to buy their luxurious homes - when they weren't making shopping trips to Miami or constructing air-conditioned mausoleums for the afterlife.

So back in '56 Cuba was ripe for revolution, which wouldn't have meant a damn thing to me, of course, except for one tiny little detail. All because of Biggins and his cloak-and-dagger mob, a poor unsuspecting pilot from Her Majesty's RAF was about to be dropped slap bang in the middle of the whole mess.

Don't annoy the dead man

In all honesty I have to say that I was rather taken with Cuba – well Havana, leastways. Being in the Caribbean the climate was generally pleasant and I enjoyed wandering through the streets of the capital, admiring the colonial-style buildings before we were escorted to our contact in Batista's government.

His name was Colonel Blanco Rico and he was the chief of the *Servicio de Inteligencia Militar*, the Cuban equivalent of our own Service. Much to Biggins' chagrin, he refused to discuss business when we arrived at his office in the centre of the city, saying that he was heading home for dinner. He suggested we should meet up later that evening at the Cabaret Montmatre around midnight, and by the time Biggins started to protest, the work-shy colonel was heading for the door.

I have to say that he was a man after my own heart, which was confirmed a few hours later when we arrived at the aforementioned nightclub to find it also sported gambling rooms, populated by beautiful coffee-coloured hostesses.

The man continued to go up in my estimation when he explained to Biggins that all this 'revolution' nonsense had been blown up completely out of proportion and that the regime had nothing to worry about.

So I decided to enjoy myself at the blackjack table, while I flirted with a particularly eye-catching waitress. Before I knew it, dawn was on its way and the proprietors finally decided to close the shop. I was feeling as contented as a pig rolling in his own do-dah, as Biggins and I waited by the elevators with Rico and another officer.

What occurred next happened so quickly that I reacted purely on instinct, and I didn't intend to save Biggins' worthless life, no matter how much he insists to the contrary.

Everyone was talking and laughing without a care in the world, except for one captain from the RAF who happened to notice a rather striking Cuban miss sashaying down the corridor, wiggling her hips in such a way that it had him dribbling down the length of his cigar. For those moralists amongst you who frown on such lecherous behaviour, I have to say that if it hadn't been for my wandering eye, Biggins and yours truly wouldn't be alive today and we would have most likely ended up in one of Cuba's ghastly mausoleums.

As I watched the girl's animated bottom disappear round the corner, I spotted two seemingly innocent young men walking down the corridor, when one of them suddenly revealed a submachine-gun. I desperately looked about me in search of an escape route, and all that presented itself was a door to what appeared to be a cupboard.

Needless to say I was charging towards it without waiting for a formal invitation, and the only obstacle in my way was the overweight Mr. Biggins. I didn't stand on ceremony and crashed into him, sending us both sprawling through the open doorway, just as the quiet of the nightclub corridor was shattered by the deafening noise of the machine-gun spewing out its deadly cargo.

Fortunately my hapless colleague and I were not the intended target of our young intruders, and once they'd dispatched Rico and his unfortunate compatriot, our killers wisely disappeared into the night.

Little did we know that the sudden execution of the commander-in-chief was to have far-reaching consequences, and it marked the start of an anxious expectation, threatening to hang over the entire country. Street traffic became light, theatre audiences were small, and the cinemas and the stadium were practically empty from that moment on.

Out of respect for our hosts we thought it politic to attend the funeral of the late intelligence chief, and towards the end of the proceedings we couldn't help but notice that some of the officers in attendance were smiling and laughing. I walked up to one of the more amiable-looking specimens to find out what was so hilarious.

"I say, Lieutenant, what's so funny? Weren't you particularly fond of the chief?" I asked innocently, and it only caused the man to guffaw all the more.

"No, Captain, you have it all wrong – Colonel Rico was a fine officer. But we have just received news that his death has been avenged. Our men have broken into the Haitian embassy and killed the revolutionaries who were hiding there," he explained with a wide grin plastered across his pock-marked face.

Not the most comforting news for a pure-bred coward like me to hear. You see, when I'm in foreign climes and the bullets start to fly, I usually take some comfort in the fact that the blessed sanctuary of a British embassy is hopefully never too far away. But from what I'd just learnt, the Cuban authorities hardly seemed to respect such political niceties as diplomatic immunity. It may well have been just the *Haitian* embassy and they might have thought twice about treating one of Her Majesty's establishments the same way, but even so. This latest revelation did nothing to settle my delicate nerves.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant," said Biggins, "you chaps certainly found the culprits quickly enough. We saw two gunmen in the nightclub – did I hear you say both of them were killed?"

"You misunderstand, sir," explained the lieutenant, a confused look on his face. "The political refugees who were executed have been in the Haitian embassy for some time, since their cowardly attack on the Goicuria Barracks. They had nothing to do with Colonel Rico's murder."

"Good God!" gasped Biggins by way of a reply.

The perplexed officer made his excuses and joined his fellow mourners to continue having a good chuckle at the demise of another batch of revolutionaries.

I was beginning to form a nasty suspicion that Batista and his beaks had a rather different approach to police work than our Bobbies back home. I couldn't help but be reminded of what I'd witnessed in Hungary only a few short months before, when Rakosi was desperately trying to hold on to his unpopular regime.

Even Biggins was beginning to have his doubts. Since the revolutionaries were supposedly communists, this was quite a turn up for the books, considering he hated Lenin and his followers with a passion.

I suppose I might have tried to persuade my gormless colleague to abandon our ridiculous mission, if I hadn't been distracted by the magnificent charms of a strikingly pretty Cuban piece. She'd been constantly looking in my direction and giving me the glad-eye as we'd made our way through the cemetery.

Nothing new there I hear you say, and in normal circumstances you'd be right. But these were hardly normal circumstances. You see, as if giving a handsome passer-by a lustful glance in such surroundings wasn't sufficient grounds for being accused of bad taste, the wanton hussy was rather compounding the situation by being dressed in black and wilfully neglecting her duties as a mourner of another departed soul.

Being a gentleman I returned the admiring glances, but I admit to being rather taken aback when the forward missy sauntered over, wiggling her shapely hips to such good effect that I wouldn't have been surprised if one of the recently buried corpses hadn't popped out of the ground for a closer look.

"Are you American?" asked the bereaved, and her full lips opened invitingly as she spoke the words with a husky Spanish lilt.

"Good heavens, no," I replied, defending our honour. "We're English."

I looked across at Biggins to see what he made of this new turn of events, only to be faced with the sight of his fat, dumbstruck face gawping alarmingly.

"You have a kind face," continued the little flatterer. "As you can see, I am in mourning for the loss of a close and dear friend and I am in great need of a friendly and supportive companion."

As she uttered the words a wanton smile broke out across her enticing lips. Biggins just stood there, gaping, clearly unable to believe his own eyes.

"Why don't you join us at the funeral home? You can bring your companion too, if you wish," she said amazingly.

Not an ideal venue for a romantic liaison, I thought, and the fact that she was willing to allow Biggins to tag along like a faithful lapdog should have got the alarm bells ringing, I'll admit. But I'm afraid to say that I have a one-track mind in such circumstances. As her cleavage glistened in the bright morning sunshine and she stared at me enquiringly with her gorgeous brown eyes, I found myself accepting the invitation without a second thought.

"What the hell are you doing?" snarled Biggins through gritted teeth, as we were led to a waiting car near the cemetery gates.

"I'm earning my pay, trying to develop contacts amongst the local populace," I replied in my defence.

"I know you, Fletcher - there's only one sort of contact you're interested in," he said, and he nodded in the direction of our pretty mourner.

"Well, in that case, don't feel obliged to tag along on my account - I'm sure I'll be able to cope without you for an hour or two."

"Not on your nelly, Fletcher. I'm not taking the chance of you disappearing into the backstreets of Havana until you think the coast is clear. I'm sticking to you like glue."

Bloody Biggins knew me all too well, you see, and I had little choice but to let him play gooseberry as we made our way to the funeral home.

It was a surprisingly cheerful place, considering its purpose in life, and evidently served the more affluent members of Cuban society. A neatly painted sign above the door proudly informed us of its name - 'Caballero'. As well as providing for those who had gone

trumpet-cleaning, the inhabitants of the here and now were equally well catered for. To accompany the usual parlour, there was a coffee shop and even a *bar*.

Apart from the beauty who had lured us to the wake, there were half a dozen other 'guests', and when I noticed they all happened to be young men, the hairs on the back of my neck suddenly decided to stand up against my collar. Biggins must have been of the same mind because I noticed his hand surreptitiously reaching for the inside of his jacket, where he could easily remove his revolver from its holster if the need should arise.

"Before we go to the bar to relax, would you care to take a look at the deceased?" asked my delectable temptress.

"Well, if you insist," I replied, not particularly enamoured with the idea.

We were led to a room at the rear of the building where the casket had already been laid out and was open to the world, so that those with a morbid sense of curiosity could pass their eyes over the contents. Not exactly my cup of tea, having seen enough people take an earth bath to last me a lifetime, but I leaned over for a look-see, hoping that I would soon be able to turn to more pleasant duties with my pretty Cuban seductress.

As I say, I've seen more than my fair share of stiffes, and all this silly talk about the recently departed looking as if they're simply resting or asleep is utter balderdash. There is a death-mask that falls across the face when life chooses to make a hasty exit, and the young, healthy cadaver lying prone and staring up at the ceiling looked about as dead as my Aunt Fanny – who was very much alive back in the day.

As if to confirm my hasty appraisal of the not-so lifeless occupant of the pine overcoat, our 'dead' friend's hand rose up to reveal it was holding an automatic pistol, pointed straight at my head.

Biggins went to draw his revolver but, before he could complete the impetuous manoeuvre, I gently placed my hand on his arm and made my plea.

"Don't annoy the dead man, Biggins. I'd rather not join him in the coffin, if it's all the same to you."

"A wise decision," said our irresistible mourner, who had clearly been the bait for the trap which I had so easily fallen into.

"I will take those, if you don't mind," said one of the other men, helping himself to our revolvers.

He was a huge bearded Galligantus, and he succeeded in grinning while simultaneously chomping on a cigar. His rough, coarse voice matched his visage and he couldn't hide his sense of triumph when he spoke.

"You gringos are more stupid than you look. Even a child would have realised he was being tricked. Perhaps there are no English women whose beauty compares to that of our lovely Consuela, huh?"

I wanted to tell him we had a few home-grown beauties who would be more than a match for the deceiving bitch, dressed in her tight-fitting funereal fashion, but since our protagonist was in possession of our revolvers, I thought better of it.

"Fortunately for you, your stupidity will not result in your sudden demise," explained our bearded friend, thereby calming my quaking knees, at least for the moment.

“Whatever do you want with us?” asked Biggins, who, it is fair to say, was never particularly adept at the art of interrogation.

“You are not here to ask questions,” snapped our stogie-chewer. “If it was up to me you would both become customers of this fine establishment, since you are clearly working for Batista’s thugs. Fortunately for you our beloved leader feels you would be of more use to our cause alive.”

“Is your leader here?” I asked, eager to meet the one sane man in the bunch.

“Our leader has recently left Mexico, where he has been cruelly exiled. He will arrive in Cuba very shortly and then Batista and his butchers will have cause to wish they had never been born.”

Wonderful sentiments, no doubt, but they did nothing to help Biggins and I in our present predicament. We were frogmarched to a waiting car and we spent what seemed like the whole day driving from one blasted end of the island to the other, until we reached a town called Santiago de Cuba.

We must have travelled hundreds of miles, and I dare say the confounded journey would have taken us a week if it hadn’t been for the recklessness of our young driver. Whether he’d ever taken the time to glance at anything resembling a highway code, I can’t say, and how we survived the journey I’ll never know.

When we reached the town we parked next to a house where we were locked in a damp basement with only a flickering light bulb for company, and things soon went from bad to worse.

“You and your wandering eye,” said Biggins accusingly. “If you’d tried thinking with your brain instead of other parts of your anatomy, we wouldn’t be in this mess. My God, we’ve barely been in the damn country five minutes and the rebels have got hold of us already. Damn you, Fletcher!”

Of all the ungrateful, self-centred oafs, I thought. Who did Biggins think he was? Never mind the fact that *he* was the one who’d sought me out and dragged me to the blasted island in the first place. I decided I’d had enough of his pathetic whingeing and I weighed in.

“I didn’t ask to be here, Biggins. Besides, from what the lieutenant was telling us at the cemetery, it sounds like Batista’s mob are the ones who are behaving like thugs. You know, Biggins, sometimes I wonder if we’re on the right side at all.”

He looked as if he was about to have a fit, but fortunately we were interrupted before he could launch into another one of his wretched diatribes. The door opened and the pretty Consuela entered, while her towering friend stood in the doorway, armed with a pistol. Even in the fading glow of our bare electrical illumination, she looked a gorgeous sight.

While I might have been cursing the unlucky events that had brought me from my Antiguan hideaway to a dingy basement in the back of beyond, I couldn’t help but feel my spirits lift when my Cuban stunner gave me another one of her seductive smiles.

“We have brought mattresses so that you can make yourselves comfortable. Food is being prepared while we speak and if you need to use the facilities, Juan here will take you. You see, we are not barbarians – which is more than can be said for those who run our country today. But soon, very soon, all that will change.”

She appeared to stand taller, and for a moment her pretty brown eyes began to fill with tears before she managed to compose herself.

“However,” she continued, “do not take our kindness as a sign of weakness. Even though our leader would prefer it if you were kept alive, my comrades have orders to shoot if you attempt to escape. I trust I have made myself understood.”

“Certainly, Consuela,” I said, attempting to give her my most disarming smile, and I did my best to butter her up. “You have been very kind. I hope that one day I will be in a position to return the favour.”

Her smile became even brighter and I felt sure she was starting to blush. At this rate she’ll be joining me on one of the mattresses if I play my cards right, I thought. But then I remembered that Biggins was there to spoil things and, as if to emphasise the point, he broke the spell with one of his tactless questions.

“I say, miss, who is this confounded leader of yours, anyway?”

The smile was instantly wiped off Consuela’s face as she turned to face her interrogator.

“Why, I thought you would have worked that out for yourself. His name is Castro – Fidel Castro.”

Make England proud

Today everyone knows the name of the resilient leader of Cuba, of course, but back then he was just another in a long line of revolutionaries determined to force a regime change. He'd been imprisoned on the lonely Isle of Pines for a botched attack on a barracks and had fled to Mexico when it looked as if Batista might have the troublemaker polished off for good.

But he'd always promised his followers that one day he would return, and now it looked as though the time had come. Clearly his band of revolutionaries believed that the day of reckoning was close at hand for Batista and his repressive regime. I was sceptical, naturally, having only just come through the debacle in Hungary, but I wasn't about to say that to my pretty jailer.

Unfortunately I didn't get the chance even if I'd wanted to, because she left us just then and I didn't lay eyes on her curvaceous physique for another two frustrating days. We were treated well enough, but the lack of daylight and the fact that I only had Biggins' fat face to brighten my day rather took the shine off our enforced confinement.

We woke one morning to find the gigantic Juan with his ever-present coffin-nail in his mouth, standing in the doorway looking down at us with undisguised hatred plastered across his ugly dial.

"Would either of you men know anything about explosives?" he asked by way of wishing us good morning.

"I do," said Biggins, opening his big mouth without thinking.

"We need your assistance. You will come with us."

"I'm not going to help you, you bugger," replied my half-witted companion.

If there's one thing I've learnt in all my years, it's to act with all the politeness you can muster and do as you're told when the chap doing the talking is holding a gun to your head. If he wasn't careful, I thought, Biggins could well end up with a bullet in what I imagined he called a brain. As it turned out, the truth was even worse.

"That is your prerogative. However, if you refuse to co-operate I will be forced to shoot ... your compatriot."

And with that, the vicious ogre pointed his gun straight at *me*.

As if to add insult to injury, Biggins actually had the gall to hesitate before finally deciding to go along with our captor. I reminded myself to return the favour if I ever got the chance.

"We will be leaving you here with Consuela," explained our bearded thug. "She may be a woman, but she is more than capable of handling a gringo like you."

I was about to agree with him wholeheartedly but before I could comment, he was sitting me in a chair and tying my hands behind my back with a stout rope.

"This is just to make sure you don't cause any trouble," he added, blowing copious amounts of cigar smoke in my face. "Pray that your friend is successful, gringo. Remember, if he fails ... shwit!"

He made a slicing motion across his throat, leaving me in no doubt what would befall your helpless hero if Biggins should bugger it up. Knowing my fellow operative as I did, I didn't hold out much hope for my survival.

Eventually the voices of my kidnappers receded into the distance, and Consuela and I were left alone.

"You want me, don't you, Captain?" said my pretty guard, clearly not willing to stand on ceremony.

"I'll say," I replied, entering into the spirit of things while the going was good.

"Would you like to rub your hands all over my body?"

Involuntarily I gave an audible gulp, unable to hide my shock at such forward behaviour. Naturally I was all for it, and you can rest assured that I'd already planned my escape once I was free – after I'd sampled the goods, of course. But my infuriating little temptress had other ideas.

"Do you think I am a fool? If I untied the rope you would flee."

"No, honestly, Consuela, I assure you ..."

"Save your breath, Captain," said the tease, and she placed her finger on my lips to silence me. "I will not untie you – but that does not mean we cannot ... enjoy each other's company."

Before I'd even decided what to make of this latest development, she shocked me yet again - but this time my face must have betrayed a healthy dose of fear too. You see, the wicked slut had produced a large knife, and not being a Scaevola, my future didn't look quite so rosy.

With increasing alarm I realised she was pointing it at my manhood and slowly getting closer with every second. At the last minute she cut through my belt and was tearing at my unmentionables for all she was worth.

"Really, Consuela, I honestly think we'd be more comfortable if you ... oh my God!"

As I said, the beautiful freedom-fighter was right up my alley, and even in my undignified position I couldn't help but show my admiration for her wondrous assets, no matter how unintentionally. Clearly the brazen hussy was well pleased with what she saw, because she lifted her skirt as if she was warming her husband's supper, and took advantage of my helplessness to satisfy her ... curiosity, shall we say.

Not that I'm complaining, and I did my utmost to make England proud – which ain't easy when you're waiting for a hairy revolutionary to burst through the door and catch you *in flagrante delicto* before he slits your throat.

I'm happy to report that Consuela appeared more than happy, once the proceedings were blissfully concluded, but she still refused to untie me, so I remained at the mercy of the rebels. At least she had the decency to restore my modesty and pulled my trousers up where they belonged. Mind you, I suspected it was a matter of self-preservation on her part. I'd seen my bearded throat-slitter giving her the eye, and he might not have taken too kindly to her sampling the charms of his prisoner while he was busy blowing up half of Cuba.

So there was nothing to do but wait for our revolutionaries to come home after a hard day's work, while I marvelled at the morality of the pretty female in their midst. Eventually

our heroes returned, and from the dizzy heights of ecstatic pleasure I was about to be plunged into the depths of despair.

“Gringo!” roared the bearded-one, anger etched on every line of his face. “Your useless compatriot has failed – so now you must die!”

You look awfully pale

I've had some shocks in my misspent life, but *that* particular moment, as I sat there totally at the mercy of my would-be executioner, takes some beating. I found myself threatened with a knife for a second time in so many hours, but this time I knew there wasn't going to be such a happy conclusion.

"We tried to destroy the telephone exchange by dropping one of your friend's home-made bombs under a manhole cover," explained my knife-wielding friend. "I yelled at the couples in the park, screaming for them to run away, but the blast never came. I felt like a fool!"

"Sir, I'm sure Mr. Biggins did not fail you deliberately," I cried, inwardly cursing the ham-fisted oaf.

"You lie! You and your friend are here to help the regime – you must die!"

And with that he lunged forward and lifted his arm, ready to plunge his blade into my chest."

"No!"

The scream came from the open door and my attacker turned to see Consuela, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Why? What is this man to you?" he yelled.

"Nothing. But Fidel has ordered us to keep these men alive."

"Madness!" cried my assassin. "They are fighting against our glorious revolution!"

"It is an order! Fidel does not want to give the American or British governments an excuse to send their armies. Use your head for once."

You could almost hear the cogs whirring in his pea-sized brain, as he digested what his pretty comrade had said. His face relaxed and he appeared to calm down before he gave her a knowing smile.

"As you wish, Consuela, but are you sure it is for the good of the revolution that you wish to spare this man?"

"What are you saying?" she asked, returning his gaze, but her confidence had left her.

"I have seen the way you look at this filthy imperialist. Are you sure you don't want to keep him alive ... for yourself?"

"You filthy pig!" she cried, before turning on her heels and leaving the room.

Juan turned to face me, and to my horror he threw his knife so that it stuck into the base of my chair, a few scant inches away from all I hold dear. My powers of speech had deserted me and I stared back in abject terror, as he leant forward to retrieve his blade.

"Do not think this is over, gringo. I have seen the way you look at my beautiful Consuela. You had better keep your filthy hands to yourself or next time ... I will not miss."

Seeing my look of blind terror, the evil brute stood back and began to roar with laughter, before leaving your sorry hero to finally take a breath and wonder if his heart was still beating.

It was then that Biggins was unceremoniously thrown into our makeshift jail and the door was locked behind him. As he began to untie me, a thoughtful look appeared across his fat face.

“I don’t understand why that damn bomb didn’t work. I say, Fletcher, do you suppose it might have had a faulty wick?”

He looked at me when I failed to answer. I was still unable to speak after the last few traumatic moments.

“I hope you don’t mind me saying, Fletcher, but you’re looking awfully pale. Try not to get too disheartened, there’s a good chap. Look on the bright side – I rather think that Consuela might be fond of you and it could work in our favour. I tell you what, the next time she brings in our food, why don’t you see if she’s interested?”

Long live the 26th July

The next day we were escorted under guard to the main part of the house, and our hosts were dressed in olive-green uniforms, together with black armbands covered in red lettering. Strewn about the place were submachine-guns, rifles, grenades, Molotov cocktails, and even a .30-calibre machine-gun. It was like the Corvin cinema back in Budapest all over again. Juan stood before his assembled partisans to deliver his rousing speech.

“We’re going to fight in Cuba *for* Cuba! Long live the Revolution! Long live the 26th July!”¹

The little band of hot-heads filed out of the room, leaving Biggins and I to wonder what fate was about to befall us. We didn’t have to wait long to find out.

“You will be coming with us,” announced Juan, as he shoved us towards the open door. “We cannot afford to leave any of our men behind and I want you where I can keep an eye on you.”

We had little choice but to do as we were told. Much as the prospect of joining our revolutionaries on one of their ridiculous escapades put the fear of God in me, it was good to get out of our stinking basement and into the fresh air. Besides, I suspected that they couldn’t watch us for every single second of the day and we might well get the chance to slip away.

My hopes were soon dashed when I noticed that our under-dubber was sticking to us like flies on a turd and pointing his machine-gun ominously in our direction every step of the way.

Our objective was the national police station and we eventually worked our way to an attractive building which I later learned was the School of Fine Arts. We crossed the courtyard and went up to the roof, overlooking the police headquarters.

One of the idiots in our group casually walked up to the edge to look down at our intended target, and somebody must have spotted him because a shot rang out, signifying the start of a right royal battle. We numbered less than thirty men and women, but there must have been nearly three times that number of policemen and soldiers returning fire.

I stood well back on our precarious rooftop perch and our guard appeared more than happy to join us. I would have been glad to sit out the gunfight right there until all of the crazy idiots had killed one another, but Juan ordered us to return to ground level.

I thought he’d sensibly realised that the situation was hopeless, but the reckless fool started to lead the group up the hill towards the station-house. He’d made a fatal mistake and now it was the police who controlled the higher ground. They opened fire with a machine-gun they had placed on top of the building.

In desperation Juan and a few of his deputies began to flag down what few car owners were foolish enough to be driving their vehicles past an ongoing gunfight.

“The Revolution is beginning in Cuba now!” he screamed. “Your country asks you to give up your car. In the name of the 26th July, we’re going to fight the dictatorship!”

Incredibly one or two of the unfortunate passers-by obliged. But whether it was down to patriotic fervour, or they were simply frightened out of their wits by the gun-toting maniacs screaming at them through their car windows, I was never quite sure.

The men leading the group crammed into the few vehicles on offer and proceeded to drive up the hill, but the merciless machine-gun fire continued to rain down on them and soon Juan's newly acquired transport spluttered to a halt. He had no choice but to get out and urge his men on, and they took up positions to return fire.

Several policemen were shot down, and as Molotov cocktails started to do their work, flames began to erupt from the station.

One of Juan's deputies fell when he was shot in the head, and that was when our leader stood up and ordered the charge. He led the column, firing his M-1, but when he turned the corner a spray of bullets hit him in the leg. The tough revolutionary continued his advance, leaning against the wall as he fired, only to be cut down by another salvo of bullets.

I'll not pretend I enjoyed the spectacle, but at least it meant that one revolutionary intending to do me harm was conveniently out of the way. My new-found optimism soon deserted me when I turned to see our guard, bristling with emotion and ready to take out his revenge on the first imperialists he could lay his eyes on – which unfortunately happened to be Henry Biggins and one quaking RAF captain.

Thankfully he must have thought better of slaughtering us on the spot without orders. Besides, he had rather more important things on his mind, as he watched yet another one of Juan's deputies struck by a policeman's bullet.

It was clear the rebels had lost the element of surprise. As far as I could see, our kidnappers were nothing but enthusiastic amateurs. Flames were beginning to gut the police station and I believe that if they'd waited, instead of trying to rush the building while the police could still conceal themselves, they might have won the fight.

As if to illustrate my point, a policeman ran away from the flames and headed for the prison door to save those inside. A lieutenant stood in his way and pushed the Samaritan back. In spite of the crackle emanating from the burning timber, we could hear the officer screaming his order.

"Stand back! Let them all burn – that'll stop them from starting any more revolutions!"

"That is one of Batista's latest recruits," said Consuela, who had wisely joined us at the rear of our party.

Fortunately for the prisoners they were rescued from their burning pit by the fire department, whose members clearly weren't put off from completing their duty by the sight of bullets flying back and forth across the street. In any event, the hapless rebels had buggered it up royally and it was decided to withdraw so that what was left of our group could live to fight another day.

When we returned to the house we had one more shock to complete our hectic day. As our guard prepared to throw us into our dungeon, the door to the house crashed open and the void was filled by a ghostly giant who had come back from the dead. Juan stood there, his huge body riddled with bullets, before collapsing on the floor. Consuela ran forward to tend to his wounds, giving out orders to her fellow rebels.

“Lie still, Juan. Why do you struggle so?” asked Consuela, as she cleaned his wounds.

He leant up on one arm and grinned in my direction before spitting out his next words through gritted teeth.

“I have unfinished business. Isn’t that right, gringo?”

We're all comrades here

If you'd told me back then that Fidel Castro and his band of followers would one day topple the Cuban government *and* end up running the country, I would never have believed you – especially after witnessing such an almighty cock-up as took place at the police station in Santiago. My suspicion that the revolutionaries were on a hiding to nothing was only confirmed by our next enforced participation in the whole messy affair – to wit, witnessing the long-awaited arrival of Castro and the rest of his desperados from Mexico.

Somehow the ex-lawyer had cobbled together enough funds to purchase a leaky sieve of a boat called the Granma. The entire revolution could quite easily have ended before it had even started, because the seasick bunch of heroes were crammed together on their pokey little craft for days and had to weather storms which threatened to send them to the bottom of the Gulf. As it was, they had to stop to retrieve a man who had been lost overboard. But against all the odds, they avoided the patrols sent out by Batista's navy and finally reached the shores of their beloved homeland.

That's not to say they actually knew where the hell they were going. When we finally gathered to meet the conquering heroes, we discovered that because they had no decent hobbler in their party, they'd landed in the wrong place.

The rendezvous had been planned to take place at Ojo del Toro, near Niquero, and we stood there waiting expectantly with a large group of rebels, all dressed in their olive-green uniforms and surrounded by trucks.

If the new arrivals had landed where they'd planned, they'd have had no problems from what I could see. There was a nice welcoming beach where they could have anchored, before slipping ashore to step casually into jeeps filled to the brim with petrol.

As it turned out they couldn't have landed in a worse place than the one where they eventually ended up. For their triumphant return to Cuba's shores they chose a swamp, and they were forced to wade through mud for several hours before they reached solid ground.

We learned later that after their nightmare of a journey, the exhausted and weary party had to survive for three days without food, marching through strange countryside without a guide. Not only that, they'd been surprised by the Cuban Army and they were forced to split up after a number of them were killed.

Being a Laodicean, I couldn't have given a clergyman's arse, and I would have been happy to leave the pathetic bunch of rebels to it. But aside from the fact that our guard apparently never slept or needed to conduct his ablutions, there was someone else who was paying your correspondent an inordinate amount of attention and tempting me to stay.

You see, the ravishing Consuela had become rather besotted with her latest conquest from across the Atlantic. And without access to a good dose of Vitex, who can blame the poor girl? Tanned as I was in the unrelenting Cuban sunshine and dressed in a well-tailored suit from Saville Row, I dare say my handsome English profile made a welcome change from the inexperienced Cuban scruff she usually had to make do with.

Anyway, the upshot was that Biggins and I weren't exactly in a position to thank everyone for a wonderful time and excuse ourselves before retiring to our lodgings back in Havana.

It was another month before our group finally caught up with Fidel's invasion party, such as it was. Mind you, as prisons go, I have to say that our accommodation wasn't half bad. While we waited for the landing party to join us, we were put up at a house belonging to a local supporter of the cause, and a pleasant set-up it was too.

Being on the coast and surrounded by swampland, Biggins and I were given a fair amount of freedom about the place, since there was really nowhere for us to run. And I have to say I was rather reluctant to even think about escaping our enforced confinement. No doubt the pretty Consuela's flattering attention was rather clouding my judgment.

For the Cuban rebels it was a waiting game back then, until Fidel and the other leaders decided to poke their noses out of their hiding place. Fortunately my beautiful overseer knew exactly how she was going to pass the time with her new admirer – and I was all for it, naturally.

I remember one day we decided to go skinny-dipping in the cool waters of the bay, while my guard looked on in disgust. Since he was out of range and Consuela was clearly 'unarmed', I dare say I could have slipped away and swum all the way to Haiti if I'd had a mind to. But why spoil things, I thought, when everything was going so well?

To add to the charm of the place, I got on rather well with its owner, Marcelo. Always dressed to the nines in his guayabera shirt, a lariat around his neck, and wearing a felt hat, he was fascinated by my stories of fighting in Korea and Vietnam. I'd been a reluctant participant, of course, but you can rest assured I didn't find it necessary to tell him about that.

We'd burn the midnight oil while I shared my exploits as a 20th Century Palmerin, and he would question me about my knowledge of guerrilla warfare. And then, just to top the evening off, I'd bid the guards at the door goodnight and quietly slip away to Consuela's bedroom to discuss manoeuvres of a rather different kind.

Naturally I'd have been more than happy to spend the rest of my days in Cuba ensconced in my fairy tale prison, and the odd thing was that Biggins seemed to be of the same mind. He might not have had a Cuban beauty with whom he could spend a pleasant evening improving international relations, but he seemed to relish talking with the other revolutionaries billeted in our quaint little home from home. If I hadn't known better, I could have sworn his usual fervour for spilling communist blood had deserted him and he'd decided to swap sides. As it turned out, I wasn't far wrong.

"I say, Fletcher," he began, when he managed to corner me the next morning before I'd had time to search out my pretty jailer and persuade her to go for another swim. "I can't help feeling we're in a strange version of Hungary all over again. These people are just trying to make a better life for themselves - like Eva."

I decided that the poor lovesick fool was pining for his little heart-throb who he'd had to abandon in Vienna. Of course I'd been rather missing the gorgeous Anna Novak's tender

ministrations for a while, but that was all behind me – especially now that I had the stunning Consuela to act as a more than satisfying substitute.

My idyllic introduction to a guerrilla's life in Cuba wasn't to last, of course, and a little over a week later we got word that Fidel and the others had emerged from their enforced hiding.

It must have been the middle of January when we headed for the banks of the Magdalena River, where we found the crew of the Granma conducting target practice and swimming in the cool waters. Biggins and I had been allowed to exchange our suits for the green uniforms of our escorts and, although we were unarmed, an unsuspecting observer might well have assumed we were just another couple of Fidel's idealists.

It wasn't until men began to embrace each other and welcome their long-lost compatriots that we began to feel like gatecrashers at a party where we didn't belong. Biggins suddenly grabbed my arm, pointing into the distance, and I squinted as I looked through the undergrowth to see what all the fuss was about.

There were three men standing together, talking with Marcelo, and that was when I realised why Biggins was getting himself in such a tizzy. Having seen photographs, I could tell that the tall charismatic figure in the centre of the foursome with his dark hair and beard was the man himself – Fidel Castro.

Apart from Marcelo, the others I didn't recognise. The man facing us was clean-shaven, save for a moustache, and he wore an olive-green kepi, while the other had developed a wispiest version of Castro's beard and sported a beret.

We couldn't help but stare and we were caught in the act when Marcelo became the one doing the pointing, this time in *our* direction. The little group headed towards us, and for some reason I began to feel nervous and wished I could hide.

"So these are the men from England you told me about, Marcelo," said Fidel without waiting for a formal introduction. "I understand you gentlemen have already experienced a revolutionary struggle in Hungary."

"Yes, sir," replied Biggins, butchering the Spanish lingo and looking like a star-struck teenager. "Although I expect you would have called it a counter-revolution."

"Nonsense – you must not believe everything your friends in the CIA tell you. I have a profound interest in Marxist philosophy, but that does not mean I cannot recognise a genuine struggle on behalf of the people. And please, Mr. Biggins, let us have none of this 'sir' and 'your lordship' of which you English are so fond. We are all comrades here. There is no need to stand on ceremony."

And with that Fidel held out his hand and smiled. Hesitantly, Biggins took it and blushed like a schoolgirl.

"Thank you ... comrade."

I stood there agog, totally perplexed by this new turn of events. It might not sound like much, and I'll grant you that 'comrade' is just a word like any other, but witnessing it coming from the lips of Biggins, who'd dedicated his life and soul to polishing off communism for good ... well, it was almost heresy.

“And you must be the legendary Captain Fletcher,” said Fidel, noticing my reaction. “Marcelo here has been regaling us with your exciting exploits around the world. No doubt our modest struggle to win back our island nation will appear a little tame after all of your death-defying exploits.”

I couldn’t for the life of me tell whether he was being sarcastic or not, since his face gave nothing away. I’d told Marcelo the truth, pretty much, save for the fact that I’d been quaking in my boots most of the time, but no doubt Castro didn’t believe a word of it. The confusion must have shown on my face because he tried to put my mind at rest.

“Do not look so perturbed, Captain – I am teasing you. I very much look forward to hearing your heroic tales for myself. I might even be able to learn a few lessons from an officer in Her Majesty’s Air Force.”

I still didn’t know what to make of him, and I couldn’t help feeling that he was one of those infuriatingly perceptive people who can see right through your facade and recognises you for what you are – a born yellow-belly in my case.

Before my paranoia could take hold, the chap in the beret began wheezing like a chap on sixty fags a day and he turned to the leader of the Revolution as he struggled for breath.

“Forgive me, Fidel, my asthma appears to have returned with a vengeance. I am afraid you will have to excuse me, gentlemen. I think I may need to go in search of my inhaler.”

“Raul, go and help him, would you? We do not want to lose our doctor so early in our struggle – we may well have need of his services very soon,” said Fidel cheerily.

“Gentlemen, you must excuse my Argentinian friend,” said Fidel, turning his attention back to his English guests.

“That man is Argentinian?” asked Biggins, as he watched the afflicted beret-wearer being assisted by the helpful Raul.

“Yes, but he is a loyal supporter of our cause and an inspiring leader of men. One day the whole world will have heard of Ernesto. We prefer to use his adopted nickname, of course – ‘Che’ Guevara.”

Every day they try new tortures

His name meant nothing to me back then and, as is usually the way when you're not expecting to suddenly be introduced to a legend, I have some trouble recalling our first meeting. No doubt I was probably still overawed by the presence of the enigmatic Fidel, and apart from Che's wheezing I can't remember a fat lot.

Of course it's easy to claim you recall things differently, once you've seen his image staring out at you from posters and coffee mugs, or heard his name fervently extolled in rock songs and operas - but I wouldn't be telling the truth. And I'd hate for you not to accept everything I've written down in these sacred memoirs as gospel.

I was to get to know the real Che well enough, I'm afraid to say. Not that he wasn't a nice chap - especially if Marxist physicians devoted to bettering the life of the poor is your thing. No, the reason I would have been happy to forgo his charming acquaintance was that he dragged me into the fray once too many times for my liking.

Mind you, he wasn't the only one to have the honour of nearly putting an end to the charmed life of yours truly. He of the wispy moustache who turned out to be Fidel's brother, Raul, was another case in point. He and Che were the die-hard communists amongst the bunch, I reckon, while Fidel was a pragmatist and he only took the hammer and sickle route when the Yanks started throwing their weight around and gave him no choice.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, so allow me to return to that fateful day, when the precious life of a captain in the RAF was to suddenly become entwined with the violent struggle for control of the island of Cuba.

"Come and eat - we must talk," said Fidel, leading us to a wooden hut with a thatched roof, and we sat down on some hastily laid logs that doubled up as dining chairs.

Fidel was carrying a sniper's rifle with a telescopic sight, and he carefully placed it against the trestle-table which was adorned with our sumptuous repast of exotic fruit and vegetables. I noticed that a guard wearing an American helmet stood to our rear with his shirt undone to the waist as a concession to the oppressive heat. He toted a machine-gun, ominously resting on his hip.

"When I was young I was politically illiterate," began Fidel, clearly intent on sharing his life story with us. "I did not have to choose this life because I was born into a family of landowners - we were rich and treated as such. Therefore, gentlemen, I would like to ask you a question. Why do you suppose I turned my back on all that to lead a band of armed men against the army's Moncada Barracks?"

Biggins and I looked at one another, somewhat at a loss for words, but we needn't have worried because Fidel didn't wait for an answer.

"Over twenty men died in the attack and my brother and I were imprisoned for two years because of it. I was even forced to leave my beloved country - but now I have returned. So I ask you again," he said, conveniently forgetting that he hadn't given us a chance to get a word in edgeways. "Why have I risked everything?"

Biggins appeared to have lost the power of speech so, deciding that one of us ought to have a stab at the question, I did my diplomatic best.

“Well, sir ... bugger it ... I mean, comrade. I imagine you are fighting for a cause dear to your heart.”

“You are only partially correct,” he said, thankfully realising I was struggling. “I can believe what I like, but I would not have the support of the people of Cuba if Batista and his underlings were not so unpopular. And why is that?”

For Pete’s sake, this was becoming like a game of twenty questions and, as I munched on a guava and tried to look thoughtful, I hoped that our host would presently come to the point. Thankfully my prayers were answered.

“The people support us because they are being starved, while Batista and his men line their pockets. And anyone who dares to question the regime is treated with the utmost brutality.”

Having only recently been at the mercy of Rakosi’s Hungarian version of viciousness and cruelty, I had no wish to have the Cuban variety spelled out to me in any great detail. But it was a forlorn hope and Fidel let us have the gory details with both barrels.

“When the paddy wagon arrives at the door of Batista’s Military Intelligence building, his thugs yell out: ‘Get ready, the fresh meat has arrived!’ When a mother goes to the police station to enquire about her son they say: ‘Look at him - this will be the last time you see him, because tonight we are going to kill him,’ and she is shown his broken and whipped body.”

“Frightful business,” said Biggins, shaking his head, but if he thought Fidel had finished sharing the gruesome details with us, he was very much mistaken.

“Every day they try out new tortures. The telephone bell that breaks the eardrum; the blow from a blackjack that smashes the skull; the instrument placed around one’s neck that cuts the throat if you dare to move; the Sicilian torture, whereby one is submerged in fresh cement which slowly hardens; the nails in the body; the electric blowtorches burning eyes; the tearing out of noses with pliers; the squeezing of testicles with pincers; the tearing out of women’s nipples. Should I go on?”

A resounding no would have been my answer, if I hadn’t been in danger of choking on a melon seed going down the wrong way. But before we had time to get over the shock of what he had just imparted to us, he was asking another one of his blasted rhetorical questions.

“And who is it that gives their financial and military support to the regime conducting such atrocities? Why, the United States government.”

“Bad show,” I said, but then his next revelation had me wanting to hide in the nearest hole in the ground.

“Before you become too smug, Captain, I am afraid to inform you that the British government has also authorised the shipment of aircraft to Batista.”

Biggins and I stared at the ground, feeling like a pair of guilty schoolboys, but Fidel chose that moment to provide my *fidus Achates* and I with a smattering of news to help relieve the tension.

“Even Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, believes that her government is wrong to do this and she has tried to persuade her ministers to change their minds.”

“God bless her!” I cried, just to show whose side I was on in case our dinner partner needed any convincing.

“I believe you are trying to pull the wool over my eyes, Captain. While it is true that I would prefer to convert my enemies rather than kill them, I cannot believe I have convinced a member of the British Secret Intelligence Service of the rightness of our cause so easily.”

“You must forgive my colleague’s light-heartedness. It is just his way of trying to hide his true feelings,” said Biggins, having the gall to try and defend me.

“Ah, yes - the famous British sense of humour.”

“From what you have told us we can sympathise with your plight, but do you think that violence is the answer?” asked Biggins.

“Unfortunately, yes. But that does not mean we have sunk to the same depths as our enemy. While they hunt our brave followers down like dogs and murder unarmed boys, we always provide *their* wounded with the best of medical attention.”

“What is it that you want from us?” I asked, and I immediately regretted my impatience.

Fortunately Castro was all smiles and he began to light one of his large cigars before he spoke.

“I need you to contact your government and explain that we are not the enemy. It is Batista’s regime which is doomed - and helping to defend it will only cause the deaths of innocent people unnecessarily. We do not mean to threaten the economic interests of our American and European investors, but we must put an end to the inequality that exists in our country.”

Suddenly the feelings of despair that had threatened to overwhelm me began to ease. I even dared to hope that we would be released so that we could explain to HMG what thoroughly good chaps Castro and his band of followers were. Unfortunately I soon realised that my optimism was misguided and Castro’s next words shattered all my hopes of returning to civilisation.

“However, I do not think you should return to Havana immediately. No matter how much I might value my own powers of persuasion, my vanity does not allow me to believe that I have convinced you of our sincerity. Therefore you will join us in our struggle and then you will see for yourselves with your own eyes.”

I could have cursed the bearded oaf and made him eat his cigar. He’d played havoc with my emotions – dangling the promise of releasing us, only to quash my new-found relief by insisting we become involved in his confounded revolution. It was almost too much to bear. I say ‘almost’ because there was one silver lining to decorate the looming cloud, and it came in the shapely form of one Consuela Cortez, who was more than happy to express her unbounded joy at having her English lover join the cause.

As I lay there exhausted after our latest bout, she chose that moment to share her delightful news. We would be joining Fidel’s group to help replenish the band’s supply of weapons and ammunition by attacking an army barracks.

“Isn’t it exciting, Thomas? Fidel will be striking the first blow against the regime since his return to Cuba – and *you* will be there to witness this great moment in history! Thomas,

are you all right? Oh dear, I must have been a little too energetic in our lovemaking, no?
You have broken out into a sweat.”

All that stands between you and eternity

Far from being one of the ‘great moments in history’, our little jaunt to the army camp at La Plata turned out to be a lacklustre affair, I’m pleased to say. We waited for a coastguard boat to leave and at nightfall we crossed a shallow river to set up positions beside the barracks.

There was a full moon and Fidel opened up with two bursts from his machine-gun. Incredibly the rebels were trusting enough to provide us with weapons and Biggins was eager to show off his sniper skills by carefully picking his targets. Why he’d suddenly decided to switch sides I didn’t know, but for the moment I had rather more important things to occupy my mind – such as how I was going to avoid getting shot to pieces.

I’m happy to report that not one of us received so much as a scratch, while two of Batista’s soldiers were killed and five were wounded. The rest were taken prisoner but they were simply released. As Castro put it to me later:

“We’re not in the business of killing young men who have been forced to fight for a corrupt regime. We merely need weapons so that we can continue the struggle until the people are able to rally round us and rise up.”

Well, he’d certainly convinced me that he meant what he said. Not that it made any difference as far as I was concerned – I just wanted to get off the blasted island. But what completely took me by surprise was the fact that the charismatic leader had clearly turned the usually stubborn Biggins too. When I cornered my gormless sidekick later, he was more than eager to explain his sudden transformation.

“Don’t you see, Fletcher, our intelligence was all wrong. These people aren’t communist puppets – they just want their freedom. As soon as we get the chance, we’ll have to explain what we’ve discovered to Whitehall and hopefully they can persuade our CIA chums.”

“This is a turn up for the books, Biggins. I never thought I’d see you batting for the other side.”

“That’s just it, Fletcher – I know that Raul and Che would like nothing more than for Cuba to become a communist state, but I don’t reckon Fidel’s thinking along the same lines. If the Americans and British don’t push him into the arms of the Soviet Union, I don’t see any reason why we can’t all just get along.”

“I think you’re forgetting one thing, Biggins. Fidel and his bunch of revolutionaries aren’t exactly running the country just yet. There’s the little matter of Batista and his armed forces who might have a thing or two to say about us hopping on to Fidel’s bandwagon.”

“It’s only a question of time before the people rise up,” said the little turncoat, “and once our two governments cut off the regime’s military supplies, Batista’s days will be numbered.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I’d always pegged Biggins as a true-blue patriotic little communist-basher and now here he was, not giving a second thought to disobeying orders and assisting the enemy. Not that I gave a monkey’s nut one way or the other, since it had no bearing on my immediate predicament – namely, how I was going to get out of the fanatical clutches of Fidel and his gang of guerrillas.

As if to confirm that my fears about hanging out with a bunch of revolutionaries were well founded, the next morning the drone of aeroplanes could be heard overhead. A fighter plane came out of nowhere and explosions erupted throughout the camp, as it dropped its deadly cargo of bombs. Our field kitchen was blown to the four winds, together with my breakfast, and we all darted around like a bunch of sailors when the tarts have come to town. Miraculously no one was hurt, but it only went to show how precarious our position truly was.

But Fidel appeared to be correct about one thing – the people had clearly had enough. All over the country the 26th July Movement was sabotaging utilities and setting fire to sugar-cane fields. Unable to control the situation, the regime was killing protestors out of hand, but to no avail.

Not that the Revolution in our neck of the woods fared as well. As far as I could tell we appeared to be traipsing through the undergrowth, only to camp on one blasted hill after another. To top it all we had to go without food, except for the few occasions when we happened to come across a sympathetic peasant who would share what little he had with us. The conditions were atrocious and I noticed that Che now had malaria to accompany his asthma.

But no matter where we went, Batista's air force seemed to find us. Naturally my suspicious mind heard the clamour of alarm bells ringing and I began to look for the traitor in our midst.

As far as I could tell there was only one chap who seemed able to come and go as he pleased and I asked Fidel about him.

"His name is Julio and his mother is sick – he has to take her whatever medicines Che can spare," explained our trusting leader. "Why do you ask?"

I told him I was just curious, not having any proof to back up my suspicions, and it wasn't until the following day that I felt I could venture forth with my doubts about the mummy's boy.

It was late morning when I was roped in to teach some of the less educated peasants amongst the group their ABCs. It was all part of Fidel's obsession with education as a means of bettering the lot of the hoi-polloi. But the point is that while I was playing the part of schoolmaster, I spotted the mater-loving Julio make his excuses and head out into the woods. He was looking mighty shifty and I raised my concerns to Fidel once school was over for the day.

"Why are you suspicious of him?" asked Fidel, reaching for yet another cigar.

"Don't you think it's strange how that plane found us through all this thick foliage after all the precautions we've been taking?"

"What are you saying?"

He was sounding a little testy and I decided it would be best to tread carefully.

"I know it's not really my place, Fidel, but all I'm suggesting is that we move camp – simply as a precaution."

The upshot was that Fidel took my advice and we'd barely settled down in our new home, when the air was filled with the sound of gunfire and explosions. The area where we

had been camped only moments before was attacked. A chap called Luis, who I'd only just taught to write the Spanish alphabet, happened to be in the line of fire. Consequently he never got a chance to use his newly acquired skill because he had his brains blown out by a .50-calibre bullet.

Naturally I was the hero of the hour and Fidel sang my praises to the rest of the group, deciding to make me an honorary rebel. It never seemed to enter anybody's head that I'd been looking out for my own skin as much as anyone else's, but I saw no reason to shatter the illusion. The more I was trusted, I reasoned, the easier it might be to slip away when the opportunity arose. In the meantime, Consuela was more than happy to show her appreciation for having saved her life.

It's funny, but whenever I think of Cuba and the crisis that caused the world to hold its breath, I like to imagine I played my humble part. Just think, if we hadn't moved our canvas shelters and our pots and pans on that fateful day, Fidel, Che and all the rest could well have been blown to smithereens - and Batista would have been able to hold on to the country while the Yanks continued to use it as their playground.

Anyway, it was decided we would leave the El Lomón region and move to a new sector, making contact with peasants along the way while we set up bases we could return to if things got tight. Fidel was also eager to leave the Sierra Maestra and reach the plains, where the group would be closer to his fellow rebels in the city.

There was a nasty moment when Biggins and I were led away from the rest of the group by one of our band, armed with a rifle, but we later found out that Fidel was expecting a visit from a reporter called Matthews. You see, Fidel was eager to grab all the good publicity he could get, and the last thing he wanted was two members of MI6 complicating matters.

When we returned we were greeted by the sight of our fellow rebels interrogating Julio, who'd foolishly returned to the camp. The guilt-ridden traitor knelt before Fidel.

"I am not worthy to kiss your boots. I am guilty of what I have been accused and I just want to be shot," he announced.

"Is there anything you want before we pass sentence?" asked one of his accusers.

"Please look after my children," he replied, which I couldn't help thinking was a tad optimistic, considering the circumstances.

To add to the horror of the impromptu trial, a terrible storm broke out and, as the sky turned black and the heavens opened, the lashing rain soaked us and mingled with our sweat. Lightning crossed the sky and thunderclaps threatened to deafen us.

But perhaps the most terrifying memory I have of that frightening scene was when the unfortunate Julio departed the world. As the storm raged I began to feel that I'd been transported into another nightmarish land.

One of Fidel's men took out his revolver and prepared to play the part of Jack Ketch. A burst of lightning illuminated Julio's terrified countenance, and a roar of thunder completely masked the gunshot. One minute the traitor had been amongst the land of the living, crying and looking at his accusers, and the next a wound 'silently' appeared across his temple and he was nothing but a lifeless piece of meat.

When I was a lad, our school chaplain used his weekly sermons to share heart-warming thoughts with his young charges.

“Each and every beat of your heart is all that stands between you and eternity,” he informed us, as he glared down from his pulpit.

I remembered those words on that damp, stormy night and, as I thought about my own treacherous role in the camp, life had never seemed so fragile.

It is simpler to cut off its head

It was soon decided that our little band of rebels was just too small and vulnerable, so we waited for more men and weapons to arrive from Santiago. The only piece of good news for the revolutionaries was that a Cuban radio station began to report on the interview between Fidel and the journalist, Matthews. This was a victory in itself, but it turned out to be more so because the regime had foolishly claimed that Fidel was dead. As the rank and file of Cuba gathered around their radios, they must have been rather impressed with how vocal Fidel's corpse turned out to be.

The next day we happened to spot a large column of soldiers and they started to fire mortars and machine-guns in our direction. Fortunately we'd noticed them in time and we managed to get to the next hilltop unharmed. But the one member of our group who struggled was Che.

Just one look at his face told you he was in agony, and his constant asthma meant that every single step was painful. While a heavy rain beat down from above, several of the rebels tried to encourage him, but he just couldn't carry on.

"Here, take this," said Fidel, passing him a rifle. "You will have to lie low in the woods for a few days."

It was at that point that the Argentinian chose to have a coughing fit and we nervously stared into the forest, waiting for the army to hear his spluttering and come through the trees to finish us off. Fidel turned to me and Biggins, causing my heart to thump in my chest when I convinced myself he would ask us to stay with the helpless Che. As it turned out his next words were totally unexpected, but no less shocking for that.

"We are making no progress here. It is time for you two gentlemen to return to the city."

Some of the rebels looked as if they were about to have a fit. Clearly they still didn't trust us, and they feared we would give away their position when they were at their most vulnerable. But Fidel had a trick up his sleeve.

"Two of my men will go with you and you will drive back to Havana."

Even Che looked up when he heard this unexpected piece of news and he couldn't hide his surprise.

"Why must they go to Havana, Fidel? We can get word to their government from Santiago."

"We are in a precarious position and the time has come for drastic action. When the enemy attacks, sometimes it is simpler to cut off its head," said Fidel cryptically.

"Whatever do you mean, comrade?" asked Biggins, who was never one for symbolic imagery.

"We must strike at the heart of the regime. Our people will march on the presidential palace and kill Batista – and you, my lucky English friends, will prove your loyalty by joining them!"

* * *

Once I'd got over the shock of Fidel's surprise announcement, I suddenly felt as though a great weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I soon decided that things couldn't have turned out better. Once I'd said a fond farewell to the beautiful Consuela, I would finally be able to escape the oppressive jungle-like forest with its incessant rainstorms and head back to civilisation - well, Havana, leastways.

I can't say I was looking forward to the interminable journey, especially when I heard we'd have to take the back-roads in order to avoid army patrols. But once I was safely in the capital, I'd be giving our escort the slip and heading to the embassy before you could say: "Long live the Revolution. Good luck, but I'm buggering off to Brighton."

I'm happy to report that my gorgeous and curvaceous Dowsabel was so upset at the news of my impending departure, that she was determined to make the most of our last night together. Naturally I was all for it. So, with the thought that I'd soon be escaping from the mad clutches of her fellow rebels, I entered into the spirit of things with my usual gusto – a tergo.

After the festivities I was tempted to lie back and fall asleep, blissfully sated. But instead I sought out Biggins to find out exactly how and when we would make our escape. So imagine my surprise when the gormless idiot explained that he had other plans.

"We're not heading for the embassy, Fletcher, we're going to do as Fidel has asked and help his men kill Batista."

"Are you stark raving mad, Biggins? They'll lock you up and throw away the key. You were sent here to *stop* the revolutionaries, remember? Just think of the stink it'll cause if a member of the British government is caught trying to assassinate a foreign leader. They'll hang you out to dry, or ... or more than likely they'll charge you with being a traitor."

Needless to say I didn't give a left bollock what the cabbage-head got up to, but I wouldn't have put it past the oaf to drag me into the shooting match right along with him. And I was proved right all too soon.

"No, you're wrong, Fletcher. Once Fidel takes over the country, our government will see what kind of man he is. Batista's regime is barbaric and corrupt. After we explain what we've seen here, the department will see why we *had* to change sides."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Clearly the persuasive Fidel had somehow managed to brainwash my idiot of a colleague. No doubt the revolutionary cause *was* justified, but if Biggins thought the Americans would stand by while the Castro brothers helped themselves to their business interests, he was barking up the wrong tree.

We went back and forth as I did my level best to convince him of the error of his ways, but he wouldn't have it. One or two of Castro's men began to look in our direction and, before they wandered over to see what all the fuss was about, I decided to call it a day.

It had become clear to me that I was on my own. I quickly decided that whatever Biggins had planned in his befuddled mind, I was going to have no part in it. As soon as we got back to Havana, I'd be gone.

Our journey was as long and as dangerous as I'd feared, but miraculously we made it back to the capital in one piece. I'd briefly toyed with jumping out of the car before we reached our destination, but the young idiot driving never slowed down long enough for me

to risk it. More than likely I would have ended up with a broken leg for my trouble. When we arrived at a house on the outskirts of the city, we were met by the group that would be leading the assault on the palace.

The two men who accompanied us were armed, so I resisted the temptation to run down the street crying for help. I reasoned that I'd be able to quietly slip out later on, but when we entered the crumbling edifice my confidence soon deserted me. The place was crammed with armed men and I began to feel an overwhelming sense of claustrophobia, as we wandered from room to room. There must have been more than fifty tough-looking customers in that modest little dwelling.

There were the young hot-heads, like the two with whom we'd been forced to share an unpleasant jaunt through the Cuban countryside. And then there were the older specimens, including some veterans of the Spanish civil war who, quite frankly, should have known better. One ancient-looking individual called Hernández suddenly said his piece.

"I am not optimistic of our chances at the palace. Nevertheless I am willing to meet my death if there is a chance that we might succeed," began the lunatic. "But why are we jeopardising what slim chance we have by allowing these gringos to join us? They will betray us and we will be slaughtered before our mission is complete."

"These men are here on instructions from Fidel himself," said Stirling Moss, our young driver who had delivered us to the city.

"If Fidel trusts these men then I suppose it must be all right," replied the old man reluctantly, "but I suggest, as a precaution, we do not let them out of our sight until our mission is complete."

Biggins clearly took offence at having his loyalty to the cause questioned, while I listened with increasing alarm as I watched my chance to escape fall by the wayside.

We were forced to spend an uncomfortable night on the hard floor amongst a gaggle of snoring peasants, and every time I tried to gingerly make my way to the door at the rear of the building, some annoying little bugger would stir and ask what I was doing. When I was caught out for the fourth time, making the usual excuse that I needed to use the facilities, I worried that they might become suspicious. In the end they put it down to nerves on my part – and they weren't far wrong.

The upshot was that I was still ensconced in the overcrowded hovel when some of the men returned from reconnoitring the neighbourhood around the palace. The youngsters were concerned that our plans had somehow leaked to the authorities, because the streets outside the palace had been closed to traffic.

One or two of the more nervous-looking boys were all for calling the whole thing off. Naturally I was right behind them. But before I even had a chance to get my hopes up, one of the older chaps explained that Batista insisted the traffic was kept at bay so he could get a good night's sleep. Well, at least one of us is well rested, I thought.

Before I knew what was happening, everyone was suddenly busy oiling and loading their weapons, which ranged from Thompson machine-guns to M-1 carbines. At three in the afternoon a veritable procession of vehicles drew up outside the house, made up of several cars and a truck.

Biggins and I were invited to ride in the back seat of a convertible which followed the lorry. The streets were relatively busy and it was frustrating to be so close to safety but unable to do anything about it. In fact how we weren't stopped by the military remains a mystery to me, since there were at least four men in each car and all of them were carrying their guns out in the open. One or two of the more reckless souls even had grenades hanging from their belts.

At least I was relieved not to be in the truck, where the men were pressed against one another in the stifling heat with the doors firmly closed. There was nothing to give away the fact that the lorry contained a small army, and a painted sign across the side proudly announced: 'Fast Delivery'.

I still clung on to the slim hope that the ridiculous enterprise would be called off at the last minute, but, in spite of the heavy traffic, our vehicles soon pulled up on Colón Street, right outside the entrance to the palace.

The four men in the lead vehicle were jumping out and shooting at the guards in the entrance before Batista's men had time to react. As I looked around, desperately searching for a means of escape, one of the men in our car thrust a pair of ancient-looking revolvers into our hands.

"You only have six bullets each – use them wisely," he instructed us, and while Biggins thanked our armourer enthusiastically, I stuffed my own gun into the belt of my trousers, trying to look as harmless as possible.

While Biggins and the other two men from our car charged forward, I hung back, ready to run off into one of the nearest side-streets. And that was what caused my undoing. As I stood there, waiting for the men from the truck to pass me by, a bullet struck me in the chest. I fell back as if I'd been pushed over by an unseen hand and everything started to go black.

Several seconds must have passed as I lay there dazed, and all the while I could hear bullets tearing into the pavement around me. I realised that if I didn't do something, I was a goner for sure. Through sheer willpower, which I believe only comes from being a coward who is terrified of ending up on the mortuary slab, I managed to stagger to my knees and work my way to the iron grille which swung open at the entrance to the palace.

I dragged myself into what I imagined was the hallway and mercifully no more bullets appeared to be heading in my direction. Shaking with fear, I looked down at my blood-soaked shirt and searched for the fatal gun-wound that I was sure would finish me off for good.

My hand touched the cigarette case I'd been carrying in my shirt pocket, and the feel of the dent at its heart triggered a flooding sense of relief through my whole body. *Albae gallinae filius*, no doubt.

By some miracle the bullet had hit the case, but the metal had split on the other side and it had cut into my chest, causing the bleeding. As far as I could tell, any injuries were superficial and the bullet hadn't penetrated my body. Absurdly, all I can remember thinking at the time was that my cigarettes were ruined.

In my dazed condition I looked around, and a fierce battle was raging. But from what I could see through my blurred vision, the defenders were beginning to give way and take refuge on the upper storeys of the palace.

I risked a look outside through one of the windows to see if there was any way I could make my escape. The close shave I'd experienced must have addled my brain, because when I saw bullets smashing into the road in front of the building, I convinced myself it was simply raining. But I soon learnt differently when those from our group who had chosen to shelter near the truck were cut down where they stood. Clearly retracing my steps wasn't an option and I began to look for a quiet corner where I could hide myself away.

I drew my revolver, but by then any soldiers on the ground floor had been completely wiped out. Blood started to pour into my left eye and I reached up to discover I must have cut my head when I was thrown to the ground. As I wiped the gore away with my handkerchief, a figure suddenly appeared at my side and I pointed my revolver to fire.

"What the devil are you doing, Fletcher? It's me – Biggins."

For a second I thought of pulling the trigger regardless, after all the trouble the blasted idiot had caused me, but for some reason I decided against it. Mind you, I soon wished I hadn't been so hesitant when he dragged me bodily up the stairs to join in with the fight.

Cursing, I stumbled with the rest of the group along the west wing until we came to a hallway full of mirrors. Standing there were three servants who looked so terrified I thought they'd collapse on the spot. When they raised their hands and were asked where we could find Batista, one of them tried to speak but nothing came out.

Suddenly bullets came crashing through the upper storey windows as policemen along the Avenida del Puerto opened fire on the building, and Biggins had to cover his face when a large chandelier shattered above his head.

Eventually we reached Batista's office, but our way was blocked by a stout door. One member of the group fired several clips of ammunition into the lock and eventually it gave way. You can rest assured that I hung well back as the bolder spirits charged in, but the room was empty.

Shots rang out near the stairway as the remaining guards fired at us from the third floor. The younger fools among our group began to shoot up through the gap in the stairs, and one or two of them even hurled grenades in the direction of the defenders.

As if that hadn't been terrifying enough in such a small space, one idiot actually took out some dynamite, lit the fuse, and tossed it up on to the next floor. When it blew, the entire palace shook and nearly deafened us, but the firing stopped. If I'd thought that the worst was over, I was mistaken, and if you ask me how I wasn't killed where I stood I haven't got an answer.

You see, in spite of our apparent victory over the guards, one of our zealous young idiots got carried away and thought he'd throw another grenade up the stairs for good measure. But he bungled it and it came rolling back down to land right at my feet. I was so stunned I didn't even have the wherewithal to make a grab for it and throw it in Biggins' direction. Instead, like any self-respecting coward, I closed my eyes tight shut and prayed that it wouldn't be too painful when I inevitably got blown into a hundred pieces

So imagine my surprise when I peered down at the offending projectile to find that it had failed to explode.

“God’s watching over you, Fletcher,” said Biggins.

Of course I simply put my good fortune down to the old and faulty equipment with which the rebels had been provided.

But when I witnessed one grenade after another explode with no problem at all, I couldn’t help thinking that I’d been damned lucky. Biggins had put it down to Divine intervention, but I ask you: why would God go to the bother of saving a selfish womaniser like me? Anyway, I’m still here to tell the tale while better men are pushing up the daisies, and I’ll simply say that I put it down to shoddy workmanship - the lazy buggers.

Eventually we met up with the rest of the group, who had made an equally fruitless search in another part of the building. Someone shouted the code words we’d agreed upon to stop any trigger-happy fools shooting at their own.

“Directory, Viva the Directory!”

From the roof we heard some of the defenders shout in reply.

“Viva Batista!”

“They must have taken him to the roof,” said one of the older members of the group.

I’ve experienced some surreal moments during the heat of battle, I can tell you, but I don’t think anything beats what happened next. As the blood-stained rebels gripped their weapons, ready to charge up on to the roof to slaughter the remaining guards, the telephone rang. This in itself might not be considered too strange, but when you look on as a gun-toting revolutionary calmly answers to enquire what the caller wants ... well, you might be forgiven for questioning your sanity.

“Is it true that the president has been killed?” asked the caller.

“Yes. You are talking to a member of the armed militia of the Directory. We’ve just taken the presidential palace and killed Batista,” replied our Pinocchio.

Mind you, I had to admire his style. We might not have been fortunate enough to send the tyrant six feet under, but if his people believed it was all over, it could have worked in the rebels’ favour.

A blistering fire started to come down on us through an opening in the roof, and it was decided that we would retreat down the stairs in search of reinforcements. But with the rest of the men pinned down and dying on the street, there was no help to be found. A second group which was supposed to have turned up to cover our escape never arrived.

“Since escape is impossible,” announced our leader heroically, “we might as well lock ourselves in and try to find Batista. We’re going to be killed in any case.”

Rousing words, I’m sure you’ll agree, and they only served to put the polished marble floor in danger of being decorated with the contents of my bowels. But before my last meal could even start its impromptu journey south, the landing was suddenly swept by a murderous barrage of machine-gun fire from above.

One idiot charged through it and spun round to return fire, only to have his body riddled with bullets for his valiant effort. Incredibly another young fool did exactly the same, with the inevitable result that he joined his friend in that great revolutionary land in the sky.

“Look, there he is,” cried Biggins, using his sniper’s eye to spot our attacker.

As one we fired heavenwards until the guard fell down dead at our feet.

“Go!” came the cry, and we made our way down the remaining stairs, which were littered with dead bodies and covered in blood.

Without halting we ran out of the palace through the iron grille and headed for the guard post in search of shelter. I looked at our surroundings and it was clear that our only chance of escape was to head across the street, which was easier said than done when bullets seemed to be flying from every direction.

I quickly decided that the longer we stayed where we were, the more chance we had of getting killed. I also reasoned that once one of us had made their escape, the soldiers on the other side of the street would be ready and waiting for anyone else thinking of trying to do the same. And that is why the rebels witnessed the incredible sight of one Captain Fletcher leading the charge, as he ran to the promising sanctuary of the tree-line as fast as his tired legs would carry him.

When I heard shots ring out, I could almost feel the ricochets following on behind me as I reached a fountain in the centre of a park. I dived for cover and chunks of cement landed on top of me, torn from the base of the structure by the barrage of bullets.

Eventually the onslaught stopped and all I could hear were faint cries coming from the direction of the palace, as the troops redirected their fire at the rest of the group. I crouched and sprinted towards an intersection, not really knowing which way to go. If I’d only known, police reserves were closing in from all directions and I was heading into a trap. It would have probably been all over for me if it hadn’t been for a tender angel of mercy who suddenly yelled from a doorway on the corner.

“Quick, come this way!” she cried, gesturing that I should follow her into the building.

It took me less than a second to make my decision, no doubt spurred on by the sound of gunfire all around me, and I followed my rescuer into the sanctuary she so kindly offered.

“Is it true what they say? Have we killed Batista?”

I was still gasping for breath after my recent exertions, so I was unable to satisfy my saviour’s curiosity as we stood in the sudden quiet of the dark hallway. I used the time to try and take stock of my situation and to get a good look at my questioner.

From her use of the word ‘we’, I quickly decided that any fears I’d had that it was a trap and she was a supporter of the regime were unfounded. She was a young, jolly looking thing, with one of those round jovial faces that seem to be always smiling, whatever the circumstances. From the looks of her, she wasn’t exactly on the starvation diet, but being only young I put her curvaceous frame down to what I generously like to call ‘puppy fat’. Deciding that I’d stalled as long as I could, I answered her question.

“No, I’m afraid we couldn’t find him.”

She’d been holding my arm and was about to lead me up the stairs, when she suddenly stopped and stared at me.

“You are not Cuban. What is a gringo doing fighting for the Revolution?” she asked, suddenly wary.

“I’m English but I came to help because I believe in the cause. I’d like to thank you for helping me – you are very kind,” I said, trying to give her my warmest of smiles.

Her look of concern gradually vanished and her cheery face beamed as I followed her wobbling jutlands into a quaintly furnished room on the first floor.

“This is my parents’ apartment,” she explained. “They are visiting my grandparents in Matanzas for a few days.”

Suddenly she had come over all bashful and she looked down at the floor for a few seconds before fluttering her eyelashes. Finally she looked up and stared at me intently with her large blue eyes. On closer inspection she was much prettier than I had realised and I thought a good dose of flattery wouldn’t go amiss.

“As I say, I can’t thank you enough. I’m very fortunate that you came along when you did. I thought I’d be killed and I never expected to be rescued – especially by someone as beautiful as you.”

It was all pretty tame stuff, I thought, but it had her giggling like a schoolgirl, and once I’d broken the ice I couldn’t shut the bloody blabber-mouth up. I do believe I’d learnt her whole life story before I’d been in the blasted apartment five minutes. She’d just turned eighteen and worked in one of the larger department stores in the city. Her name was Melba and she loved flowers, cats, boys and buying dresses.

“I have never met an Englishman before. Are they all as good-looking as you?” she asked out of the blue.

“One or two might come close,” I said, giving her a wink, and she burst out laughing so hard, I began to worry that she might bring Batista’s entire police force charging up the stairs.

The gunfire appeared to have stopped but I didn’t dare risk a look out of the window. I hoped that I would be able to lie low in the apartment until everything had calmed down, and I tried to think how I might best broach the subject. As it turned out I needn’t have worried.

“I hope you can stay and keep me company,” said my friendly hostess, pouring me a glass of rum from the bottle I’d been enviously eyeing during our conversation.

“It would be an absolute pleasure, Melba,” I said, laying on the smooth talk, thick and fast. “I’m really enjoying chatting to you.”

It was then that she got up and reached for the straps of her dress, which promptly fell to the ground to reveal her inviting milkshop.

“I was hoping you could thank me for saving your life without words,” she said, pouting.

I tried to hide my shock at such brazen behaviour and took a healthy swig of rum in preparation for the forthcoming activities.

“If you insist,” I replied.

Falling on hard times

If you happen to be a young man who is unfortunate enough to find himself on the run and in need of a place to hide, I can honestly say that you could do a lot worse than bounce around from one end of an apartment to the other with a pretty fat lass, as you cling on for dear life. Mind you, I might well have eluded the authorities, but I had to pay for my room and board, if you know what I mean. I was fagged out by the end of my stay. In fact I think it's fair to say that my young admirer had clearly shed a few pounds herself by the week's end.

A good thing never lasts, of course, and the day soon came when Melba's parents had the bad manners to inform their daughter they were returning the following morning to spoil our fun. My lover decided she would finally venture outdoors to see the light of day, and while she shopped for a few essentials, she tried to find out what had happened to my fellow revolutionaries. Unfortunately the news wasn't promising.

"Most of the men who invaded the palace have been killed, wounded or taken prisoner by the police," said Melba, as she drew me towards her and rubbed her chubby fingers across my left buttock.

"Did anyone manage to escape?" I asked, pretending to care.

"A few," she replied, "and I have heard rumours that some of them are hiding out in an apartment on Humboldt Street. If that is true, then they are in great danger. The police have been searching all of the buildings in that area."

"Oh dear," I exclaimed, not really bothered. But then my buxom guardian had another surprise to spring on me.

"Apparently there is a wounded Englishman among the group. Is he a friend of yours?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, deciding to stretch the truth, and I was soon wishing I hadn't been quite so careless.

"I can show you where he is, if you'd like," offered my helpful bundle of loveliness.

I was in two minds, as you can imagine. On the one hand I had no wish to go anywhere near Biggins' ill-chosen hideout if Batista's thugs were milling about the place. But on the other, I would have had the devil of a time trying to prove my innocence if word got out about my involvement in the assassination attempt. I clearly needed Biggins to back me up.

So later that evening your reluctant hero found himself on Havana's Humboldt Street, enjoying a farewell kiss from the adoring Melba, while he surreptitiously kept an eye on the building where my fellow member from the Service was supposedly convalescing. It all looked relatively quiet to me and I decided it wouldn't hurt to wander over and have a look. God help me, I must have helped myself to a few too many glasses of Melba's rum.

She held my face in both of her chubby hands and gave me such a passionate kiss, I'm surprised she didn't wander off with my lips still attached to her face. When I think back to the time I spent in the company of my pretty Melba and recall her round bottom making its wobbly way down Humboldt Street, I still have a yearning to hold her in my arms just one

more time. It's funny when you think about it, considering the abundance of top-notch totty it has been my good fortune to have loved over the years.

When I knocked on the door to the apartment I had the devil of a time persuading the oaf who answered that I was part of the group. But when he eventually recognised my English accent and I mentioned Biggins by name, he relented and let me in, before leading me up to the first floor apartment.

"Jumping Jehosaphat, Fletcher, you're alive!" exclaimed Biggins, observant as ever. "How on earth did you evade the police?"

"Well, it hasn't been easy," I said modestly. "I've just had to keep my head down and rough it for a while – you know how it is."

"You look done in."

"Yes, it's been exhausting. But how about you, old chap? I hear you've been wounded," I said, trying to keep in his good books.

"Oh, it was just a scratch, really. A bullet went right through my forearm, but the doctor cleaned the wound and patched it up."

I was just about to say what a jolly good show it was to see him in such high spirits, when a loud banging could be heard coming from the front door of the apartment building.

"Batista's assassins are trying to break down the door!" screamed the man who'd let me in, as he ran back into the hallway.

We were just about to follow him when a machine-gun fired, followed by a scream. We heard what sounded like a body falling down the stairs, so we slammed the door shut and darted back into the apartment, almost crashing into the semi-naked figures of our comrades running around in confusion.

"This way!" screamed Biggins, and he led me into the kitchen.

At first I thought the idiot had ballsed it up because there were no windows and the only door was the one through which we'd just entered. We could hear the gunmen charging up to the first floor and I was sure we were finished.

Biggins pointed to an air vent and proceeded to remove the cover before jumping into it. Without thinking I followed him, dropping my revolver in the process. Amazingly, we both slid all the way down to another apartment on the other side of the building, where a woman screamed in alarm at the sight of two burly men emerging from one of her kitchen appliances.

"We do beg your pardon," said Biggins in English, which only added to the woman's confusion - but at least it shut her up.

We raced for a door at the rear of the woman's dwelling and emerged into an alley behind a garage which sported a large sign. It said: 'Why Not Drive One of Our Cars Away Today?'

As tempting as the offer was, we had to find a more practical way out of our predicament. Just then, two men emerged from another rear door, nearly frightening the life out of us, but Biggins recognised them as fellow revolutionaries and they ignored us, before heading to an iron gate at the end of the narrow passage. It was padlocked and the hapless duo hammered against it in frustration.

A couple of mechanics arrived from the garage and told the two rebels to wait while they went off to fetch the key. I was just starting to believe we might have actually eluded our pursuers, when a pair of dogs suddenly crashed against the gate, snarling. At first I optimistically hoped they belonged to the owner of the garage, but then a policeman carrying a large hammer arrived and proceeded to smash away at the padlock.

We looked around, desperately searching for another way out of the alleyway, but we were surrounded on all sides by smooth concrete walls with no way of climbing out. The only shelter was a large metal tank full of putrid rubbish. The stench was overwhelming, but, with a sense of Phocensian Despair, we both dived in as if it was a welcoming king-size bed.

The metal of the tank was rusting away and we both managed to find peepholes through which we could observe what was happening outside. My biggest fear was that the police had spotted us and would decide to fire a salvo of bullets into our hiding place.

We looked out just in time to see the officers shoot our fellow escapees at point-blank range. Their victims must have been killed by the first few bullets, but the murderers continued to fire, laughing as they did so, like a couple of sadistic maniacs. The noise echoed off the walls and a couple of bullets struck our metal coffin.

To our horror, the assassins began to climb over the bodies of their prey to search the alleyway. We looked at one another in desperation, realising there was absolutely nothing we could do.

Windows and balcony doors began to open above our heads and the inhabitants of the building started to scream and curse.

“Murderers! Scum!”

The policemen scowled back and pointed their weapons at their accusers, but evidently decided against killing random members of the local populace. Instead they took their frustration out on the dead bodies of their latest victims and dragged the corpses away by the hair. There were more screams but this time one of the policemen had clearly had his fill because he fired his machine-gun into the air. That was enough to put a stop to any further protests, and suddenly doors and windows began to close as people returned to the safety of their homes.

Biggins and I sat there, unwilling to move, and we strained our ears in an effort to discover if the police had finished their search. In spite of the stink emerging from our hideout, we must have stayed in our sanctuary for nearly an hour before we dared to venture out on to the street.

Biggins was only dressed in his vest and trousers but he found a stained dickey and even a wide-awake amongst the refuse. Once he'd dressed himself and donned his new headgear at a jaunty angle, we made our way down the deserted street. After a few blocks Biggins said he had to rest, so we collapsed against a wall to catch our breath.

“God, this hat stinks,” he cried, throwing it on to the pavement in disgust.

We could hear hesitant footsteps approaching, and when we looked up we saw the bent figure of an old woman making her way to the corner of the street.

“You poor dears,” she said, as she passed us, “you *have* fallen on hard times, haven’t you? I do hope this helps.”

And with that, our generous benefactor threw a handful of coins into Biggins’ upturned hat.

A true gentleman

I still remember the look of utter disbelief on the faces of the embassy staff in Havana when we tried to persuade them who we were. But I have to say that they were more than accommodating once Biggins extricated his credentials and explained that he needed a call putting through to London, pronto.

While I left Biggins to explain himself to the head man, I showered and gratefully accepted the new suit of clothes offered to me by one of the secretaries. She explained that it had belonged to an officer in the Cuban army she had been dating. But, as she informed me with a wanton gleam in her eye, he was now out of the picture.

I began to almost feel human again, and it was only after I'd finished flirting with my new patron that I began to worry about my future. Knowing Biggins as I did, I suspected he wouldn't deny a thing and would be telling the Whitehall mob exactly what he'd been up to. Honestly, when I think about it, how he ever became a member of the Service in the first place is beyond me. I couldn't help thinking that when he was finally dragged off to the Tower of London for being a turncoat, I'd probably end up right along with him.

As it turned out I needn't have worried, and all of a sudden the Americans were singing a different tune. Naturally Biggins couldn't wait to share his good news and brag about how he'd been right all along.

"Ever since some journalist chap made a film about Castro's struggle in the Sierra Maestra, public opinion has swung in favour of the revolutionaries," he explained confidently.²

"But I thought the Yanks were quite happy having Batista as their lapdog in the Caribbean," I said, unable to believe what I was hearing.

"Quite frankly the U.S. government is finding it harder to defend his actions. And Fidel made such a good case that the Americans are beginning to see him as a fighter for freedom. I told you we were doing the right thing, didn't I?"

"Biggins, you might not have found Eisenhower and the PM standing up and singing your praises if you'd been caught red-handed, standing over Batista's body with a smoking gun in your hand," I said, determined to stop the smug buffoon in his tracks.

"Nonsense, this is like Hungary all over again. The rebels are fighting against a corrupt dictatorship and if the Western powers don't alienate Fidel, then Che and Raul won't be allowed to bring the Soviets into the picture."

"In that case we're buggered. The ditherers back in Whitehall and Washington are bound to cock it up. They won't openly support Castro in case he fails, and if he wins it'll be too late."

I should have seen it coming, of course, after all I'd been through with Biggins over the years. As usual our masters, tucked up safe and sound back home, decided to do what they always did – hedged their bets and avoided making any kind of decision. So I braced myself for what I knew was coming next.

"We've been ordered to work with the rebels - *unofficially*, of course, and our involvement in the fight against Batista is to remain very hush-hush."

“Oh God, Biggins, what difference do the idiots in London think we can make?” I asked, utterly exasperated.

“If Castro wins, which looks increasingly more likely, then the PM hopes that our support of the revolutionaries, no matter how clandestine, will work in the government’s favour when it comes to building a relationship with the new authorities in Cuba.”

We’d got a new prime minister in Number 10 by then, of course, but clearly Macmillan was singing from the same hymn sheet as his predecessor.

I shook my head but, being a realist, I knew there was nothing I could do. So I quickly decided to get to the heart of the matter and find out what the desk-bound oafs back in Whitehall expected of Captain Thomas Fletcher.

“What are we supposed to do?” I asked, fearing the worst.

“We’ve been ordered to rejoin Castro and the rest of the revolutionaries in the Sierra Maestra. The government believes that it is there, where Batista’s forces have very little support, that the battle will be won.”

It was the most miserable news I could have heard just then but, before I’d even had time to break into a sweat, Biggins was itching to get going. He’d got himself cleaned up and from somewhere he’d found a suit that managed to fit him. (Idly I wondered if the obliging secretary had a plethora of Cuban men paying her a visit.) And with the Service’s endorsement he’d even managed to commandeer a rather impressive convertible car.

Once we’d met our contact in Santiago, we were assigned a guide who said he knew where Castro and the gang were hiding out. We were issued with the usual olive-green fatigues, but since there was a shortage of weapons we were asked to make do with our revolvers. We drove as far as possible and made the rest of the way on foot, until we caught up with our old revolutionary friends near a place called El Uvero.

“This is excellent news,” said Fidel, hugging Biggins and kissing him on both cheeks - which had the gormless oaf blushing like someone caught with the Winchester goose. “I knew that the American and British governments would finally see sense – especially with the help of fair-minded reporters and good men like yourself.”

Having informed Fidel of our government’s change of heart, my fat compatriot was basking in the undeserved praise.

“I have also been informed of the brave part played by you and Captain Fletcher in the attempted assassination of Batista,” said the Cuban revolutionary. “Although the mission failed, my gratitude for your heroic participation is not diminished.”

“We have been sent here by the British government to help in any way we can,” said Biggins alarmingly.

“It just so happens that your arrival has come at a most propitious time. Tomorrow morning we intend to capture the garrison at El Uvero so that we can replenish our supply of weapons. You will be able to join us and share in the glory of the moment.”

A fine welcome back, I’m sure you’ll agree. I quickly decided that if he expected your hero to lead the charge against a heavily armed garrison, he was barking up the wrong tree.

There was *one* piece of good news that kept me from running into the nearest hole and crying my eyes out. It came in the shape of the fine-looking Consuela, who was on hand to welcome me back to Dunmow in one of the most delightful ways imaginable.

Once we'd tucked ourselves away in a quiet corner of the camp, we were getting reunited with our usual gusto and you can rest assured that I concentrated fully on the matter at hand, if only to keep my mind from dwelling on the forthcoming brawl.

As it turned out, Fidel and his men took the barracks without our help, I'm pleased to say. Afterwards we watched as Che and the rest of his medical corps tended to the wounded soldiers from the garrison - and this while Batista's men were murdering prisoners out of hand in the rest of the country.

In spite of the fact that I was able to observe events in relative safety, I've shared the details with you because it marked the point in time when Castro's little band suddenly became a force to be reckoned with. With the weapons and ammunition they captured that day, they were able to begin a whole new and more ambitious phase in the Sierra Maestra, and the leniency they'd shown to the enemy would serve them well when it came to recruiting the disillusioned soldiery.

That's not to say the rebels didn't have their own firing squads to deter traitors and the like. I remember one strange chap, who liked to be known as 'the teacher', being hauled in front of one of Castro's execution squads. Apparently he'd pretended to be Che, and as part of his role as the group's 'doctor', he'd used his self-appointed position to thoroughly 'examine' the women who came to him.

"Have you heard of anything so outrageous?" cried Fidel, when I asked what the man's crime had been.

I assured him I hadn't, if only to confirm that I too was a man of extremely high morals when it came to the treatment of the fairer sex. I had the chance to prove my point back at camp when Consuela chose to paw me in front of the other men, and I was forced to berate her severely.

"Goodness, my dear, I do believe you've been drinking to excess," I said loudly enough for Fidel to hear. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to desist. A true gentleman would never dream of taking advantage of a lady."

Psychological torture

More barracks fell to the rebels and over the next few months the Movement gradually grew in strength. Eventually the guerrillas split into different groups led by Fidel, Che and Raul. Everyone's spirits were raised even further when a large proportion of the Cuban Navy agreed to join the revolutionaries, in spite of the threat of torture for those caught consorting with Castro's followers.

Not that the Movement didn't have its problems. I happened to be on hand when a particularly vicious chap called Chang was caught leading a band of ruffians who were murdering, raping and torturing peasants, all in the name of the Revolution. Naturally Fidel dealt out swift justice to the more serious offenders, but he decided that some of the younger members of the group, who had tagged along for an easy life, should be given a second chance.

It was decided that a bit of psychological torture was called for and I was kindly allowed to join in the fun. Three of the young lads were blindfolded and told that they were going to be shot. Unknown to them, we'd been ordered to fire into the air and when they realised they'd been spared, they were crying with relief. Fidel's particular brand of mental anguish must have worked because they became loyal members of the group from then on. I must say I rather enjoyed the work, and it certainly beat staring into the gloom of the forest as a way of passing the time.

One of the things which I found most incredible was the fact that Fidel was still eager to be out there with his men, risking life and limb. Naturally, for a true-blue coward like me this sort of behaviour was absurd at the best of times, but when you thought how the whole success of the Revolution rested on his shoulders, it was just pure recklessness. Clearly I wasn't the only one who thought so and I was on hand when Raul and Che did their best to persuade him not to risk his life unnecessarily. Unfortunately there was nobody eager to offer similar advice to your gallant hero – quite the opposite in fact.

"I understand you fought in the Korean War, Captain," said Raul one cold night, as I huddled round the camp fire.

"Among others," I said warily, wondering what was coming next.

"I take it you are used to piloting an aircraft in enemy-held territory without being detected."

"Well, it's not as easy as it sounds ..." I began to say before he got any ideas, but he interrupted me.

"We may need someone to deliver a consignment of weapons awaiting shipment from Miami."

"I thought you'd be all sorted on that score after your recent hauls. Besides, the Americans have agreed not to supply Batista with any more weapons." I said, doing my best to hit his alarming proposition for six.

"That is just a cynical ploy on behalf of the imperialists," insisted Raul. "The United States government is simply selling its weapons to the Nicaraguan and Dominican dictators, Somoza and Trujillo, and they in turn pass the weapons on to Batista."

“Yes, the Yanks can be damned sneaky buggers when they want to be,” I said, not really knowing what to say.

He just looked me up and down with a confused look on his face, as if he didn’t know what to make of me. Eventually he tried to pin me down for an answer.

“So, would you be willing to help us bring the weapons into Cuba?”

“I dare say we could arrange something,” I said tentatively, inwardly wondering if Raul’s little errand might present me with an opportunity to escape the damn country for good.

“In the meantime we need some technical help, testing our latest batch of home-made explosives,” he said alarmingly, and I nearly swallowed my cigar.

“Ah, now there I *can* help you,” I replied quickly, standing up and patting him on the shoulder. “I know just the man.”

I looked out across the camp until I spotted who I was looking for.

“Biggins! This chap needs your help!” I yelled, quickly walking off into the night. “Now, where did I put that bottle of Tom Thumb?”

The need to fight injustice

For the next few days I was walking around on tenterhooks, waiting for the fanatical Raul to dream up a suicidal mission for yours truly. In the end I just couldn't stand it anymore and I managed to persuade Biggins to ask if we could join Che's group. Incredibly he agreed and, what's more, Raul gave his permission. I was feeling pretty pleased with myself, but if I'd known what I was letting myself in for I would have snapped up Raul's kind offer to employ me as a gun-runner.

We had a few days respite before the excrement decided to hit the fan, and I was more than happy to join the other group, helping myself to any liquid fortification that was on offer.

It was during those quiet few days that I got to know the legendary Ernesto 'Che' Guevara a little better. He was an odd fish in many ways, and I can honestly say that I never really figured him out.

"I was not always a political animal, Thomas," he said one night, as we shared a glass of rum by the fire. "I never took part in any protests as a student in Argentina, but I have always felt the need to fight injustice."

He began to laugh, and when I asked him what was so funny, he wheezed all the more until he ended up having to reach for his inhaler before he could continue.

"I am sorry, Thomas, I was just remembering the first time I made a stand for justice. When I was a young man I came across a crippled beggar, cowering as the local children threw stones at him. So I tried to rescue him, but the old man cursed me for poking my nose in where it didn't belong."

Che still seemed to find the whole thing amusing and continued to chuckle to himself. I laughed politely, while I secretly thought I would have kicked the ungrateful old bastard up the arse.

"Have you always had asthma?" I asked, as he reached over to his inhaler for a second time.

"Yes. In fact it was so severe that I was excused military service, so I became a doctor. I also fell in love with a pretty girl, but like you nothing could stop me from seeking adventure."

Like so many others he'd fallen for my false bravado and, knowing I'd played a part in various conflicts around the world, he assumed that we had something in common and that I was cut from the same cloth. The drink was starting to go to my head, and I intended to regale him with stories of my numerous conquests. But then I remembered how Fidel had dealt with the pervert who'd pretended to be a doctor and I thought better of it.

"Unlike you, Thomas, I was not fortunate enough to have access to the skies and I had to make do with my humble motorcycle, which I built myself. Nevertheless I was able to explore South America for the first time – and that is when my education really began."

"How did you meet Fidel?" I asked, suddenly feeling groggy from the drink and trying to hurry things along before I dozed off.

“I met the Castro brothers in Mexico and I thought Fidel was extraordinary. He had an absolute faith that he would continue the fight in Cuba and that he’d win. I shared his optimism, Thomas, and sometimes you have to act. You have to stop weeping and fight!”³

While he made his political speech I took another healthy sip of rum to oil the tonsils and, as the comforting warmth trickled down my throat, the smell of cigar smoke and the soporific sound of Che’s voice threatened to put me into a coma. My eyelids were just about to close one more time when his next words brought me up with a start and nearly frightened the life out of me.

“And tomorrow, Thomas, you will be able to join me and experience the struggle for yourself.”

Che looked around the camp, suddenly realising that he was talking to himself. Away from the glow of the fire it took him several moments before he figured out that I was laid out on the ground, having fallen off my log.

Saving a legend

My head hurt damnably and the next day I had a case of barrel-fever. Not that anybody cared, and I was forced to join the group as it made its way to a village called Mina de Bueycito, where Che had been told some of Batista's soldiers were quartered. They were well dug in, but instead of mines they'd simply rigged a line of wire netting.

"I'll soon get rid of that," said Biggins, eager to show off his bomb-making skills.

He placed charges of TNT which he'd put into some empty cans of condensed milk, and my head felt as though it would fall off when an almighty explosion erupted in front of the wire. But when we looked across to view the damage, Biggins' hopeless offering hadn't done a thing. Firing filled the air, but I'm happy to report that I hadn't been the only one sampling the local rum because neither side managed to hit a blessed thing.

We moved on to what I thought would be another camp, this time about a mile from Las Minas. At first I was pleasantly surprised because instead of having to sleep out in the open, the group had managed to find an empty house. I don't think I could have faced another night being bitten to death by the swarms of insects that infested the damn forest. In the end I found a convenient spot by the door, and I kept my ears cocked, ready to dash out of the house if I heard anything that sounded remotely like an approaching aircraft.

In the meantime Batista's army did its best to win over the peasants by burning their huts to the ground and looting anything they could lay their grubby little hands on. Why any of the locals had anything to do with the rebels I'll never know, because if the army got so much as a whiff that they'd been helping us, they were killed on the spot.

We had a taste of the army's justice the next day when we entered an area recently vacated by a platoon of soldiers. They'd left behind the corpse of a peasant with a bullet through his mouth. I remember there was a journalist with us, although I can't recollect his name, and he took a photograph of the body, which no doubt did wonders for Batista's international standing when it reached the outside world.

Everything was fine until Che's asthma began to play him up again and he decided to head back to the house. He asked me to go with him, and since we were apparently heading *away* from danger, I thought nothing of it and agreed to tag along.

We were crossing an open meadow and heading towards a coffee plantation when a soldier suddenly came running down the hill in our direction. Che was carrying a Beretta and he fired at our new visitor but missed, with the result that rifle shots suddenly rained down on us, seemingly out of nowhere. We both ran, zigzagging in an effort to avoid being hit, but Che was carrying enough ammunition on his back to start a war and by the time he reached the trees he was puffing and panting like an old man.

When we finally decided we'd lost our assailants, we stopped to rest behind a large rock halfway up a steep hill. Che looked as if he was about to faint and I'll confess I was ready to join him. Suddenly I heard someone step on a fallen branch, causing it to snap. I drew my revolver and spun round to be greeted by a soldier preparing to finish Che off for good. Fortunately he hadn't seen me and I aimed my revolver at his head.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, old chap," I said, presuming he'd drop his weapon.

But the idiot had the gall to turn and was about to point his rifle at *me*, so I obligingly shot him between the eyes.

“Thank you, Captain,” said Che, gasping. “You saved my life.”

“Don’t mention it,” I replied magnanimously.

As I helped Che to his feet, I quickly tried to put the frightening episode behind me. It was only years later, when Che’s reputation grew, that I actually began to think about the part I’d played saving the legend from an early grave. And now I’ve shared the episode with you, for what it’s worth.

We finally managed to get back to camp safe and sound and just in time to observe Biggins doing his best to redeem himself after the embarrassing incident with the TNT. His latest creation was a tin grenade which sent lethal fragments of metal in all directions. When he explained that he would be able to use some cable and a television antenna to set it off from a distance, he was suddenly the most popular boy in the playground.⁴

I’d learnt long ago that when Biggins ever took it upon himself to play with explosives, it was time to give him a wide berth, and I was about to excuse myself when the confounded clot gave me his ‘wonderful’ news.

“Raul paid the camp a visit while you and Che were off gallivanting in the woods,” he said cheerily.

“Bully for him,” I replied, not really caring. “What did he want?”

“Oh, he told me you knew all about it.”

“Knew all about what?” I cried, desperate for the blithering idiot to get to the point.

“He came to talk to you about bringing in weapons from Miami,” he announced alarmingly, while he continued to tinker away with his blasted tin bombs.

“I hope you told him it was a ridiculous idea,” I said, not holding out much hope – and I was right.

“Don’t be such a pessimist, Fletcher. I told him you would be happy to do it.”

My face dropped and I idly wondered if anybody would notice me taking a quick shot at the tin can full of explosives, hanging next to Biggins’ fat head.

But gradually it dawned on me that Raul’s proposition might be the answer to my prayers. You see, once I was on my own in the United States, I’d be able to melt into the background where no one could find me. That was when Biggins intruded on my thoughts.

“Don’t look so glum, Fletcher. There’s nothing to worry about – I’ll be with you all the way.”

Mr. Grouchy

I was reminded of my time in Korea, when I'd been whisked off to the hallowed safety of Washington. One minute we were tangling with the Cuban Army in the Sierra Maestra, and the next we were driving back to Havana in our convertible for a scheduled flight to Miami.

Once we'd settled into our Floridian lodgings, the temptation to give Biggins the slip and find some way back to my wonderful sanctuary in Antigua was almost overwhelming, but I decided I would have been wasting my time. More than likely he would have turned up again like a bad penny and had me up on charges.

Evidently he was thinking along the same lines because when I said I was off to the nearest bar, he insisted on coming along. As was so often the case when I found myself at a loose end before an impending spot of danger, I was chasing after the first bit of skirt on offer in the forlorn hope of taking my mind off what was to come.

"Don't you think you've had enough to drink, Fletcher?" asked Biggins, fussing in his usual style as I knocked back a huckle my buff. "Remember, Raul has arranged for us to pick up a Cessna tomorrow and you'll hardly be able to walk at this rate, let alone fly a plane."

"Brrrrr!"

"What the devil are you saying? Oh, for goodness sake, Fletcher, take your face out of the young lady's breasts so I can hear you, damn it."

The prudish Biggins had to spoil my fun, of course, and before I knew it he was dragging me back to the hotel to sober up. I was dead to the world as soon as my head hit the bed and I awoke eight hours later to find myself sucking on the pillow, no doubt dreaming I was still in the bar getting to know my female companion a little better before Biggins had put an end to the proceedings.

"Rise and shine, Fletcher," he cried cheerily, as he handed me a glass of the local orange juice.

"Go away, Biggins, or I'll punch you in the face."

"Tut, tut, Fletcher, come on now – we're not at home to Mr. Grouchy."

I tried opening my eyes and squinted, just to make sure it actually *was* Biggins' voice I could hear. What on earth had got into him I couldn't imagine. I decided to ask him straight out.

"Why are you so damned cheerful?"

"Why shouldn't I be? For once we're going to make a difference. We might have had to give in to the communists in Vietnam and Hungary, but this time we're going to succeed – I can feel it."

He was acting as if he was in line for an *accessit*, while I'd been ready to put his good mood down to the fact that he'd found his own female companionship. I might have guessed he was more concerned about his pathetic mission, such as it was. Whenever he got that zealous look in his eyes I knew it was time to watch out.

When we'd picked up the Cessna, Biggins had me performing practice manoeuvres near an abandoned airfield outside the city, and I soon found myself in danger of spewing my

fruity breakfast all over the cockpit. My passenger didn't help matters when he explained why he had me conducting aerial acrobatics.

"I wanted you to be completely familiar with the aircraft before we pick up the weapons," explained Biggins. "The FBI could be watching us and you'll have to avoid the American radar on our trip."

"Good God, Biggins, couldn't you have cleared everything with the Yanks? We're supposed to be on the same side, remember."

"It's not that simple, I'm afraid," he said pathetically. "The Americans might no longer be willing to supply arms to Batista directly, but that doesn't mean they'd look kindly on us helping the rebels."

I sometimes look back on my time with the Service and wonder if my fellow operative was right in the head. He'd already risked life and appendages fighting the communists in various parts of the world, and now here he was, eager to have a swipe at Batista's bunch of thugs. It didn't seem to matter to him that Raul and Che were dyed-in-the-wool Marxists.

Over the years I'd gradually formed the suspicion that he just liked fighting for the underdog and he hadn't thought his politics through at all. Being a simple soul, I was damn confused. Well, you know the philosophy I live by - and if a sultry woman and hard liquor aren't on the cards, I ain't interested.

When the promised weapons arrived, I had no choice but to get the Cessna aloft and fly low to avoid the radar, as per Biggins' instructions.

We'd barely spent half an hour flying over the Gulf of Mexico, when we ran into a tropical storm - and it was a beauty. Aside from the fact that Biggins looked as if he was about to throw up in his lap, I was mighty worried that the creaky old plane would break up and plunge into the sea.

Fortunately the storm only lasted an hour and we were soon approaching the Cuban coast at Nuevitas. The problem was that just when we could have done with a few clouds dotted around to mask our approach, the gods *now* decided to present us with a clear blue sky.

Judging from the smoke billowing from the burning peasant huts, courtesy of Batista's army, we had a hell of a headwind and the old engine was struggling so hard, I began to wonder if it would have been quicker to get out and walk.

As we searched for the tiny airstrip which we had been told was sandwiched between two ravines, I couldn't help but admire the beautiful Cuban landscape unfolding before us. When you saw the pretty mountain peaks, beaches and canyons, it was hard to believe that below us people were fighting and dying all over the island.

When we finally landed, the runway turned out to be a ploughed field and if we hadn't been strapped in, I dare say we'd have been thrown out of our seats. I'd experienced more than my fair share of rough landings before, of course, but when you're carrying enough explosives to blow the top off a mountain, it rather focuses the mind.

The rebels had scattered, initially thinking we might be one of Batista's planes making a bombing run, but they eventually emerged, sporting their beards and red-and-black armbands.

After a long walk through the mountains to Fidel's camp at La Plata, he welcomed us back like long-lost friends and couldn't thank us enough for bringing in his latest shipment of weapons.

"You have arrived just in time," he cried, hugging both of us in turn. "You are truly friends of the Revolution. God bless Her Majesty the Queen!"

I was quite overwhelmed by all the attention, and idly began to wonder if the beautiful Consuela was also on hand to express her gratitude to a weary RAF captain. The jovial mood in the camp was infectious and, as I helped myself to one of the oversized cigars on offer, I even started to look forward to my nightly glass or two of rum round the camp fire. I should have known better, of course, and my bubble of joy was well and truly burst when Fidel made his unexpected announcement.

"The weapons you have delivered to us will be invaluable when we conduct our last great offensive and repulse Batista's army for good."

"Good show!" I cried, warming my backside against the fire.

"And you two brave Englishmen will be at our side to share in the glory!"

My arse decided to offer its own response to this shocking piece of news - nearly putting the fire out in the process.

* * *

The good news was that Consuela had joined the camp to welcome home her English hero, and she could hardly wait to drag me off to an empty peasant's hut so that we could get reunited properly. She'd fitted it out in fine style with a roaring fire, cigars, and even bottles of Cuban beer - which were surprisingly good. She was wearing an extremely fetching off-the-shoulder number and I wasted no time pulling it down the rest of the way to reveal her wonderful assets.

"I knew you would return to join us in our struggle," she sighed, once we'd got reacquainted.

"Try keeping me away," I said, determined to stay in her good books.

"Weren't there any pretty girls in Miami?" she asked, fluttering her eyelashes at me in such a becoming way, I almost felt glad to be back in Cuba.

"Not that I remember," I said, which was true, considering the state I'd been in.

"Do you think a member of the British Secret Intelligence Service would be allowed to marry a Cuban revolutionary?" she asked, causing me to drop hot cigar ash on my naked torso at the thought of Captain Fletcher *et ux*.

"Bugger!" I cried, wiping the hot embers away before my chest hair set alight.

"Oh, Thomas, don't you love me?"

"Of course I do, my cherub. Yes, I'm sure it could be arranged - naturally I'd have to glance at the regulations," I explained, trying to placate her, but she was already reaching down between the bed sheets.

"You *must* marry me, Thomas. Can a silly English girl do this?" she asked.

And with that she showed me a trick that even my Japanese professionals had failed to teach me.

“My goodness ...” I said between gasps

Naturally marriage was the last thing on my lecherous mind, especially in my younger days, but I have to say she was damned persuasive.

Where there's life, there's hope

Fidel may well have been happily talking about a proposed offensive, but Batista's air force still ruled the skies and I happened to be too close for comfort when some airborne shrapnel tore the leg off one of Raul's band of guerrillas. He clearly didn't live by the adage, '*where there's life, there's hope*', because once the doctor had repaired the damage, he promptly unholstered his revolver and shot himself.

I happened to witness suicide of a rather different kind a few days later when several hundred soldiers from Sagua de Tánamo decided to pay us a visit. Naturally when Raul's volunteers did their best to hold the invaders at bay, I made damned sure I was watching the proceedings from a safe distance. Nevertheless I was close enough to hear one of the regime's officers berating his men, and I couldn't believe what I heard.

"Advance, you cowards. It doesn't matter if a hundred of you die – we survivors will have more girls to rape!" cried the motivational speaker.

More than once Fidel confided in me that he was thoroughly sick of seeing Batista's men, drunk to the eyeballs or high on marijuana.

"All they do is loot and murder, supported by planes dropping bombs supplied by the Yankees. The Americans are going to pay dearly for what they are doing," he growled. "When this war is over, I'll start a much bigger war of my own – against them! That is my true destiny!"

When you think of how he played his part bringing us to the brink of World War Three a couple of years later, perhaps I should have paid more attention.

Unfortunately I had a rather more pressing problem to contend with - and it was heralded by the sound of Consuela's inconsolable sobs, as she rested her head on my manly chest and cried her eyes out.

"They have killed my sisters."

She'd finally managed to get the words out between gasps and, as I held her to me, I was rather at a loss for words. For one thing it was the first *I'd* heard that she had any siblings, and for another, I'd never known anyone turn to the heartless Fletcher for sympathy. Without realising why, I found myself with a confounded lump in my throat.

As she let it all out and her tears soaked through my shirt, I tried to figure out what on earth was going on. Consuela Cortez was the prettiest thing that ever came out of the Caribbean as far as I was concerned, but surely I couldn't have been developing feelings for the silly chit, could I? I had to admit that we'd had more than our fair share of tender moments and the daft bat appeared to worship the ground I walked on, but that was hardly a reason to go soft on the dippy girl.

"What happened?" I asked before I embarrassed myself.

"They were killed by Batista's men. But I swear to you, Thomas, they were innocent – they had *nothing* to do with the Revolution."

She was bawling her eyes out again and I couldn't get anything else out of her. So once my distraught rebel had left to compose herself, I sought out Raul to find out what had happened.

“An attempt was made on the life of a Senator in Havana,” he explained. “The police searched the apartment building where Consuela’s sisters live and when their brother returned, they were gone. Their half-naked bodies were discovered at the morgue the next day.”

“My God, do you mean Batista’s men murdered them?”

“It would appear so, yes. My sources also tell me there was evidence of sexual assault and they were beaten.”

“Were they rebels too?” I asked.

“Absolutely not. Consuela has never involved her family in the activities of the Revolution, but she still blames herself.”

“But that’s ridiculous. It’s not her fault Batista’s men went on a killing spree.”

“I agree, but she will not be persuaded otherwise. Naturally I have told her that she can return to Havana. She is eager to see her brother and to make all the necessary arrangements. The family are devout Catholics.”

Being a communist, he’d said the words as if he disapproved, but it was hard to tell. Clearly he felt for Consuela and was worried about the danger she would face by returning to the capital - as his next words proved.

“I cannot spare any of my men and I would consider it a personal favour if you and Mr. Biggins would accompany Consuela to Havana.”

“You trust us?” I asked without thinking.

“I will admit that at first I thought Fidel was foolish to bring you into the fold, but you have proved your worth and I believe you genuinely oppose Batista’s regime. I am also aware that you and Consuela have become ... very close, and I presume you will do your utmost to keep her safe. Now, if you will excuse me, I have important matters to attend to.”

Well, he was presuming a damn lot if you ask me. Yes, I’d been helping the cause when I had to, but only because Biggins had given me no choice. And as for me taking a bullet for the delectable Consuela – all I can say is he didn’t know Captain Fletcher very well, did he? Once we were back in Havana, if I got the chance I’d be seeking out the blessed sanctuary of our embassy quicker than you could say: “Viva la Revolution!”

Of course with Biggins in tow it wouldn’t be quite that simple. But I consoled myself with the thought that once Consuela had gotten over her grief and I’d cheered her up by attending to her needs, I could somehow contrive to slip away and hide until all the shooting was over.

This might surprise you, but I wasn’t all that eager to be leaving the Sierra just then - and for one very good reason. You see, I’d seen enough war to know that the rebels were finally starting to get the upper hand.

Fidel had made sure that all the approaches to our various camps were well protected by powerful mines which decimated entire companies of the army before they reached us. Any survivors were subjected to a barrage of machine-gun fire and it was like shooting fish in a barrel – exactly the sort of fighting a timid soul like me could get behind. Any resistance to our attacks tended to be half-hearted and when the soldiers tried to escape, another column of rebels would cut them off.

Being a wily devil, Fidel even sent a letter to Batista's officers, explaining that the rebels weren't at war with the army but with the 'tyranny'. He went on to say that if the men decided to join the rebels it wouldn't *really* be surrender at all, but a decision to fight with those struggling for the good of *all* Cubans. Accompanying the letter was a pile of mail from the soldiers' wives and sweethearts, telling them how much they missed them.

You see, Fidel and his band didn't succeed because they kept fighting – no, they won because they did their best to win the hearts and minds of their enemy. Prisoners were fed and even received a free cigar before they were released - and the wounded were handed over to the Red Cross. I couldn't help thinking that if *I'd* been one of Batista's finest and had the choice between being massacred or seeing out my days chomping on a Havana, I'd have been running up the hill to shake Fidel's hand, *toute suite*.

When Fidel managed to get hold of one of their radios, he had his men sending messages to confuse what was left of Batista's rabble. The fight to control the cities was played out in a similar fashion, as Fidel was happy to share with me when I met him to say goodbye before we headed off to the capital.

"We are not terrorists, Thomas," he explained enthusiastically. "And we are not interested in inflicting harm on the people. Indeed, whenever our men plan to destroy a utility building in the city, we always warn the populace beforehand, even when this invariably puts our own troops at risk."

"Highly commendable," I replied, deciding it sounded like the right thing to say.

"Thomas, when you speak to your government you must tell them these things. To give you another example, Raul ordered the detention of a number of North Americans from Guantánamo, but they were well treated and I ordered their immediate release. We do not want a war with the Yankees. Even though we would fight to the last man, we know it is a war we could never win."

I did my best to look interested as I puffed on my cigar and stared into the flames of the camp fire - and it was then that the Cuban leader managed to gain my full attention.

"I have arranged a plane for you at La Plata, from where you, Consuela and Mr. Biggins will fly to a small landing strip just outside Havana."

"Much obliged, comrade," I replied, relieved that we wouldn't have to face the dangerous journey by road.

"You are very fortunate. You will travel to La Plata with our troops. They are crossing the plains and you will have the opportunity to strike a blow against the regime along the way."

Fidel looked across to see how I took this latest piece of news and he suddenly lost his temper.

"God damn it, Captain, that is no way to treat a good Cuban cigar. Why the devil did you spit it into the fire?"

Gentleman be damned!

When we joined the rebels in the Cauto region, I was soon cursing the bad luck that had brought me on the long march about to unfold. Our band of thirty rebels travelled without a guide and the whole trip was a disaster from beginning to end.

At night we barely had time to rest and, as we spent the next two weeks working our way along the coast, we marched in water and mud up to our knees, dodging ambushes whenever we were forced to cross a ford. We didn't even have enough food, and after four days without a proper meal we had to kill one of the scraggy horses that carried our equipment.

We were supposed to meet up with Che and his men, but apparently they were in such a sorry state that they failed to make it to our rendezvous point in time.

To give you an idea of how accommodating our rebel band had become, we were joined by over a dozen soldiers who had decided they wanted to switch sides. I was a little wary of them, to say the least, but our commander, Cienfuegos, allowed them to keep their weapons. Not so for the moss-troopers, who'd tagged along and robbed people blind in the name of the Revolutionary Movement - they were found guilty and shot. Unfortunately such small diversions soon passed and we were forced to continue our interminable journey.

We crossed rivers using ropes and rafts and we trekked through dark forests full of branches that lacerated our skin. We crossed highways and railway lines where Batista's troops had prepared ambushes, and I had the shock of my life when, as we climbed across an old river bridge, I spotted a soldier staring right at me. But he must have been a kindred spirit because he didn't do a damn thing and failed to raise the alarm.

The only pleasant time I can recall throughout the whole blasted excursion was when we briefly rested up at an abandoned sugar mill. I'd found a quiet spot at the rear of the building and my beautiful Consuela sought me out. Clearly Cuban lovelies cope with their grief in a different way to our fair maidens back home, and she was tearing my clothes off before I'd had a chance to wish her a good afternoon.

But the sugar mill turned out to be not quite as abandoned as we had thought, and when things had reached their happy conclusion, a huge man suddenly emerged from the trees, causing Consuela to scream.

"Who the devil are you?" I cried with as much dignity as I could muster, while I tried to retrieve my trousers from my ankles.

"I work here," replied the grinning oaf, as he got an eyeful of Consuela's impressive top-furniture.

When we introduced our commander to the interloper, he took up the man's offer to find us a guide and let him go. But instead of returning with the promised escort, our voyeur brought half the army along with him and we barely had time to grab our weapons before we escaped into the surrounding woods.

Eventually the soldiers gave up chasing us and, as I led the withdrawal, I happened to be the first to come across a bunch of charcoal-makers sitting around a ramshackle house. They nearly frightened the life out of me, but for once in my life I'd encountered a bunch of

quaking souls who were more terrified than me. One poor chap even burst out crying when he saw the machine-gun I was carrying.

Naturally they couldn't do enough for us and the blubberer offered to act as a guide. Mind you, he was about as much use as a pair of long-johns on your wedding night. He'd never wandered more than a mile away from his home in his life and he just pointed us towards the coast.

So there was nothing for it but to continue our seaside walk and we soon ran into another inevitable swamp. There was a single bridge and Cienfuegos said it was odds on that an ambush was waiting for us on the other side. While we were deciding what to do, three strangers turned up out of the blue, claiming they were peasants.

"I think they're pulling your leg, sir," I said to our commander, as I pointed out the army boots adorning their feet.

"No, we are telling the truth, Senor," claimed one of the ugly trio who was missing the majority of his teeth. "You are perfectly safe crossing the bridge – no one is there."

While Cienfuegos rubbed his chin and deliberated about what he was going to do, I came up with my own suggestion.

"If what these helpful gentlemen say is true, then I'm sure they won't mind leading the way."

Just one look at their terrified faces told you they'd been caught in a lie, and they promptly told us exactly where the soldiers were lying in wait. To my utter relief it was decided there were too many to take on and we made our weary way to the highway, fifteen miles inland, where we rested until dark in a cane field.

We waited until midnight before it was safe to cross and by early morning we came to a village. Once they realised we weren't soldiers from Batista's army, we were welcomed with open arms. There was a heavy rain and because the road was impassable, the teacher of the school hadn't arrived. The children were all weeping and Consuela put herself in charge of giving classes. From somewhere she'd found sweets and even notebooks and pencils to give to the children.

We risked staying overnight and when we went to leave the next day, some of the children ran to Consuela and hugged her, crying and begging for her to take them with her. By the time we left she was in floods of tears, but the experience somehow seemed to have taken her mind off things and she eventually perked up.

As we walked beside the road, we saw two trucks full of Batista's soldiers. But this time luck seemed to be on our side, because they mistook one another for rebels and wiped themselves out – thereby saving us a job.

But our good fortune soon ran out and the next river was too deep for us to cross. To make things worse we soon became soaked, when torrential rain and gusts of wind came at us from all directions.

The noise of the rushing air was incredible and when I tried to look across to the other side of the river, I couldn't see a thing. All of a sudden I thought I could hear shots, and I turned to see our fellow rebels falling down all around us. I felt as if I was paralysed - just standing there waiting to be slaughtered. But time must have stood still because I managed

to dive for the ground and pull Consuela down with me. Biggins cried out and clutched his hand before falling on his face - and the three of us lay there, not daring to move.

Eventually the firing stopped and we heard footsteps approaching. Through the driving rain I could make out a foot swinging in my direction, preparing to kick me in the face. Without thinking I reached out and grabbed it, twisting for all I was worth. There was a loud crack and its owner fell beside me, screaming in agony. Incredibly the man's companion burst out laughing, chiding his friend as he cried for help.

"Why are you wasting your time on this gringo?" he cried. "Look at this lovely Cuban mama."

The new arrival made a grab for Consuela and for a second I thought about reaching for my machine-gun to teach the lecherous pervert a lesson. But I thought better of it when I saw the dozen or so men in his wake. Of course Biggins didn't know when to call it a day.

"Unhand her, you blackguard!" he cried, like some sort of character from a Victorian novel, as he lay there clutching his wounded pinkies.

I believe our captor would have polished off the idiot there and then, if an officer hadn't picked that moment to arrive on the scene.

"Seize their weapons and load the prisoners into the truck," ordered Biggins' saviour, before stepping on my friend's wounded hand, cackling with laughter.

Out of the thirty or so rebels in our group, only eight had survived the attack, and they were all wounded in one way or another. We were manhandled to our transport and, as we waited our turn to be loaded on board, I could see that mattresses and sheets had been laid out to cover the interior. Suddenly a terrible feeling of foreboding rose from the pit of my stomach and I shouted across to the officer.

"I'm not riding in the back with these pigs!" I screamed. "My friend and I are British officers. Batista will have something to say when he finds out how we've been treated."

I'll freely admit it was the act of a desperate man, and at first it looked as though I'd wasted my time. The officer simply smiled and began to walk towards his waiting jeep. But then he suddenly stopped and turned to face us.

"What are Englishmen doing with a bunch of rebels? Are you mercenaries?"

"Good lord, no," I said dismissively. "We work for MI6 and we were sent to help your government by infiltrating the Revolutionary Movement. We even know where Fidel Castro is hiding."

I must have sounded convincing because even one of the wounded rebels lunged at me, cursing, which was exactly what I'd hoped for. Whether or not the officer actually believed me I can't say, but clearly he wasn't sure and he told his men to bring Biggins and I to his jeep.

"The girl is an informer - I will need her help if we are to put an end to the Revolution."

Why I'd stuck my neck out for my pretty rebel I can't really say, and this time it was clear he knew I was lying. An evil smile appeared across his face, as he made his own assumptions as to why I needed Consuela for company. I reciprocated with my own lecherous grin.

"Bring her along too," he ordered, but Consuela nearly spoilt my plan.

“I cannot believe you, Thomas. I thought you loved me!” she screamed.

“Well, I can’t help that,” I replied.

“Let me go,” she squealed, trying to escape from her guard’s grasp. “I will tend to the wounded.”

She reached up and clawed at the soldier’s face, drawing blood, and the officer seemed to find it as amusing as everything else.

“What are you, a bunch of women? Can’t you even hold a girl?” he taunted.

Eventually two of his men forced Consuela to the rear of the jeep before the officer nodded to the men standing by the truck. It was the signal to start the very thing I’d been dreading.

The sound of the machine-guns rang out and, in spite of suspecting what was going to happen, my cries competed with those of my two companions as we heard the screams of the wounded men being murdered. We looked on in horror, as the bodies and stained mattresses were dragged out of the truck and left to rot at the roadside.

Biggins stared, wide-eyed, unable to believe what he’d witnessed, and Consuela was screaming hysterically. Once they’d finished murdering the wounded rebels, the soldiers were ordered to board the truck, no doubt untainted from any blood and gore because of the precautions they had taken. The officer signalled to the driver that he was to take the lead and the lorry began to rumble past us before parking in front of our jeep.

“You men have earned a reward,” shouted the officer, grinning, and he indicated to the two guards holding Consuela that they should take her to the truck. As they dragged her away he turned to face me.

“We will need to borrow your ‘informer’ for a short while. I’m sure you won’t mind.”

“Not at all, dear chap, I’ll just give her a farewell kiss,” I said, laughing.

I walked towards her, as the two men held her firmly by the arms. As I’d expected, she brought her leg up to kick me in the most delicate part of my anatomy, and I quickly side-stepped the movement, pretending to grab hold of the soldier to her right for support.

You see, I’d noticed that the man had a hand-grenade hanging loosely from the straps of his knapsack, and in one swift motion I grabbed it, pulled the pin, and threw it in the truck to join our happy band of murderers. Cries could be heard as the men scrambled to find the grenade before it exploded, but they were too late. The screams of the wounded, moments before, were now replaced by those of their killers, as their heads, arms and God knows what else were torn off by flying shrapnel.

When I think back to what I did, it was shameful behaviour for a committed coward like me, and I can’t honestly say what possessed me. When I’d suspected that the soldiers were preparing to massacre everyone, I’d only intended to get the three of us out of the firing line, but when the leering officer decided to offer up my delicious Consuela for all and sundry to have a piece – well, something snapped.

I was a bloody fool, not least because there were still four of Batista’s thugs to contend with. Fortunately my pretty rebel was biting and scratching for all she was worth and her two guards were having the devil of a time trying to stop her from running amok.

Biggins leapt forward and his large frame knocked his more diminutive adversary to the ground. He punched the man in the face, knocking him out cold, but my idiot of a colleague had used his wounded hand and he cried out in agony as a result of his efforts.

I was preparing to grapple with the officer, whose inane grin had finally been wiped off his ugly face, but he was obviously a man after my own heart because he ran off into the woods. Fortunately this left me free to turn my attention to Consuela's captors, which was just as well because Biggins was rolled up in a ball, crying in pain while he clutched his forks.

One of the men had managed to get his hands around Consuela's throat and he was squeezing until her face was blood-red. As luck would have it, this meant that I had free access to the pistol poking out from the holster on his belt. So I drew the weapon and shot his friend point-blank before he had time to react. I quickly turned and pointed the pistol at its owner.

"Let her go!"

He did as instructed and raised his hands before stepping away from his half-strangled prey.

"Thank you for not killing me," he cried. "You are truly an English gentleman!"

"Gentleman be damned! I was just worried about hitting Consuela."

And with that I shot the ugly brute in the head.

What is this peasant girl to you?

When I think back to our lucky escape from Batista's soldiers, I still believe I was a damn fool to have even tried. If our captors hadn't been young conscripts who didn't know their arses from their elbows, I dare say Biggins and I would have met our end on that muddy Cuban road, and Consuela would have had no choice but to entertain the troops.

Anyway, we were hardly out of the woods and we couldn't afford the luxury of patting each other on the back by way of congratulation. For one thing, Biggins was still crying out in pain, but Consuela was carrying her home-made nurse's kit and she managed to create a splint for his broken fingers and clean the wound before applying a bandage.

While my hapless colleague was getting all the attention, I was busy planning our way out of the whole mess. Fortunately the road was pretty quiet and nobody had turned up to wonder what the three of us were doing amongst a bunch of dead soldiers. I decided there was no way I could face continuing our gruelling journey across country and I turned to Biggins to let him know what I had in mind.

"Henry, it seems a shame to waste a perfectly serviceable jeep," I said.

"Are you mad? The roads to La Plata will be crawling with Batista's men – we'll be stopped as soon as we hit the main highway."

"Not if we're wearing those," I said, pointing to the uniforms adorning the corpses at our feet.

"By Jove, you're right – it sure beats tramping through the woods."

I insisted on driving and Biggins sat in the back, ostensibly guarding our captured female rebel. The jeep had plenty of fuel and I took the corners as fast as I dared. It was still early morning and the few soldiers we encountered at the side of the road gave us enquiring looks, but I was determined not to slow down for anything or anyone. When an officer shouted something to us as we passed, I kept the pedal to the floor.

No matter how sick with fear you might feel inside, in such circumstances I've always found that if you try and look relaxed and act as if everything's normal, nine times out of ten you can bluff your way out.

Incredibly we made it all the way to the rebel camp at La Plata without incident and the Cessna was waiting for us, just as Raul had promised. As well as taking Consuela to bury her sisters, we were to deliver weapons to the rebels in Havana, and it had been arranged for some of them to meet us at an airfield just north of Güira de Melena.

In spite of the plane's worn out engine, we made it to the airfield in a fraction of the time it had taken us by car weeks before. Once Consuela and our reception committee had finished their reunion and the weapons were unloaded, we were driven to her family's apartment in Havana, near the Plaza del Vapor.

It was an old, well-kept colonial building and the apartment was on the top floor. Consuela's brother, Pedrito, was there to greet us and Consuela ran into his arms as soon as we were through the door. They held each other tight, but then he looked up and spotted Biggins and I loitering in the background.

"What are these gringos doing here?" snapped the ungrateful bastard.

“Do not be so rude, Pedrito. These are my good friends who have fought for the Revolution and they saved my life,” said Consuela, coming to our defence.

“Forgive me,” he said, shaking his head, “with all that has happened it is difficult not to suspect everyone.”

“I want to see Celia and Sara,” said Consuela, taking a step back to face her brother.

“They are still at the morgue. But I must warn you, Consuela, it will not be a pleasant sight after the way the bastards beat them.”

“Why are they still at the morgue?”

“An officer from the United States embassy wanted to see their bodies for himself, but it was a waste of time. He told me to complain to the *police*. Can you believe the fool? Am I to go to the very men who murdered them?”

“You must not get mixed up in this. I will not lose a brother as well as...”

Consuela had spotted something leaning up against the corner of the room and we looked to see what had caught her attention. It was a rifle and there was a large box of ammunition sitting beside it.

“Where did you get that?” she cried in alarm.

“From the rebels. I am going to join the Revolution and avenge our sisters’ deaths.”

“No, Pedrito, you must not become involved. I could not bear to lose you too.”

“It is too late for that. We have already struck a blow against Batista’s thugs when we attacked the police station last night.”

“You fool! They will hunt you down and kill you too!”

“Do not worry, Consuela, they will have to find me first.”

Consuela wasn’t the only one distraught at this latest piece of news. If I was any judge, it wouldn’t take long for Batista’s Bobbies to realise that the attack on their station was in revenge for the sisters’ murders and their first port of call would be Pedrito’s home. I was about to suggest we continued the family reunion in somewhat safer surroundings, when we heard a burst of machine-gun fire coming from the street below and a voice yelled for us to surrender.

I couldn’t believe it. After all we’d gone through to get Consuela to her family’s blasted funeral, only to end up in a trap. I could have cried in frustration if it would have done any good, but instead I looked around, desperate to find a way out of the apartment before the police stormed in.

To our amazement we weren’t alone and a semi-naked couple emerged from the other room and pressed themselves up against the wall next to the window. The man peered out to see what was happening.

“There are dozens of patrol cars outside, Pedrito, and I can see heavy machine-guns set up on the roofs of the building opposite,” he said, quickly bringing his head back into the safety of the room.

He kissed his pretty lady-friend passionately on the lips and stroked her cheek as he spoke.

“Don’t worry, you will be all right. I am going to get my gun. Stay here and don’t move,” suggested our lover-boy, but as soon as he was out of the room she chose to ignore his advice.

Whether or not it was simply curiosity that drove her to look out of the window, I can’t say. But before any of us could tell her not to be such a bloody fool, she was sticking her pretty head into the open air for a better view of the proceedings, with the result that a bullet entered her brain and her body slumped back into the room like a rag doll.

Mind you, she wasn’t the only female on hand with a death wish, and I had to physically restrain Consuela from walking to the window to help her friend. I might have saved one revolutionary from certain death, but the impetuous young soul mate of the recently deceased wouldn’t be told when he returned to the room after hearing the shot.

He screamed the girl’s name, which for some reason I can’t remember. No doubt I decided committing it to memory was surplus to requirements as she was no longer with us. Brandishing his pistol, he recklessly stood in the opening, firing one shot after another into the street below.

He kept pulling the trigger even when his gun had no more ammunition and, after the second or third click on the empty chamber, one of the policemen in the street decided to serve him the same way as his dead lover, causing his head to explode before he promptly fell out of the window.

It was as if we were in some kind of trance, as we watched the murder of the two youngsters. And I think if it hadn’t been for my innate instinct for self-preservation, we would have still been there when the police began knocking down the door.

“Biggins, let’s go!” I screamed, letting him do the honours, and he opened the door to the corridor.

Mercifully it was empty, but we could hear the sound of heavy footsteps charging up the stairway.

“Through there!” I yelled, indicating a door to another apartment across the way.

Biggins used his bulky frame to crash through the flimsy wooden structure and a quick look at the window opposite confirmed what I had hoped - it faced the rear of the building, away from the street.

There was an explosion behind us and what I assumed was tear gas emerged from the apartment we had just hastily vacated. The flat roof of the next building was only a few feet away on the other side of an alley. I kindly opted to go first, and by bracing my legs against the sill of the window, I managed to spring across and land without hurting myself.

Consuela jumped next and I prepared to make a grab for her in case she didn’t make it, but she was as athletic as she looked and covered the distance with room to spare - which was more than could be said for the overweight spy with the broken fingers bringing up the rear. The fat oaf nearly landed on top of me and his legs dangled precariously over the edge before I managed to drag him up.

Pedrito was preparing to jump when the police caught up with him. Bullets ricocheted off the walls behind us until we managed to find a water tank which shielded us from the other building.

“They’ve jumped!” yelled one of our assailants, no doubt putting his perceptive detective skills to work. “Here, follow your friends.”

The brute grabbed hold of Pedrito by the ankles and threw him to the ground below. Consuela’s brother landed with a sickening thud and lay on the ground as a pool of blood formed around his inert body.

“No!” screamed Consuela, and I could feel her body physically slump in desperation.

Clearly none of the brave souls from the local constabulary appeared eager to risk jumping across the void, and they contented themselves with firing at the water tank and hoping for the best. Biggins and I drew our revolvers but we had no spare ammunition and we just looked at one another, wondering what to do next. It wouldn’t be long before our pursuers headed for the ground floor of our building and climbed up to finish us off.

I stayed well hidden with Consuela behind the tank, but Biggins was in his element and he kept peering round the corner to return fire. Even with his right hand out of commission, he still managed to kill two of the blighters - but there were just too many of them.

“There is a fire-escape at the rear of the building. You can reach it over there!” yelled Consuela, pointing to the far corner of the roof.

Biggins and I fired several shots at the open window, and when we were sure the police had retreated back into the room, we prepared to run to the metal stairway. The coast looked clear and Consuela took the lead while I pocketed my revolver and followed closely behind.

It was more of a makeshift ladder than anything else and you had to use both hands to climb down, with the result that Biggins lagged behind. I was just starting to believe we might actually make it, when three policemen appeared at the foot of the fire-escape and taunted us.

“Thank you for saving us the trouble of having to come up and get you,” said the officer, grinning.

The two men with him were armed with rifles pointed in our direction and there was nothing we could do but slowly continue our descent.

“You are taking too long, damn you,” cried the officer. “Rodriguez, help the lady down.”

For a moment I couldn’t fathom what the hell he was on about. We were still two storeys up and there was nowhere we could go – but then the horrible truth became all too clear.

Taking aim with his rifle, the man called Rodriguez fired, hitting Consuela in the hip and she screamed, before falling to the ground with a sickening thud.

I can’t remember sliding down the ladder but I must have, because seconds later I was on the ground, kneeling by her side. Blood was oozing down her beautiful face and her arm was twisted at a strange angle.

“Thomas, I can’t move,” she whispered, and her eyes looked into mine as if she was pleading with me to help her.

“Why did you have to shoot her, you stupid bastards - she wasn’t going anywhere!” I yelled in English, not really thinking straight.

“You are the Englishmen we have heard about,” said the officer, as Biggins finally joined us and foolishly reached for his gun.

The two men with the rifles stepped back and aimed their weapons straight at us, while the officer relieved us of our revolvers.

“Never mind who we are – get an ambulance!” I cried.

“I do not take orders from you, gringo. Besides, she is probably already dying. If she is not, Military Intelligence will finish the job.”

Consuela was still looking up at me, but now she was crying and I don’t think I’d ever felt more helpless in my life. Having saved her life twice, it was as if she was relying on me to do the same again, but this time the situation seemed hopeless. She was looking for a hero and as I stared at the rifle pointed at my chest, I wanted to make a grab for it but I just couldn’t. Not for the first time I was cursing my own cowardice. But even Biggins, who was usually too stupid to be frightened, didn’t risk making any sudden moves.

“We work for the British Government and if you harm one hair on her head you’ll have Batista himself to answer to,” I said, desperately trying to bluff our way out of the mess we were in.

“What is this nonsense?” asked the officer. “We have heard the rumours about the two English spies working for the Revolutionaries.”

“If you believe that, you are as stupid as you look,” I said, trying to exude a confidence I didn’t feel.

He grimaced when he finally recognised the insult, but you could see the doubt in his eyes, as he tried to make sense of this latest piece of information. I just stood there staring at him, trying to look as indignant as possible. Finally he spoke.

“What is Colonel Batista to you?” he asked uncertainly.

“As I am sure you are aware,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady, “my country has been selling arms to your regime. Our prime minister was concerned that these weapons might fall into the hands of the Revolutionaries. He therefore offered to send intelligence operatives to infiltrate the rebel movement. We are those operatives and this woman has been helping us. We have important information which we must deliver to Colonel Batista immediately.”

In spite of being a complete bunch of horse shit, I didn’t think it was half bad, especially considering it was off the cuff and I had a loaded rifle pointed at me at the time. But the confounded officer still insisted on picking holes in my story, and all the while Consuela’s condition seemed to be deteriorating.

“If you have the information, then this woman is no longer of any importance. Throw her into the wagon.”

The policeman called Rodriguez passed his rifle to the officer and bent down to pick Consuela up.

“If you so much as touch her, I will see to it that my good friend, Colonel Batista, has you executed.”

It was all I could think of to try and put the fear of God in him, and it must have worked because he took a step back.

“What is this peasant girl to you?” asked the officer accusingly.

My next words left my lips unbidden and I looked down to see Consuela smile.

“She is my wife!”

We don't know Batista from Adam

It was all nonsense, of course, but sometimes it takes some nifty footwork to get your audience's attention. Being a coward, I pride myself on being able to mark out what's likely to make the other chap quake at the knees and, knowing the reputation that Batista had, I was sure that our brainless trio wouldn't risk facing their leader's wrath, no matter how unlikely my story might have sounded.

Anyway it worked, and as more policemen came out of the woodwork, an ambulance was called for while Biggins and I were handcuffed. When the medicos arrived and Consuela was carefully laid on a stretcher she cried out in pain, but at least she was alive and, as I watched her being carried away, she gave me one last smile.

Needless to say it looked as though I'd only managed to postpone the inevitable and as soon as my story was checked out and proved to be false, the three of us would all be for the high jump. But in my experience I've always found that if you can buy yourself some time, you never know what's round the corner - and sometimes, if you're lucky, fresh opportunities can present themselves out of the blue.

Not that any happened to be in the offing just then, because Biggins and I were smartly whisked off some miles away to a police station in Santa Clara and locked in the cells, no doubt while my wild claims were investigated.

It had taken several hours to reach our new prison and my mind worked overtime. Had they got Biggins and I out of the capital because they planned to execute us? Perhaps they thought the British embassy in Havana might get wind of it and intervene? These thoughts and more threatened to throw me into a blind panic. Fortunately Biggins intruded on my imaginings before they got out of hand.

"If I didn't know you better, Fletcher, I could have sworn you were more concerned with Consuela's safety than your own."

For some reason his words struck a chord and I did my best to put him straight before he got any ideas.

"I'm sorry to knock your feeble attempt at amateur psychology for six, but you're dead wrong, Biggins. She'd already lost both of her sisters *and* her brother, so I didn't fancy seeing Batista's thugs polish off the whole family, that's all. Besides, there was no way for us to escape anyway."

"If you say so," he conceded. "The question is, what are we going to do when they find out we don't know Batista from Adam?"

"Jesus, Biggins, I don't know."

I stood up from my bunk and walked over to the barred window of our cell to take a look at the large courtyard adjoining the police station. It was closed off by a wire-mesh gate and there was an American Sherman tank guarding the entrance.

On the far side of the road I could make out a driveway to a cemetery. There were several men facing the gate and they were carrying what looked like a coffin. But when I squinted to get a better look, it soon became clear that I was mistaken and the wooden overcoat turned out to be a bazooka.

“My God, Biggins, what are they doing?” I cried, and he came to my side to see what I was looking at.

“Well, either they’re on their way to bury a perfectly serviceable tank-buster, or they’re after the Sherman tank parked outside.”

We looked at one another and when the truth finally dawned on us, we dived on to the floor of our cell to take refuge underneath our bunks. Seconds later an almighty explosion erupted outside and, as the dust settled, we peered through our window to see the Sherman tank out of commission.

The men who had seen off the tank made their way across the road, just as a police patrol approached from the other end of the street. I assumed that the rebels were done for, but I couldn’t have been more wrong, and snipers began killing every policeman foolish enough to be out in the open.

We could hear more gunfire and explosions coming from the front of the station, and we pressed ourselves against the wall of the cell behind the door, just in case one of Batista’s finest decided to cut his losses and opened our sumptuous lodgings to finish us off.

We stood there sweating for nearly an hour before we heard the keys turn and the door sprang open, nearly smashing Biggins in the face.

A bearded man in an olive-green uniform stood in the doorway with a triumphant smile plastered across his face.

“Long live free Cuba – the tyranny’s troops have surrendered!”

He’d disappeared before we had a chance to thank him for our timely rescue, and we tentatively made our way through all the chaos and out into the main square of the town. The church bells were ringing and what seemed like the whole town had swarmed out on to the streets to hug one another in celebration.

Eventually we discovered that the town had been captured by Che’s rebels, and when I recognised one of his men with whom I’d shared a camp fire weeks before, I collared him to find out what was going on.

“Is the Revolution over?” I asked.

“Almost. Havana and some of the other towns are still in the hands of the regime, but it is just a matter of time before the whole of Cuba is ours.”

I should have been elated at the news. Our ridiculous mission was almost over, and we’d just managed to escape from the grubby hands of Batista’s torturers. But for some reason I couldn’t get excited and that was when Biggins piped up, believing he was able to read my mind better than I could myself.

“Don’t worry, Fletcher, Consuela might be in hospital in Havana, but the police aren’t likely to harm her when it’s virtually all over.”

I pretended I hadn’t heard him as we continued to try and find Che. When we finally managed to seek him out, he had one more devastating piece of news to share with us.

“From what you have told me, things do not look good for Consuela. Batista has decreed the death penalty for any doctors who treat wounded rebels.”

Steady on, old girl

So as far as the Revolution was concerned, things were looking up. When it came to the love in my life, Che promised to speak to Fidel and see what could be done, but I think he had other things on his mind.

You see, the Revolution may well have been almost won - *cosummatum est* - but there were certain groups in the military in Havana who were more than willing to take advantage of the situation. The problem was that the dictatorship was so weak, some of the senior officers in the army were thinking about administering the final blow with a military coup. Fidel was beside himself, giving out orders to the rebels not to stop fighting until the Revolutionary Army itself was in power.

When he wasn't worrying about an unscheduled coup d'état, he was terrified that the United States might be dragged in to fight on the side of the regime. Apparently the rebels had clashed with the army at the Nicaro plant and American civilians had been detained – which obviously didn't go down too well with the Yanks.⁵

In a desperate attempt to hold on to power, Batista organised elections, but most of the people didn't bother to turn up. Some of the dictator's men were jumping ship and seeking asylum in foreign embassies, and American journalists were even clamouring to get an interview with Fidel, the prospective new leader of the country.

But it wasn't *all* plain sailing and the struggle was far from over. I even got roped into a nasty skirmish at a place called Maffo. Fortunately it was the sort of fighting I could actually enjoy. All it involved was flying over the enemy's positions in a Cessna, while Biggins stuck his fat paw out of the window to drop the occasional incendiary bomb.

Eventually the day came when we got the news we'd all been waiting for. I remember the date because it was the third blasted New Year I'd celebrated in the Godforsaken country. The joyful tidings were that Batista had decided to see the year in by smartly bugging off before everything went completely tits up for the regime.

At two o'clock in the morning he signed his resignation and made his way from his private quarters to the airfield outside the city. He gave his deputy some 'helpful' advice from the open door of his plane, and promptly flew off to take refuge in the Dominican Republic.

On hearing the news, the navy, army and national police wasted no time surrendering. All political prisoners were released and shipped in from the Isle of Pines, and Fidel arranged for his man, Judge Urrutia, to take up office as the new president of the republic.

I was in Camagüey at the time and witnessed the incredible sight of Fidel leading his column of a few hundred men past twenty *thousand* soldiers, every last one of them standing to attention while they saluted the new leader of the country. As someone once said: no army can stand up against an idea.

In the two short years since landing in the muddy swamp in southern Cuba, Fidel and a handful of men had brought down an entire government, even though it had been supported by the most powerful country in the world.

Not being a political animal, I didn't much care who was running the Caribbean island, so long as I was in one piece. Naturally my thoughts turned to my beautiful Consuela, and to add to my joy Raul shared yet more welcome news.

"My communist friends in Havana made sure that Consuela was not harmed. They let it be known to the security forces that anyone who endangered her life would pay for it personally when the regime finally collapsed."

"Thank you, Raul," I said graciously.

"We protect our own, Captain Fletcher. Nevertheless we are grateful for your contribution to our success. I hope this means that in future our two countries will be able to work together."

Good luck with that, I thought, but I kept my misgivings to myself. I made some diplomatic noises before asking if he might be able to arrange some transportation so that I could get to Havana. In spite of his communist credentials, Raul was clearly eager to start out on the right foot and gain as many friends as he could. The upshot was that Biggins and I were given use of a Cessna and before the day was out, I was looking in on my pretty revolutionary.

Her arm and leg on the left side were both wrapped in bandages, while tubes ran into her other arm. But the bruises on her face had practically healed up. Even lying prone on the hospital bed she was as beautiful as ever, and I was happy to just watch her sleeping.

"Thomas, is that you?"

I looked across as she struggled to open her stunning brown eyes.

"I just popped in to see how the patient is doing."

"You saved my life, Thomas - you told them I was your wife," she said, smiling, and it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life.

"It was all I could think of at the time. Isn't it silly the things you say when you're under pressure?"

She began to laugh but it turned into a cough.

"Steady on, old girl," I said, reaching for her hand to give it a squeeze.

Unfortunately it only made her laugh all the more, but she finally settled down and spoke again.

"I love your funny little English ways. I have been lying here for weeks, feeling sorry for myself, and after a few minutes with you I am laughing again. Will I always be your 'old girl'?"

"I should cocoa," I said, happy to keep lightening her mood.

"Stop it!" she cried, and she was giggling again.

I decided I'd better leave her in peace and I stood up to kiss her goodbye.

"Take care of yourself, Consuela," I said, getting ready to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to England, I expect."

"You mean ... you're leaving me?"

I'll freely admit that the sudden look of desperation on her face had caught me completely by surprise. When she tried to sit up she cried out in pain, and I had to lean over

the bed to restrain her. As I did so, she brought her arm around my neck and drew me towards her. I could feel her tears on my cheek.

“You can’t leave me, Thomas.”

For some reason I was feeling more terrified than when Biggins decided to surprise me with one of his ridiculous little schemes, and I tried to calm her down before the silly thing got carried away.

“But you and the other revolutionaries have won, Consuela. The country is yours now – you don’t need me anymore.”

She sat back and wiped her tears away. Suddenly her face hardened and she no longer looked in my direction but chose to stare up at the ceiling.

“No, I’m sure you’re right, Captain. Your job is done and there is nothing to keep you here a moment longer.”

I tried to reach for her hand but she pulled it away. So I walked over to the door and opened it, before turning to say my final farewell.

“Be good, ‘old girl’,” I said, smiling, but she refused to look me in the eye and I stepped out of the room and closed the door.

So that was it – mission accomplished. The Revolution was over and I’d come through another blasted civil war in one piece. I’d made the acquaintance of the most beautiful woman to come out of Cuba, and I could return to my little island hideaway.

The only trouble was, I couldn’t explain the sudden return of that damn lump in the back of my throat.

You might end up with decent human feelings

“You’re a bloody fool, Fletcher,” said Biggins when we met up at the airfield.

I’d made the mistake of telling my supportive colleague all about my conversation with Consuela, and instead of providing me with the words of encouragement I’d hoped for, he was all ready to get on his high horse.

“What the devil are you talking about, Biggins? Our work here is done.”

“I’m not talking about the blasted mission,” he said pompously, “I’m talking about you discarding that lovely young lady as if she was just another one of your pathetic conquests.”

“Well, what do you suggest?” I cried, starting to get angry with the bloody know-all. “Perhaps I should just marry the girl, settle down and raise our own little family of communists.”

“You’re being ridiculous, Fletcher. It’s nothing to do with politics and you know it.”

“You’ve got a nerve, Biggins!” I yelled, thoroughly sick of his moralising. “You drag me on another one of your pathetic escapades, just so you can score points with the top brass back home, and when you realise Fidel isn’t really a communist you just switch sides. And now that we’ve finished helping the rebels overthrow Batista’s grubby little regime, you expect me to stick around because of some lovesick peasant girl!”

He didn’t answer and shook his head before giving a huge sigh. He walked off towards the office in the corner of the hangar, but he stopped and fired a parting shot.

“Have it your way, Fletcher. But before you leave the island, remember I was there when you were practically begging for those bastards to spare Consuela’s life. That’s the first time I’ve seen you think of someone else instead of just looking out for number one. She treated you with nothing but kindness and I reckon some of it was starting to rub off on you.”

“Now who’s being ridiculous?” I said, somewhat taken aback.

“OK, Fletcher, it looks like I’m clearly wasting my breath. You’re probably right, anyway. It’s probably best just to dump the poor girl instead of inflicting yourself on her. Who knows what would happen if you spent the rest of your life with a kind, generous woman like that?”

I was about to tell him to shut the hell up, but for some reason the words stuck in my throat and he had his final say.

“God forbid, Fletcher, you might even end up with decent human feelings - and then what would you do?”

* * *

I’d had enough and I decided I couldn’t get off the damn island quickly enough. So I ‘borrowed’ the Cessna and, taking French leave, I was back in Antigua the following day.

Once I’d landed, I loaded my jeep with half the contents of the local bar, together with one of the resident tarts. I’d helped myself to half a dozen beers before I’d even reached my palatial home, but when the baggage in the passenger seat started pawing me, I pulled to the

side of the road and told her to bugger off. She slapped me across the face and walked off, calling me every name under the sun.

I don't think I roused myself for days, and when I finally dragged my carcase out of bed to take a look at myself in the mirror, I couldn't believe how much weight I'd lost. Still, that's what a diet of booze will do for you when you haven't got so much as a slice of bread in the house.

I think I could well have ended my days in a coma if the bane of my life, Mr. Biggins esquire, hadn't decided to pay another visit unannounced.

"Holy Mother of God, Fletcher, what the devil has happened to you?" he cried, peering round my bedroom door.

"Who the hell is that?" I cried, nearly frightened out of my wits. "Oh God, it's you, Biggins."

"Well, that's a warm welcome I must say," said the oaf.

"Jesus, Biggins, I'd hate for you to think you had to respect my privacy in any way. Just feel free to come waltzing in here anytime you want and poke your fat nose in where it doesn't belong."

"It's just as well that I did," he said, refusing to take the insult in the spirit with which it was intended. "What are you trying to do – kill yourself?"

"What business is it of yours? Besides, you're probably only here to drag me off to some war so I can get my head blown off," I said, reaching for another beer, but the confounded nuisance knocked it out of arm's length.

"I think you've had enough."

"I'll tell you when I've had enough – get the hell out of here!"

"You're a disgrace to the Service," said the pompous prig.

"In case you've forgotten, I never wanted to be in your precious bloody Service in the first place."

"Perhaps it's *you* who's forgotten. If it wasn't for me you'd have ended up in prison for arson!"

"You can stick me in bloody prison for all I care. You've had me fighting in one damn war after another for the last ten years. At least nobody would be shooting at me in the clink. So bugger off and try not to let the door hit you on your fat arse on the way out!"

"It's the drink talking, Fletcher – we need to get you into shape."

He picked up the box of beers lying beside the bed and carried it into the kitchen. I was about to lift my weary body out of bed, when he closed the bedroom door and wedged it shut. At first I hammered on it with my fists, but I soon stopped when the noise cut through my head like a knife.

"You're being childish, Biggins!" I yelled, and I opened the window to climb out.

In my drunken stupor I got my trouser-legs caught on the frame and I had to put out my hands to stop my head from smashing into the ground. I was just in the process of trying to figure out how to extricate myself from the embarrassing position, when I felt the cold metal of a gun barrel against my neck and I heard the sound of a click as the weapon was cocked.

I slowly looked round to see the smiling, bearded face of Juan, the cigar-chomping giant who had been all but killed outside the police station in Havana almost a lifetime ago – or so it seemed.

“Captain,” he growled, “I think you had better do as Senor Biggins wishes and stay in your room until you have sobered up – I would hate to have to blow your brains out and waste a perfectly good bullet.”

I just stared back at him - not through any bravado on my part, you understand, but simply because I was caught on the latch of the window frame and I was rather indisposed. Eventually he shoved me roughly back into my room, before closing the window behind me.

I must have cursed them both for a full five minutes before I fell dead away, and I’m happy to say that my self-appointed jailers were left kicking their heels while I slept for several hours. Mind you, in the meantime they’d clearly made themselves at home, and a bottle of my best brandy was lying half empty on the kitchen table.

They’d eventually condescended to release me from my makeshift prison when I assured them that I was fully recovered from my recent excesses. Biggins also made me promise that I’d keep a civil tongue in my head – of all the damn cheek!

I went to help myself to some of my brandy, but Biggins interceded and presented me with a large cup of fresh coffee. I took it grudgingly and sat in my favourite armchair on the veranda overlooking the bay.

“You gringos certainly know how to live,” said Juan, waving his hand to indicate our surroundings.

“It keeps the rain off my head, I suppose. Mind you, it could do with being a sight less accessible. The problem is that any old riff-raff can turn up uninvited,” I said, trying to goad the smug brute, and I succeeded in wiping the smile off his hairy face.

“Yes, we Cubans are just dirt to you. That is why you dumped Consuela like so much garbage when you no longer had any use for her.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, suddenly finding myself on the defensive.

“I know this - she loves you. But then again, there is no accounting for taste.”

I stood up, ready to punch the annoying idiot in the face, but he stepped back and his hand went down to the revolver in his belt.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen – trading insults is getting us nowhere. Juan, might I suggest we use our time more wisely and discuss what brings us here,” said Biggins, suddenly taking on the role of peacemaker.

We both sat down and I decided that it might be advisable to listen to what Biggins had to say, if only to give our hot-head of a revolutionary time to calm down before he decided to kill me.

“Fletcher, the PM’s worried about our business interests in Cuba ...”

“I have told you,” interrupted Juan, “your Senor Macmillan is a fool. Fidel is not a communist and he knows our forces would be no match for the Americans or the British. He will do nothing to jeopardise the survival of our new republic.”

“Yes, I’m sure you’re right, Juan, but the United States government is in danger of pushing Fidel into the arms of the Soviets, and our department has been hearing disturbing rumours about the intentions of our colleagues in the CIA.”

“Oh God, what are the lunatics up to now?” I asked.

“Tell him, Senor Biggins. Tell your imperialist friend what his allies intend to do,” cried Juan, pointing his cigar in my face.

“Well, Fletcher,” said Biggins, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, “it’s rather hard to believe, but our sources swear it’s true.”

“For goodness sake, Biggins, will you just spit it out!” I cried, and he obliged.

“The Americans intend to kill Fidel Castro.”

I will be forced to kill you

I'd been in the Service long enough to know there was no limit to what the backroom boys could dream up to cause trouble for the world, but I'll admit that even *I* was shocked to hear Biggins' surprising piece of news. Cooking up ideas was one thing, but it appeared that the White House wasn't exactly averse to the idea.

I used the few moments I had been given to digest this latest bombshell and wondered where it would all end. While any leaders I'd come across were more than happy to send their country's young men to die, I never thought I'd see the day when one of them would try knocking off their opposite number, so to speak. I mean, anyone would be fair game, wouldn't they? And as we all know, I was proved right in the end.

"Even if what you say is true, Biggins," I said, bringing myself back to the present, "I don't see what it has got to do with us – or the PM, for that matter."

"The government is worried about what will happen if the rumours are correct. If they are and the Americans succeed, they could very well make things even worse."

"I don't follow you."

"You know as well as I do that Che and Raul are the real communists. With Fidel out of the picture, they'll step into his shoes and nationalise everything under the sun."

It was at that point that Juan chose to share his heart-warming feelings with us.

"You gringos make me sick – British or American, it is all the same – your only concern is protecting the interests of your fat businessmen."

"That is not true, Juan," protested Biggins. "Captain Fletcher and I have fought alongside your comrades for the past two years and we both respect Fidel. If the Americans are really trying to kill your leader, somehow we will stop them."

You can damn well count me out, I thought, but as I watched the towering Juan stare at me with ill-concealed contempt, I decided it was best to play along and I nodded in agreement.

"Naturally I'm happy to help," I said, trying to sound as convincing as I could, "but I don't see what the PM thinks we'll be able to do about any assassination plot."

"But we're in an ideal position, don't you see?" said Biggins excitedly. "I've got my contacts in the CIA, so I should be able to find out what they're up to. And we both have the confidence of Fidel and he'll trust us if we try to warn him."

"Er ... Biggins, could I speak to you in private for a moment," I said, dragging my pea-brained colleague off the veranda and leading him to the garden, while Juan looked on suspiciously.

"Have you gone completely mad?" I whispered, as soon as I was sure we were out of earshot. "You're talking about two MI6 operatives doing their best to betray Britain's closest ally. What do you think the Yanks will do if we got caught?"

"HMG will deny any knowledge of our activities, naturally, but it won't come to that," replied Biggins calmly.

“How can you be so sure, blast you? You’ve obviously been sharing what you know with this bloody Juan and his Cuban friends – what’s to stop them from tipping off the CIA just to cause trouble?”

“All that alcohol has clearly addled your brain, Fletcher,” said the confounded twit. “Why would they betray us when we’ll be helping to protect Fidel from being assassinated? On the contrary, the government very much hopes that Fidel will be so grateful to our country for its timely assistance that he will allow us to expand our business interests, filling in the gap left by the Americans.”

I’d given up arguing by then. When Biggins saw a chance to score brownie points back in Whitehall there was no stopping him. Instead I decided to save us both a lot of trouble and told him what I thought about his idea.

“You and the bloody government are just asking for trouble and you can count me out.”

It was then that I smelt the stink of cigar smoke, and when I heard the growling voice only inches away, I nearly jumped three feet into the air.

“As you wish, gringo. Senor Biggins and I will go to Washington alone. We will do fine without you.”

“Holy buggery, Juan, I didn’t know you were there,” I said, trying to regain my composure. “Well, if you’re sure you’ll cope, I’ll just wish you good luck.”

“The only problem is that now you know everything, you might give the game away to the Americans,” he said, his sneering face a few inches from mine.

I was about to tell the bearded idiot to watch his manners, when his revolver suddenly appeared in his hand and he pointed it in my face. Naturally this put a rather different complexion on the matter, and I decided to try and soothe his Latin temper.

“You don’t have to worry on that score.”

“I know I don’t,” said the Cuban, displaying an evil grin, “because if you decide to stay instead of joining us, I will be forced to kill you.”

As I looked down the barrel of his gun, I was inwardly cursing Biggins for bringing the brute into my home, but, knowing when I’m beaten, I tried to look unperturbed and returned Juan’s smile.

“Washington it is then.”

Losing his facial hair

Alan Goldberg owned a very impressive Georgian home in the leafy suburbs of Washington, and he looked none too happy at the prospect of having a bearded, gun-toting Cuban revolutionary as a house guest. Naturally Biggins had telephoned ahead to tell his old friend in the CIA to expect the two of us, but he had singularly omitted to mention that we would have company.

In spite of the impressive dimensions of the hallway, Juan's bulky frame seemed to fill whatever space he occupied, and Goldberg's pretty wife and teenage daughter looked on wide-eyed, as the three of us were escorted to a well-appointed study.

Goldberg chose to sit behind his large oak writing desk, no doubt hoping it would form an impenetrable barrier between him and the monster in his midst. Juan didn't seem to even acknowledge Goldberg's nervousness and he proceeded to light one of his foul-smelling cigars.

Our host brought his hand to his mouth and began to cough as he stepped around his desk to place an ashtray in front of the hulking rebel. Juan ignored him and sat down in one of the comfortable leather chairs strewn across the spacious room. Biggins and I did the same, just as the rattle of crockery heralded the arrival Goldberg's wife carrying a large pot of coffee. She was smiling nervously and her hands were shaking.

To me Goldberg looked like a lawyer, with his wiry frame, well-groomed hair and round spectacles – and I wasn't far off. That was exactly what he'd been in a former life, until he'd taken on the role of an analyst with the Agency. Biggins had met him when we were based in Tokyo in '51, and they'd helped each other out by sharing information whenever they could – unofficially, of course.

"How can I help you, Henry?" he began, as he tried to wave away the veritable fog coming from Juan's Havana.

"Alan, I'll get right to the point if you don't mind. Our government is a little worried about the rumours we've been hearing."

"What rumours are those?" asked the wiry lawyer, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

"Well, there's no easy way to put this so I'll simply ask you outright. Is the Agency under orders to try and assassinate Castro?"

"Good Lord, no, Henry – wherever did you get that idea?" cried Goldberg, and he glanced in Juan's direction to see the rebel's reaction.

The revolutionary simply stared back and spat a loose piece of cigar leaf on to the Axminster.

"We know Eisenhower isn't exactly overjoyed at having Castro running an island a stone's throw from the coast of Florida, so what exactly does the Agency plan to do about the new leader?" asked Biggins, putting his friend on the spot.

"Well, I'll admit we've toyed with a few ideas, but only to discredit him - not to kill him, I assure you," said our host, looking in Juan's direction once again.

"How on earth could you hope to discredit him?" I asked, becoming curious in spite of myself.

“Well, like I say, they were just ideas. You know what it’s like, Henry, when they start scheming in the office.”

“Spit it out, Goldberg,” growled Juan, putting his cigar out in his host’s coffee.

“All right, all right,” said Goldberg quickly, clearly becoming more agitated by the minute. “We’ve developed an aerosol that administers LSD, and we were planning on lacing Castro’s cigars to disorient him before he makes one of his speeches on the radio.”

Juan stared at his coffee-soaked cigar when he heard Goldberg’s words, and you could almost sense his muscles straining as he came to terms with the workings of America’s intelligence services. I nearly spilled my drink and for the first time in days I actually let out a guffaw.

“Do they really pay people to come up with these pathetic ideas?” I asked incredulously.

“Like I say, these were only thoughts knocked around by the guys in the office,” said Goldberg, doing his best to defend the tarnished reputation of his precious CIA.

“What else did these Einsteins come up with?” I asked, intrigued, and even Goldberg smiled as he informed us of the next ridiculous proposal.

“There was talk of sprinkling thallium salts in Castro’s shoes.”

This was a new one on me and I wondered what the devil they hoped to achieve. I was a fool to ask.

“The salts would have the effect of causing Castro to lose his facial hair and thereby undermine his virile reputation – after all, he *is* known as ‘El Barbudo’,” explained Goldberg.

Well, it was good to know America’s tax-dollars were being put to good use. God knows why we still marvel that the world is in such a mess, I thought, when we have the masterminds at the CIA looking out for our interests.

“So you’re saying the White House isn’t planning on actually *assassinating* Castro,” said Biggins, determined to get a definitive answer.

“Certainly not,” said Goldberg indignantly, but I noticed that he nervously loosened his tie and refused to look any of us in the eye. “I mean, can you imagine our pipe-smoking, grey-haired director sanctioning anything like that?”

If there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s being lied to – especially when it’s done so blatantly. So I had one last sip of his wife’s indifferent coffee, before I had the final word and put Biggins’ friend in his place.

“I’m sure you’re right, Goldberg,” I said, pretending to put the liar at his ease before I stuck the knife in, and he smiled nervously.

“What’s the pipe-smoker’s name – ah, yes, it’s Dulles, isn’t it? He’s been in the intelligence game since the war, hasn’t he? I recall reading about one of his very first assignments. What was it? Ah yes, now I remember – it was to *assassinate* Adolph Hitler, wasn’t it?”

It was a pleasure to see the smile leave his lips, and in his eagerness to show us out, his coffee cup crashed to the floor.

Dr. Death

"I take it you believe Alan's lying," said Biggins, as we drove back to our hotel in the centre of the city.

"It is obvious," growled Juan, answering for me.

"I think you may well be right," replied Biggins, driving through a red light, totally oblivious to the unfortunate red-faced driver he'd nearly crashed into.

"Would you like me to drive, Biggins?" I offered.

"No, why?" he responded, clearly still lost in thought. Finally he spoke up.

"Fletcher, you're not the only one who's been reading up on the biographies of our American counterparts. For instance, do you know the nickname given to Gottlieb, the chief of the CIA's technical division who's been working on the 'Castro problem'?"

"Dr. Death?" I offered, deciding to spoil Biggins' fun.

"How did you know that?" he asked, clearly disappointed not to be able to impress us with his knowledge of CIA personnel.

"I do glance at the reports coming across our desk from time to time," I explained nonchalantly.

"Yes ... well, you can be sure the Americans aren't just interested in discrediting Castro by having his beard drop to the floor. Assassination is their game and no mistake."

"OK, so they're determined to kill Castro. What can we do about it?" I asked, fearing the worst.

"Just leave it to me," said Biggins uncharacteristically. "I'll find out what these idiots at the CIA have got planned and report back to Whitehall."

"Whatever you say, Biggins," I replied, all too aware of Juan's overbearing presence in the rear of the car.

"Ah, here's the hotel," said Biggins, as he swerved into the underground car park and nearly killed a pedestrian in the process.

* * *

The last time I'd been to Washington for those few blissful days when I managed to escape the carnage of the Korean War, I'd had the pleasure of my charming air stewardess for company.

But I'm sorry to report that when I used my unexpected furlough to visit Washington's finest fleshpots, my heart wasn't in it. Consuela had really got under my skin.

To top it all, I couldn't even pass the time by drinking to excess, having promised Biggins I would do my best to remain *compos mentis* while we completed our pathetic assignment. Unfortunately buggering off out of harm's way wasn't an option either, not least because our wonderful conversationalist from Cuba insisted on dogging my footsteps all the live-long day.

As it turned out, we didn't have to wait long for the industrious Biggins to discover what the CIA had planned for Juan's charismatic leader.

“I’ve managed to find out from my friend on the Cuban Committee about a plot to kill Castro, and it’s being put into operation this very night,” explained Biggins.

I’d been leaning out of the hotel window in an effort to find some breathable oxygen while Juan puffed away on his cigar - and I nearly fell out of the damn thing.

“Tonight?” I asked, shocked to the core. “What can *we* do about it?”

“No, you misunderstand, Fletcher,” said the confounded oaf condescendingly. “Two of the Agency’s anti-Castro exiles will be flying down from Florida.”

“That still doesn’t give us enough time,” I said desperately, unable to believe Biggins had been given the nod to try and stop the assassination attempt.

“Nonsense,” he said confidently, “I’ve chartered a plane and I know which airfield the CIA’s men will be using.”

I still tried to protest, but he insisted the job could be done. And then Juan put a stop to any thought I’d had of trying to escape.

“Now you will have the chance to prove your loyalty to Fidel Castro - unless, of course, you really *are* just another imperialist gringo.”

He rested his large hand on his revolver to make his point.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I said in my defence. “I suppose we’d better get going – especially if we’ll be flying with all this excess weight.”

I headed for the bathroom and slapped Juan across his ample stomach, before closing the door behind me to drown out his cry.

“Bastardo!”

And then there was nothing

Biggins was as good as his word and that very afternoon we were flying a Cessna over Floridian air space as we waited for the suspect aircraft to take off. Somehow my gormless colleague had managed to get hold of the radio frequencies that our targets would be using, and we were able to tuck in behind them at a safe distance as they headed in a southerly direction.

Any hopes I'd had that we wouldn't be able to keep up with our prey were soon dashed when I realised they were also flying a light aircraft.

"That's a Helio Courier, Biggins," I said. "They're used for landing on short runways."

"That makes sense. They can hardly fly straight into Havana and wish Castro good morning before polishing him off."

A few hours later we watched as they landed on a sugar-cane field near San Antonio, south west of Havana. Biggins told me to circle overhead so that we could find out what our gunmen were up to as they clambered out of their plane.

"Biggins, one of them is carrying a high-powered rifle with a telescopic sight!" I yelled, trying to be heard above the noise of the engine.

"Get in low so we can see where they're heading," replied the idiot

Being the pilot, I suppose I could have told him to bugger off, but I decided it was easier to do as I was told. Even so, I didn't take any chances and you can be sure I kept my hand resting near the throttle, just in case things turned nasty and we needed to make a hasty exit. We watched as the two gunmen made their way to some abandoned farm buildings, apparently oblivious to our presence. Biggins switched frequencies on the radio before passing the microphone to Juan.

"Juan, you can tell Che to move his men into the area now."

The bearded devil did as instructed and read out the grid-reference from the map Biggins had provided.

"How long will it take your men to get here?" he asked, and we could hear Che's distinctive voice coming through our headphones, saying it would take several hours.

"Very well," said Juan, passing the microphone back to Biggins. "The assassins may be long gone before Che's men arrive. We must land and stop them now."

"Don't be a fool," I cried, trying to ridicule his suggestion before Biggins got any ideas. "Wait for Che's men to do their job. If the killers try to escape we will be able to spot them from the air."

Grudgingly he agreed but, as if to pour cold water on my suggestion, the two illegal immigrants suddenly drove away from the farm in a truck we'd failed to see because it had been hidden beneath the foliage. Suddenly I felt the cold metal of Juan's revolver pressed against my head.

"Land the plane and cut them off, gringo," he snarled through gritted teeth.

"Better do as he says," offered Biggins helpfully.

I decided to try and land further up the road, but there was barely enough space. By the time I'd brought the plane to a stop, a good portion of the farmer's crop on either side had been destroyed by the wings of the Cessna.

Having no access to a door of his own, Juan was pushing me out of the plane so that he could squeeze through, while Biggins was still clumsily fumbling with his seat belt. As the truck came into view, Juan fired his revolver in a blind rage at the approaching vehicle.

With painstaking precision, I'd positioned myself directly behind Juan's bulky frame so that any bullets heading our way would strike the Cuban revolutionary instead of yours truly.

When the truck eventually pulled to a halt, one of the men emerged brandishing a machine-gun. The weapon must have been waiting for them at the farm because they hadn't been carrying it from the plane. Wherever it originated, its owner clearly knew how to use it because Juan's body trembled as it received the gun's deadly cargo.

Having lost my human shield, I dived under the fuselage of the plane and drew my revolver. In blind panic I fired all six shots. Incredibly three of them hit home and my victim dropped his machine-gun before falling dead in front of the truck.

In the meantime his partner-in-crime had managed to take careful aim with the telescopic sight of his rifle, and I realised he had a clear view of my prone carcase. Having no ammunition left, I desperately looked across at Biggins, who'd finally managed to extricate his tubby frame from his seat. He was drawing his revolver, but to my horror I quickly realised he wouldn't be able to return fire in time.

As if in a dream, I saw the flash from the muzzle of the rifle before I heard the shot. I know now it must have been my imagination, but I even believed I could see the bullet as it slowly made its way in my direction. I closed my eyes tight shut, waiting to die, and my head felt as if it was exploding when a bright light enveloped my whole body.

For a second I had a blinding headache – and then there was nothing.

An angel looking down on me

I awoke to find the most beautiful angel in heaven looking down at me, as she mopped my sweating brow with a damp cloth. I remember thinking: I wish I'd died years ago if this taste of the afterlife is anything to go by. And then it struck me: if this really *is* heaven, then poor Consuela must have shuffled off her mortal coil too. Wondering if her breasts would feel just as perfect in God's heavenly kingdom, I reached up to grab a handful. She slapped my hand away and threw the cloth down in disgust.

"Oh, God," I sighed, suddenly fearful, "I must be in the other damn place."

"I see you're feeling better," said the angel, sounding far from heavenly.

"Consuela, is it really you?" I asked, trying to raise my body up and suddenly feeling very dizzy.

"You know damn well it is!" she cried, and I winced as her voice seemed to cut through my throbbing head.

"Consuela, I've missed you. I should never have left Cuba."

"It is just the drugs talking. We had to pump you full of morphine," she explained, shattering the illusion that I'd made a full recovery with all her talk of an Anodyne Necklace.

I reached up to feel the right side of my belfry above the ear and I pulled my hand away in shock. Instead of my luxuriant locks, I touched bare scalp where my head had been shaved. I ran my fingers along a scar, trying to count the stitches, but I gave up after half a dozen or so.

"You're very lucky, Thomas. If Senor Biggins had not shot the assassin before he could fire a second time, you would not be here."

"I will have to thank him," I said, trying to take in my surroundings, but the whitewashed walls of the plain room left me none the wiser.

"Do not worry, your wound will heal. Your friend found explosive bullets in the gunman's pocket – if the rifle had been loaded with those, your head would not even be on your shoulders."

"I'm glad it's still in one piece because I can tell you ... I can tell you how much I care about you," I said, surprising myself. It's damned potent stuff this morphine, I thought.

Consuela's eyes moistened and her lips appeared to tremble. But she stood up before the tears started to fall.

"We each have our own lives to live, Thomas, so don't feel guilty on my account. I suppose I ought to thank you for saving Fidel's life."

"I don't care about that. I've got something to tell you..."

Just then the door to the room opened and Biggins walked in, followed by the great man himself - Fidel Castro.

"Ah, you are awake, Captain Fletcher," said the bearded leader, who for once wasn't smoking one of his cigars - no doubt in deference to the wounded patient.

"Yes, sir, I must thank you for the care I have received," I said, smiling at Consuela, but she looked away.

“Nonsense,” said Fidel magnanimously, “it is I who need to thank you. You and Senor Biggins have successfully thwarted an attempt on my life. I have been asked by your friend here not to publicise your government’s involvement in this matter, but you can rest assured that your efforts will not go unrewarded.”

I made some noise about how it was nothing and that it was an honour to be able to help, causing Biggins to grimace. No doubt he was recalling how he’d had to practically drag me back to Cuba. Fidel thanked us both once again and wished me a speedy recovery, before saying he would leave the hero of the hour in the tender care of Senorita Cortez.

“I believe I need to thank you too, Henry, for saving my life,” I said, once Castro had left the room.

“Stone me, Fletcher, that bullet must have done something to your brain after all. It’s not like you to start dishing out gratitude uninvited.”

“Don’t make a meal of it, Biggins, I’m just saying I owe you one, that’s all.”

“Ah, that’s more like it. The old Fletcher is back with us,” said the infuriating oaf. “Anyway, I need to talk to you about some interesting developments back in Washington.”

That was the trouble with my hapless sidekick – he never knew when to call it a day, and I decided to stop him in his tracks.

“Henry, I really am grateful for everything and I don’t want you to take this the wrong way ... but would you mind bugging off while Consuela and I have a little talk.”

“No ... don’t worry, Senor Biggins, I was about to leave,” said Consuela, making her way to the door.

I looked at Biggins and then at the door, silently telling him to go - and for once the clot got the message.

“No, that’s all right, Miss Cortez. What I have to say to Captain Fletcher can wait.”

He started to leave and Consuela began to follow him. I called her back and eventually she closed the door and returned to my bedside.

“Consuela, I’ve got something to tell you.”

“You don’t have to say anything, Thomas,” she said, looking at the floor and refusing to return my gaze.

“No ... no, I do. You see, when that chap with the rifle was about to kill me and I thought it was all over, the only thing I could think about was you.”

“Thomas, you have a nasty injury and you haven’t fully recovered. Don’t say something you might regret.”

“No, you’re wrong. Since I left Cuba I’ve done nothing but miss you.”

I rested my head on my pillow for fear of fainting dead away. I’d never been completely honest with a woman in my life and it had clearly taken its toll. My God, I thought, I hope Consuela’s wrong and it really isn’t the morphine doing the talking.

She couldn’t hold the tears back any longer and leant over to kiss me on the lips as passionately as she dared, considering my condition.

“Do you really mean it, Thomas? Do you want us to be together?”

“You just try keeping me away,” I said, holding her lovely warm body against mine – *facta non verba*, I suppose.

It was one of those earth-shattering moments one experiences in life, when you know with utter certainty that nothing will ever be the same again. It was a strange feeling, but when I look back at all the shocks and scares I've had over the years, I can't help thinking that I'd never been more terrified in my life.

* * *

It was the first time I'd seen Biggins lost for words, when I told him about my plans to give up a life of debauchery to spend it with just *one* woman. Being a pious little Christian who had never condoned my incessant pursuit of female flesh, he was obviously delighted at the news. But I knew my fellow operative well enough to recognise a moment of doubt flash across his gormless face, as he began to wonder what would become of our ill-conceived partnership.

"Anyway, Biggins, where the hell am I?" I asked in an effort to change the subject.

"You're in Havana – in one of the new hospitals Fidel's republic has set up. I have to admit, Fletcher, a lot of the rebels might well be communists, but they're genuinely trying to improve the lives of the Cuban people."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I never thought I'd live to see the day when Biggins defended a Red. It looked as if I wasn't the only one who'd been changed by the confounded country – there must be something in the blasted water, I thought idly.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" I asked, deciding that listening to what he had to say was the least I could do.

"Relations between Cuba and the United States are getting worse every day. Not only is Fidel now well aware of the CIA's clumsy efforts to assassinate him, but Washington has imposed an embargo on U.S. arms into the country."

"I don't see what the problem is. The Cubans will just get their guns from somewhere else, won't they?"

"You're dead right, but I have a nasty suspicion that our American allies aren't prepared to let things lie."

"I don't follow you," I said, suddenly wishing I hadn't been so amenable, and I began to realise that the morphine was wearing off.

"A French vessel filled with Belgian arms has mysteriously blown up in Havana harbour, killing hundreds of people," he explained.⁶

"Do you reckon the CIA was behind it?"

"Fidel certainly thinks so. At the funerals he was throwing accusations out all over the place, and he's even talking about closing the American base at Guantanamo."

"What do you make of it all?" I asked, hoping he'd get to the point and leave me in peace.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I've been in touch with some of my contacts in the CIA and it looks like they really mean business."

"What are you trying to say, Biggins?" I asked, becoming exasperated.

"The Americans are planning to invade Cuba."

It will be a piece of cake

It didn't surprise me, of course. After all my years working in the intelligence game, I knew that governments were capable of anything. The Yanks hated the communists even more than Biggins did, and they were happy to get rid of anyone who so much as leaned to the left.

Trujillo, the leader of the Dominican Republic, was killed by dissidents armed with weapons provided by the CIA, and while I can't prove they did away with Lumumba in the Congo, they made no secret of the fact that they wanted to see the back of him and, rather conveniently, someone decided to kill him. So believe me, you *can* get away with murder and it's a lesson I've been ready to learn – as you'll see.

Naturally the Yanks weren't brazen enough to load up an armada of warships with thousands of GIs and simply invade the island. They were too worried about world opinion to do anything like that – especially when they'd kicked up such a fuss about Pearl Harbour.

No, what they had in mind was to train and arm the hundreds of Cuban exiles eager to get rid of Castro, before sending the hapless band off to do their dirty work for them. Then, once Castro's republic was defeated, the Americans would naturally recognise the new government of Cuba and everything would be like the good old days.

Not that the CIA had given up the idea of assassination as a happy alternative, and they were constantly searching for anyone who held enough of a grudge against Castro to kill him. The mild-mannered operatives in their new headquarters at Langley didn't even have any qualms about asking for help from the Mafia, and they were happy to point out to the crime families that it was Castro's fault their casinos, brothels and drug-deals had fallen by the wayside – shame on him!

Fortunately the services of your reluctant hero weren't called upon where would-be assassins were concerned. Later I learned that the unholy alliance of secret agents and mobsters tried everything from poison to slaying the new leader with machine-guns.

My problems started when Biggins found out about a CIA task force preparing for an invasion. It turned out that they'd constructed an airstrip eight hundred miles from Cuba in Guatemala, which would serve bombers and transport planes – all without U.S. markings, naturally.

"We've been ordered to pop over and find out what the CIA is up to," explained Biggins, but I was eager to halt the proceedings right there and then.

"Who has ordered us?" I asked, trying to put him on the spot.

"I can't say, Fletcher. All I can tell you is that it comes from the very highest level," said the idiot, availing himself of his usual double-talk and failing miserably to keep anything a secret.

"You mean the PM," I said, determined not to make things easy for him.

"I didn't say that. Anyway, the important thing is that we look after Britain's interests. Besides, an American invasion of Cuba might upturn the apple-cart for everyone."

"I don't suppose it would do any good if I told you it's none of my business and I don't want anything to do with your blasted assignment."

“I realise you’ve got other things on your mind at the moment, but this could well affect any future you hope to have with Consuela. Just think what will happen to her if the old regime gets back into power.”

I had to admit he had a point, and when he explained to Fidel and the others that we’d be going undercover on their behalf, they were all for it. So I cornered Biggins for one last time to get the reassurance I was looking for.

“Let me get this straight, Biggins. The idiots at the CIA think we’re going to Guatemala simply as advisers and there will *definitely* be no shooting.”

“Exactly. It will be a piece of cake, I assure you. The trouble with you, Fletcher, is that you worry too much.”

Somehow I resisted the temptation to punch him in his ivories, and when he left my room I tried to think of a reason not to join him on another one of his ridiculous missions. While I examined my wounded head - received the last time I agreed to go along on one of Biggins’ blasted outings - I dithered in my best style and the decision was finally made for me by the new love in my life.

“Thomas, I’m so proud of you helping to protect our new nation from the Americans.”

“Hang on a minute. I haven’t exactly agreed to ...”

“Don’t be silly, Thomas,” said Consuela, placing her fingers on my lips to silence me, “of course you’ll go, but first, let me show my appreciation.”

She kissed me passionately and lay down on the bed before beckoning me to join her. It was clear what she had in mind and fortunately I had recovered sufficiently from my injuries to oblige.

“Oh well,” I said, resigned to my fate. “It looks like I’m off to Guatemala.”

Welcome to the stage, Mr. Kennedy

The CIA had secured permission from President Ydígoras Fuentes to set up a training centre known as Camp Trax, high in the Sierra Madre Mountains on the Pacific coast. When we arrived, the first thing I noticed was how narrow the airstrip appeared to be, providing barely enough room for the landing gear, let alone the rest of the plane you might happen to be flying.

What few Guatemalan guards there were seemed more interested in sitting around smoking and drinking coffee, rather than protecting the assortment of expensive bombers lining the parking ramp. As for the tumbledown fence surrounding the perimeter, it wouldn't have stopped an asthmatic flea from entering the compound. I remember thinking that if Che could have managed to recruit a few determined guerrillas from the Guatemalan communist fraternity, they would have had no problem stopping any invasion before it even started.

To make matters worse, tropical rain was pelting down on our heads as soon as we left our little Cessna, and accommodation was in such short supply, we had to make do with a glorified shed to sleep in. Provisions were practically non-existent because the only access by land appeared to be a dilapidated railway, from which the locals gaped at us – no doubt wondering what the hell was going on.

As good as his word, Biggins got a message through to Fidel, telling him what was happening. But when our Cuban comrade confronted President Fuentes, the Guatemalan leader said it was nothing but fiction. While he was denying the very existence of the camp, I happened to be watching a fictional transport plane, loaded with American advisers, landing next to a dozen fictional B-26 bombers - no doubt loaded with fictional ammunition.

I befriended the Air America pilot in charge - with the apt name of Burke, as it happens. As an interested 'observer' working for Her Majesty's Government, I thought it wouldn't hurt to point out a major flaw in the whole enterprise.

"Isn't the base too far from Cuba for the planes to be able to make a round-trip?" I asked, wondering if I was stating the bloody obvious.

"Quite right, Captain," said Burke, who had once flown for a Cuban airline and since then had been busy dropping weapons to the insurgents on the island. "Don't worry, we've secured permission from President Somoza to use an airstrip in Nicaragua near Puerto Cabezas, on the Caribbean coast."

"That was kind of him," I said, half-joking.

"Kind my ass," replied Burke, who was as brash as most of the CIA chaps I've ever had the misfortune to meet. "His last words to me were that we'd better get rid of that son of a bitch, Castro, or we'll have to live with him for the rest of our lives."

I began to think that Castro and his new republic wouldn't have a chance, especially when Nixon decided to run for president. But when the communist-hater was pipped at the post, I dared to believe that the whole idea of invading Cuba would fall by the wayside.

How was I to know that the contender for the presidency would be beaten by a man who would change everything?

Welcome to the stage, former Democratic Senator and now President of the United States of America – John F Kennedy.

* * *

If I'd thought that a new man in the top job would change the situation, I was to have a rude awakening. If anything, it seemed to get worse. News was filtering through about the Soviet and Czech military apparel arriving in Cuba on a daily basis, and the CIA boys began to act as if they were working against the clock. Naturally I wanted nothing to do with the whole business and I couldn't understand why we hadn't cleared off – as I explained to my hapless associate.

“Why are we still here, Biggins? We know the Yanks are planning an invasion, so why don't we just head back to Cuba and let the Castro brothers know.”

“The problem is, Fletcher, that's *all* we know.”

“What are you getting at?” I asked, thoroughly sick of one never-ending mission after another.

“We haven't the foggiest where and when they plan to attack – or how, for that matter. If we stick around a little longer and find out all we can, Fidel and his militia will be better prepared.”

I couldn't really fault his logic, so I tried a different tack.

“Don't you think the Americans will get a bit suspicious if we keep poking our noses in where they don't belong? They know we've spent the last couple of years in Cuba and they might begin to think things aren't quite kosher.”

“Nonsense, Fletcher. Britain's an ally, remember. Besides, it's precisely because we *have* spent time on the island that we're here in the first place. The CIA chaps think we'll be able to help them in their planning. With a bit of luck, we might even be able to steer them wrong.”

I swear my overweight friend was actually enjoying himself. He always did like getting stuck into a good game of deception and double-dealing, and this was just bread and butter to the over-eager idiot. As if to confirm my suspicions, he was grinning like a Cheshire cat when we attended a briefing set up by Burke and attended by the man appointed as leader of the Cuban forces – Pepe San Román.

The two of them stood before the assembled members of the task force and they made an odd couple. While Pepe was lean and fit, Burke's stomach muscles had long given up the battle of holding in his generous paunch. Pepe's steely eyes told you that here was a man who would not crumble under pressure and who was utterly convinced of the rightness of his cause. He'd been imprisoned for resisting Batista and was freed when Castro came to power. But he landed right back in jail when he began to protest against the growing communist influence in the new regime - just the man for Kennedy and the CIA.

“The code-name for the invasion is Operation Trinidad,” announced Burke, looking around at the hundred or so men gathered in the hangar. “This will be the target area for our amphibious landing.”

“It lies between the Escambray Mountains and the Casilda docks,” explained Pepe, pointing at a map set up at the end of the hangar. “There are excellent beaches and the hills will provide an ideal environment for thousands of guerrillas. There are also only two bridges that Castro’s tanks can use – and these can easily be eliminated.”

Talk about bloody déjà vu. It seemed like only yesterday we’d been fighting as guerrillas ourselves in the south-eastern corner of the island – and now it was going to happen all over again. But this time it would be Fidel, Raul and Che who would be on the defensive – along with Consuela and the rest of their followers, of course.

“The plan is simple,” explained Burke confidently. “Guerrilla fighters will infiltrate the island, our bombers will take care of Castro’s air force, and this will be followed up by an amphibious landing of the main task force, armed with heavy weapons and supplied by air-drops.”

“What if we can’t hold the beaches?” asked a nervous-looking Cuban sitting at the front of the group.

“In that unlikely event, we will head into the Escambrays and join with the local guerrillas,” said Pepe reassuringly.

“But what will happen if our planes fail to knock out the republic’s air force?”

I looked across to see who had spoken and noticed it was the same timid chap again. I remember thinking he must have been a kindred spirit, and it was good to know I wasn’t the only sane person in the damn place. But Burke simply brushed his concerns aside by turning to the pilots assembled in the corner of the hangar.

“What do you say, Chuck?” he asked, addressing one of the American contract fliers. “Do you reckon you can handle it?”

“Piece of cake,” replied the gum-chewing Chuck, but it was hard to tell if his face displayed the confidence he tried to convey because he was wearing sunglasses.

“We will assist in any way we can, but you gentlemen must realise that this is *your* fight and the world must see that the invasion is *Cuban*,” said Burke.

Well, good luck with that, I thought, trying to imagine what Fidel would make of Chuck if he happened to get shot down over the island.

“What if there is no popular uprising when we land in Cuba?” asked another member of the audience, and I was starting to wonder if their hearts were really in it.

“No sweat. Once you’ve got the beachhead secured and taken over your little patch of Cuba, you can declare that you’re establishing a provisional government.”

“Then what?” asked the questioner, refusing to let the matter drop.

For dramatic effect, Burke waited before answering.

“Then we’ll recognise the new government in Cuba and send in the big boys.”

Not the most tactful of answers, considering the company, but it seemed to have the desired effect, and you could almost feel the confidence of the group lift when they realised they had the backing of the American military.

“In the meantime you’ll have to work with what we’ve got. Remember, in addition to the bombers and weapons, you’ll have all the landing craft and ships you’ll need.”

Knowing the Yanks as I did, I assumed they’d be palming off their old World War Two surplus equipment on to the hapless Cubans, but I thought it best to keep my thoughts to myself.

“Well, if there are no more questions, we’ll leave you men to continue your training,” said Burke, bringing the briefing to an abrupt close and coming over to our corner of the hangar to single us out.

“I reckon you guys got out of the Cuban spy game just in time,” he said, not suspecting why we were really there. “Castro has thrown most of our guys out of the embassy in Havana. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he knows what we’re up to. God damn it, the security around here ain’t worth shit.”

Biggins and I looked at one another, wondering if the CIA might start pointing an accusing finger in our direction. As it turned out there was no need for us to worry, and a few days later we discovered that the invasion was one of the worst kept secrets in the history of covert operations.

From somewhere Biggins had managed to get hold of a copy of the New York Times and its front page summed things up nicely.

ANTI-CASTRO UNITS TRAINED TO FIGHT AT BASES IN GUATEMALA AND FLORIDA. INVASION REPORTED NEAR.

The Bay of what?

“Well, Biggins, now that we know everything there is to know about the damned invasion, we can bugger off,” I said, eager to be away and back in the arms of my lovely Consuela.

It was a strange feeling, pining for just *one* woman. But since my pretty revolutionary and I had buried the hatchet, I seemed to be my old self again. Even when a rather fetching local piece gave me the eye over our flimsy wire fence, I wasn't tempted – well, perhaps just a little. Old habits die hard, I suppose.

“You're probably right, Fletcher,” replied Biggins, ending my daydream about a harem of South American beauties. “I'll find a phone and contact our friends in Cuba.”

I couldn't help wondering about my old school chum and long-time colleague from the Service, as he left to make his phone call to our contact in Castro's Cuba. For years he'd done his best to stop the communists wherever they'd raised their ugly heads – and now here he was ready to betray the Americans and help Fidel's new republic which, with its new backers in the Kremlin, was communist in all but name.

He'd got his orders from our people in London to try and scotch the American plans and thus protect British interests, but I believe he would have helped our friends in Cuba even without the nod from Whitehall. Having fought alongside Fidel against Batista's brutal regime, I reckon he no longer saw things as simply black or white anymore.

Anyway, it looked as if our job was done and we could head back to Cuba. Once we'd let Fidel know what we'd found out, he'd be able to nip the invasion in the bud and I could start my new life with the adorable Consuela. And that's exactly what would have happened, if Biggins hadn't stopped to say his goodbyes to Burke before we climbed on board the Cessna.

“All that work shot to hell – damn it!”

Burke was cursing to himself as he chomped on a fat cigar and he picked up a map of Cuba, laying it out flat on the table in front of him.

“What's the problem?” asked Biggins, as I tried to steer him in the direction of the plane.

“What's the problem?” yelled Burke. “I'll tell you what the God damn problem is, boy. In his infinite wisdom our new president has suddenly decided he wants to move the landing site.”

“But why?”

“He says our plans won't allow us to deny American involvement. Hell, when are these guys at the White House gonna figure it out – we *are* damn well involved.”

“What will you do?” asked Biggins, concern written all over his face at the realisation that we were about to leave for Cuba with the wrong plans.

“My boss back in Washington has come up with another site more suited to the president's needs. It's here,” he said, pointing to the map, “a hundred miles west of Trinidad, on the Zapata Peninsula at the Bay of Pigs.”

“The Bay of what?” I asked, thinking I'd misheard.

“Pigs!” said Burke angrily. “Apparently it suits the president’s idea of a nice quiet night-time landing in support of an *internal* revolution. Internal revolution, my ass!”

He stormed off in a huff before we could question him further and we both looked down at the map he had kindly left behind.

“It looks a bit remote,” said Biggins, pointing at the new landing site. “And look, it’s surrounded by swamps. How will Fidel get his army through all that?”

“Yes, but think of it this way,” I offered. “How will Burke’s home-made band of revolutionaries break out of the bay once they’ve landed – they’ll be trapped.”

“But what if they get help from the locals?”

“What locals? There’s nobody there,” I said, suddenly relieved that the politicians were going to stick their noses in and ruin the invasion - saving us the trouble. “The only locals they’ll find in those swamps are snakes, crocodiles and mosquitoes.”

Biggins started to look thoughtful, which always spelled trouble, and I tried to bring him back to the here and now.

“Well, let’s go and tell Fidel the good news,” I said, grinning at the prospect of being reunited with the grateful Consuela.

“No, Fletcher, I think it’s best if we stick around.”

“Whatever for?”

“If the plans have been changed once, they can be changed again. If we return to Cuba with bogus information, it could well make things worse for Fidel’s men.”

There was no arguing with him and he had us stay in the camp for several frustrating weeks, until the proposed invasion was only a few days away. We were there to witness the ‘Cuban’ planes take off for Nicaragua, where they would be refuelled before they set off to deal Castro’s air force its fatal blow. Only half of the eighteen or so planes left the runway, while the rest remained on the ground. Burke was standing nearby and I turned to face him.

“Why aren’t you sending them all?” I asked, and he went red in the face.

“Washington is scared shitless we’ll show our hand and everyone will know the U.S. is involved. So some dumbass thinks halving the number of planes will make all the difference. What a bunch of dipshits!”

I have to admit that on this occasion my sympathies lay with Burke. Nine planes or eighteen – it didn’t make much difference when they were clearly freshly painted and didn’t match those belonging to Fidel’s air force. You’d have had to be blind not to realise they weren’t really defectors.⁷

Eventually Biggins relented and we headed for our Cessna, but he ordered me to land at the training camp in Nicaragua to make sure the task force actually *was* setting off. As we watched the men loading their equipment on to the transport vessels, who should turn up to wave the fighters a cheery goodbye, but the Nicaraguan president himself – and what a sight he was.

General Somoza wore a white suit and hat and his face appeared to be covered in some sort of powder. He was holding an M-1 and he was surrounded by his bodyguards, all wearing sunglasses and wielding machine-guns. He shouted to the brigade as they made their way down the gangplanks.

“Bring me back some hairs from Fidel’s beard!”

Having seen enough, we finally headed off to Cuba, and Biggins was as excited as a schoolboy at the prospect of being the hero of the hour.

“Once I’ve warned Fidel about the imminent invasion, his forces should have no trouble polishing them off,” he said, full of confidence, and I decided it was time he faced the reality of the situation.

“We’ve got to get there first, Biggins. Besides, the Cuban air force is pretty thin on the ground right now, and if Burke’s planes get lucky they could wipe it out.”

“Nonsense, Fletcher,” he said dismissively, as if he was an expert on aerial warfare, “you worry too much. The invasion will be crushed and Fidel will be indebted to the Service for its timely assistance. With any luck, he’ll have second thoughts about getting too friendly with the Soviets.”

I decided it was a waste of time arguing with him and I contented myself with the thought that very soon I would be back in Consuela’s warm embrace. As it happened, things didn’t turn out quite as planned for either of us.

Due to low cloud and rainstorms I was forced to land over a hundred miles east of Havana, at Santa Clara. This meant that we’d have a long road journey, since Biggins decided our information was so important he needed to see the Cuban leader in person.

We had the devil of a time trying to persuade the local militia that we weren’t American spies and that we’d come to the island at the request of Fidel Castro himself. But once they’d checked our story they couldn’t do enough for us, and they even provided me with a phone so that I could speak to Consuela at the republic’s headquarters in Havana.

“She has left to visit her grandmother, Senor – apparently the old lady is very ill,” explained the chap who answered.

“Do you know where her grandmother lives?” I asked, pining for my Cuban beauty like a lovesick puppy.

“She lives in a small fishing village in the south of the country. I’m afraid it is very remote.”

“I have a plane. Just give me the name and I’ll get there somehow.”

“The place is called Playa Girón and it is in Cochinos Bay.”

“Cochinos Bay?” I asked, squinting at my map. “I can’t find the damn place anywhere.”

“Ah,” said my helpful guide, and his next words turned my blood icy cold. “It also goes by another name – the Bay of Pigs.”

The Americans are using the atom bomb

For once, Biggins said he could manage without me (although I rather suspected he wanted all the glory for himself), and he hitched a ride with a couple of officers into Havana. I couldn't stay awake and decided to put my head down for a couple of hours – a decision I was to curse soon enough. Fortunately the storms seemed to be limited to the west of the island and, after being reliably informed that there was an airfield of sorts just to the west of Playa Girón, I quickly got the plane into the air.

I'd radioed ahead and managed to persuade the head of the local militia to meet me at the airfield. He arrived in a jeep, together with his thirteen-year-old son who'd come along for the ride, so that he could see the gringo's aeroplane up close. The little devil was scrambling for the door before I'd had time to turn off the engine.

In deference to his father I had to resist the temptation to give the young scamp a swift clip about the ear, and instead I explained to the commander that his little town was about to be the centre of an invasion. He ridiculed the idea and said he'd only agreed to meet me out of curiosity. Like his brothers from the north, he'd suspected I might be an American spy.

Fortunately he knew Consuela personally and he consented to take me to her grandmother's home overlooking the beach. In the meantime, the doubting Thomas took my revolver until he confirmed who I was. I reckon he only deigned to help in order to keep an eye on me, but I didn't care, and thirty minutes later we were driving along a narrow road, following the coastline.

I had just spotted the outline of a row of houses in the darkness, when a light began to flash out at sea. My new escort pulled the jeep to a halt and turned it so that it pointed towards the lapping waves. He trained the headlights to see if he could spot the source of the unexpected illumination.

"It must be a fishing boat. He's probably lost," he said.

I wasn't so sure and I was just about to shout out a warning, when machine-guns fired, practically demolishing the jeep. The boy caught a bullet in his arm and cried out.

"It's started! Let's get the hell out of here!" I yelled.

The commander and his wounded offspring were more than happy to follow my suggestion, and we ran to the row of houses at the end of the beach.

"This way," said the militiaman, pointing to the second building along.

He hammered on the door and the woman of my dreams finally answered, wiping the sleep from her eyes and demanding to know what was going on. When she eventually recognised me loitering in the doorway, she practically jumped in the air and cried out.

"Thomas! My God, I can't believe it ... how? ... what? ..."

Before she had time to complete her thoughts, I was shoving everyone inside and closing the door behind me.

"There's no time to explain, Consuela – the invasion's begun. Quick, turn out the lights."

I rushed to the window and she passed me a pair of antiquated binoculars. I spotted a team of frogmen running on to the beach, and one of them stabbed a blinking red light into the sand next to the crumpled remains of the jeep. They were so close that I could see their

faces in the moonlight. I recognised one of Burke's officers and I couldn't help but smile. In spite of Kennedy's determination to conceal U.S. involvement in the whole sorry enterprise, one of the first people to set foot on Cuban soil as part of the invasion force was an American.

More men appeared to be landing on the beach and we spotted some wading ashore, dragging a damaged inflatable boat behind them.

"They probably got caught on the reefs," offered the commander, as he watched Consuela bandage his son's arm.

One of Fidel's Sea Furies came flying out of nowhere, ready to take on the invaders, but the pilot must have been spotted by the American ships offshore because we heard a large gun fire out at sea, and the plane exploded and crashed before the pilot had a chance to react.

When daylight came, the militiaman grabbed hold of his son and made his way to the door. He turned to explain before he left the house.

"I had better go and join my men."

Rather you than me, I thought, and I suddenly became excited at the prospect of being alone with Consuela. Just in time I remembered what the chap on the phone had said about her grandmother being ill, and I began to wonder why she hadn't joined us.

"Are you alone, Consuela? I thought ..."

"My grandmother died a week ago," she explained, and I couldn't help thinking she looked like a lost little girl. "She was all that remained of my family."

I held her in my arms and wiped away her tears. Her next words caused my heart to beat faster and filled me with dread – although, perversely, I had longed for her to utter them

"You are all I have now, Thomas. You will never leave me, will you?"

"Of course not," I said automatically, kissing her beautiful lips.

"When this is all over, I promise I will make you very happy."

"You already do, Consuela."

I turned to look out of the window and spotted the commander of the militia, still with his son, but now he was accompanied by some of his men and they were actually *talking* with members of the invasion force spread out along the beach.

"That man who was with us, Consuela – can he be trusted?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he seems to be on damn friendly terms with the enemy."

"Manuel, you bastard!" she cried, when she saw the Cuban fraternising with members of the task force. "I should have guessed that the coward would become a traitor at the first sign of trouble."

"Speaking of trouble, I think we'd better get out of here. It probably won't be long before he starts telling his new friends where to find us."

Consuela was wearing a thin linen top and she went into the rear of the house and came back with a shawl. From the table drawer she pulled out two pistols and checked they were loaded.

"Are you armed?" she asked.

“I was until your friend Manuel helped himself to my revolver,” I said, shrugging.

“Here,” she said, passing me one of the sidearms, and I tucked it into the waistband of my trousers before she put the other into a leather bag and led me to the door.

As we made our way along the road, careful to stay close to the surrounding foliage, we saw more boats arrive full of armed invaders. But not all of the town’s militiamen were as fickle as Manuel, and we could hear firing coming from the forest up ahead.

Whoever was shooting was attempting to disable the boats, but they were having little effect. Then another Sea Fury flew across at treetop level and fired at one of the vessels, causing it to erupt in flames. Out at sea we could see men diving into the water, heading for the shore. Suddenly they began to scream and I looked across at Consuela, confused.

“Sharks,” she explained, very matter-of-fact.

I was just coming to terms with the fact that we’d witnessed grown men being served up on the lunch menu, when there was a deafening roar, and in the distance a huge mushroom cloud soared up into the air.

“Oh, my God!” cried Consuela. “The Americans are using the atom bomb!”

I must admit that when I’d heard what sounded like the Barisal guns erupting, my thoughts had leant in the same direction, but then I thought back to my time in Korea and I realised that one of the American ships must have exploded after being hit.

We headed for the woods and discovered a score of militiamen armed with rifles. They greeted Consuela, and I was relieved to hear that reinforcements were on the way.

We managed to lie low for most of the day and when men started arriving with heavy weapons, I began to hope that it would all soon be over. I could even hear the sound of tanks wending their way up the narrow tracks through the swamps to our rear. Our troops began to lay down a massive barrage against the men on the beach and when the firing finally stopped, you could hear the yelling of the wounded rise up to meet us.

One of Castro’s T-Birds swooped down from out of the sky, armed with rockets, and they were used to devastating effect on the remains of the invasion force.

“Consuela, what about the dissidents? Won’t they come and help the invaders?” I asked, remembering what Burke had told us about the thousands of anti-Castro rebels ready to join the cause.

“Fidel put them all in prison,” she assured me.

One of the men had managed to tune his radio into the task force’s frequency and we listened to the desperate pleas of the leader.

“Damn it, I will not be evacuated. We will fight to the end if we have to. Where is the support you promised?”

For a second I tried to think why the voice sounded familiar – and then it struck me. The frantic appeals had come from Pepe, the man I had seen briefing the task force in Guatemala only a few weeks before. I made the mistake of mentioning that I knew the man on the radio, and one of the officers suddenly explained that he had a marvellous idea.

“We have no interest in slaughtering men needlessly, but the survivors will not listen to reason. If you know this man, Senor, perhaps he will listen to you.”

I happily agreed and made my way towards the radio-set, but then he dropped his bombshell.

“No, Senor, you misunderstand. We should speak to the man in person, under a flag of truce.”

I was ready to tell the idiot to bugger off, but then I saw Consuela looking in my direction, willing me to help the officer carry out his humanitarian gesture. So I grudgingly followed the bright spark out of the forest, clutching a white flag.

As we approached the shore we saw that it was littered with wounded and dying men, and that was when a B-26 came out of nowhere. At first I’d assumed it was piloted by one of Castro’s brave defenders, but then it strafed the beach in front of us. My fellow officer and I dived into the sand and, once the plane had passed, we looked at one another, both relieved to be in one piece.

Relief quickly turned to horror as we watched the aircraft drop its load of napalm on the forest behind us, engulfing the whole area in a sheet of deadly flame.

“Oh, my Christ!” I screamed, running towards the firestorm.

As I drew closer, the heat forced me back and I skirted the burning trees, desperate for any sign that there were survivors.

“Please, God, please,” my mind kept on repeating. “Please – don’t let her be dead.”

* * *

Perhaps if I wasn’t such a godless chap my prayers would have been answered, but I doubt it. I must have circled that burning wood trying to find a way in for almost an hour. But I knew that nothing would stop the incessant heat caused by that infernal concoction of petroleum jelly. Men had created the nightmarish weapon to inflict as much pain and suffering as possible – and they had succeeded.

When the charred woodland had cooled enough for some of us to look for survivors, I fought my way through, cursing the smoke in my eyes which made it difficult to see. I vaguely remember the pain running up my legs, as smouldering logs brushed against my trousers and burnt through to my flesh.

Now I’ve no wish to shock you for shocking’s sake, and God knows the last thing I want to do is relive painful memories, *horresco referens*, but I feel I must tell you what I saw, if you are to understand the events that were to follow.

In my heart I knew that Consuela had to be dead, but somehow my mind was playing tricks and I imagined I would find her lying peacefully on the ground – as if in some sort of deep sleep. If that was what I expected, then I was to have a rude awakening. The horrific vision lying in wait was about to present itself.

If the smell of burning flesh is not enough to upset your constitution, then I have no doubt that the sight of a body with its flesh half-melted away will finish the job. I have little desire to go into details – suffice it to say that the nightmarish vision of a skull’s teeth grinning back at you can portray the agonising moment of death with devastating accuracy.

I must have only stared for a matter of seconds at the ghoulish apparition, wrapped in the burnt remains of a shawl, but it might as well have been a lifetime.

When I'd finally finished emptying the contents of my stomach, I fled the hell on earth and didn't stop running until I found myself wading into the sea. I dived into the water, desperate to erase what I had seen. But the instinct to survive is too strong, and when my body could stand it no longer, I surfaced and sucked in lungfuls of air.

I'd seen unspeakable horrors before, of course, but I had always done my best to play the part of the disinterested observer, ready to count one's blessings and seek solace in the arms of the next woman, before drinking myself into a stupor. But the death of Consuela was different.

Like a fool I'd fallen for her hook, line and sinker. And when I think back, it wasn't just that she was one of the most beautiful women I've ever known. No, it was the fact that for some insane reason that only she was aware of, she actually loved *me*. I don't believe in miracles as a rule, but if ever there was a candidate, her infatuation with yours truly would be it.

But she was gone forever. If she'd survived, would we have lived a long and happy life together? I'm afraid I have no answer.

You see, even fifty years on, it's a question I have never dared to ask myself.

Food for the gallows

It has been necessary to share with you the horrific circumstances of Consuela's death because it had a profound effect on me. Now, after all these years, I can look back and say that the loss of my pretty revolutionary must have resulted in a temporary form of insanity - as you will see.

I learned that the two Americans who had recently burnt my lovely Consuela to a crisp had parachuted from their B-26, after having been shot down by one of Castro's planes. The bomber had crashed into a sugar mill, but the pilots had landed in the water up the coast, before being dragged on to the beach by some of the militiamen.

The local troops were so incensed by the brutal killing of their comrades that they had decided to execute the unlucky aviators on the spot. I arrived just in time to see the two pilots kneeling on the sand, surrounded by snarling soldiers.

One of the pleading victims sported a beard and somehow he reminded me of my old friend, McGuinness, with whom I'd flown in Vietnam. This fact no doubt only adds to the wickedness of what I was about to do.

One of Castro's finest was pointing his pistol at the back of the man's head, preparing to kill him.

"Wait!" I cried.

They all looked round to see who had the audacity to intrude on their fun. One chap, who must have recognised me from my days spent with the rebels in the Sierra Maestra, began to protest.

"What are you doing, Senor? Consuela Cortez was with the men killed in the forest at Playa Girón," explained my comrade, as if I needed reminding. "You of all people should want to see these men dead."

"You are right, my friend. That is why I beg you to let me do the honours," I said, pulling out the pistol Consuela had given me only hours before she was killed.

The vicious-looking brute who had volunteered to be the executioner grinned and stepped back, waving his hand in a welcoming gesture.

"Be my guest. These men are food for the gallows."

I walked up to my fellow aviator and terror was etched on every line of his face. I pointed my gun at his head and his eyes pleaded for mercy. When I lowered my weapon he let out a sigh, and my audience looked on, confused. But their curiosity was quickly satisfied when I fired, hitting my victim in the groin and causing him to squirm on the ground in agony. His friend looked on in horror, before I served him the same way.

The executioner nodded in understanding and his acknowledgement of my evil intent only served to make me feel grubby, somehow. He prepared to complete the task and put them out of their misery, but I must have shocked my bloodthirsty companions with my next words because they stared at me open-mouthed.

"Don't kill them yet!" I yelled above the blood-curdling screams. "Leave them for a while to think about what they've done."

It was a terrible thing to do, I'll freely admit, and I dare say that if the wretched blighters hadn't been served up on a plate so soon after my shocking find in the forest, I wouldn't have done it. Naturally I kept the whole sorry business to myself and didn't mention a word to Biggins. Somehow I don't think he would have condoned a fellow MI6 operative killing two CIA men in cold blood.

In my defence I'll simply say that the Cubans were going to polish off the unlucky souls anyway – I just prolonged the process. Anyway, I can't imagine how the Yanks would have been able to prosecute me for killing two of their men. As the president's brother, Robert Kennedy, declared with his hand on his heart: "No U.S. citizen participated in the invasion and no Americans died at the Bay of Pigs." Case closed, M'Lud.

Of course my actions failed to make me feel any better and I wandered up and down the beach in some kind of trance. The fact that the invasion had been crushed didn't enter my consciousness. Even if it had, I couldn't have cared less one way or the other.

After the debacle of the Bay of Pigs, the chaps at the CIA resorted to their old tricks and contented themselves with simply trying to kill Castro.

Operation Mongoose involved such ridiculous ideas as slipping poison into a chocolate milkshake; providing the Cuban leader with a botulism-infected scuba-diving suit; and placing colourful seashells rigged to explode on the sea floor.

If the Americans thought Castro wasn't aware of their half-arsed attempts to do away with him, they were deceiving themselves. As he said to me a few weeks later:

"Let Kennedy and his brother Robert take care of themselves, since they too can be victims of an attempt which will cause their deaths."

Prophetic words, if you like.

When I met with Castro a few weeks later, I had recovered sufficiently from my trauma to be able to function in the real world. But looking back, I still believe I was existing like some sort of automaton. People would speak and I would respond, but my mind was consumed by an overpowering grief which threatened to have me screaming like a madman.

Even Biggins seemed to sense that I wasn't my old self, and for those first few weeks he wisely kept out of my way and spent his time sending long-winded reports back to Whitehall. He was preparing to return to London. But, unknown to him, there was trouble brewing in Havana.

What if I were to double-cross you?

“My reading of the Bay of Pigs is that it signals unrelenting American hostility. What is your opinion, Captain?” asked Fidel Castro Ruz, interested in the opinion of his English supporter.

“That would be my assessment too, comrade,” I replied.

“Comrade Khrushchev has come up with a solution. He has agreed to deploy nuclear missiles on the island of Cuba.”

For the first time in weeks I was dragged from my dark thoughts by this latest revelation. I couldn't hide my shock, as I accepted the cigar Fidel offered me to accompany my rum. He stood up from his desk and walked over to the window of his new office before turning to face me.

“Do you think I should accept our Soviet friend's gracious offer?”

“Certainly,” I said, happy to see Consuela's Cuba in a position to stand up to the Yanks.

Fidel looked at me thoughtfully, as the smoke from our cigars filled the room.

“If I may say, you are a strange enigma to me, Captain. When I first met you I was sure that you were only concerned with the interests of your own country, but now I truly believe that Cuba is at the front of your thoughts. No doubt the love you shared with Consuela before her untimely death has had something to do with your change of heart.”

“No doubt,” I said automatically.

“I am glad you agree that I should welcome the arrival of such weapons in Cuba because I have already given my approval, and nuclear warheads are already in place,” said Fidel, shocking me to the core for a second time.

“But why are you telling me all this, comrade?”

“Am I wrong to trust you?”

“No.”

“I believe you, Captain. This is most fortunate because I require your help.”

“In what way?”

“Unfortunately the United States is a wealthy country and they possess expensive hardware of which I can only dream. Have you heard of the U-2 spy plane, perchance?”

“From what I've been told, it can take photos of a chap reading a newspaper from sixty thousand feet up.”

“That is quite correct, Captain. Do you think we will be able to hide our missile launchers from such a plane for long?”

“I doubt it.”

“I'm inclined to agree with you. Which brings me to how you might be able to help my country – a country for which, I needn't remind you, Consuela died,” said Fidel, reminding me of that very fact.

“I'm afraid I still don't follow you, comrade.”

“I wonder if, as an agent of Her Majesty's Government, you could contrive to go to the United States and meet with your counterparts in the Central Intelligence Agency.”

“What would be the purpose of the meeting?”

“I believe that when the Americans discover our launchers, as they undoubtedly will, they might assume we do not have a nuclear capability already in place and they will initiate a pre-emptive strike against my country. I was hoping that you might be able to warn the Americans how foolish it would be to attack us, in light of what I have told you.”

“But you’ll be able to retaliate, won’t you?”

“I have no wish to start World War Three. What sane man would? A deterrent is only a deterrent if your enemy knows you possess it. I need you to convince the Americans we are more than capable of defending ourselves.”

“May I ask why you are willing to trust me?”

“Believe me, Captain, I have experienced grief myself and I sense this in you. You want Consuela’s legacy to survive, do you not?”

“Yes. But what if I were to double-cross you?”

“I do not believe you will. However, in the unlikely event that you do, I would be forced to seek my own form of revenge.”

“What do you mean, comrade?”

“I’m afraid I would find it necessary to let it be known that a captain in the Royal Air Force tortured and killed two American citizens.”

* * *

What Castro didn’t realise was that there was absolutely no need to waste his threats on me. I had no intention of helping the Yanks.

I told Biggins about my little chat with Castro, but he was convinced that the Cuban leader was bluffing. I decided to put him straight.

“I saw the missiles myself - but if that’s what you want to believe, it’s no skin off my nose. The whole world can go to hell in a hand-basket for all I care.”

I poured myself a large glass of rum and lit a cigar. Biggins just stared at me, trying to work out if I was telling the truth, and finally he let out a curse.

“Jesus, Fletcher! Castro really *has* got nuclear weapons, hasn’t he?”

“What can I tell you, Henry?” I said, returning his gaze.

“But if the Yanks attack, it will be the start of World War Three.”

“Correct,” I said, taking a healthy sip of rum.

“I’d better contact London,” he said, heading for the door.

“You do that,” I said to an empty room.

Knowing the idiots in Whitehall and Washington, I didn’t hold out much hope that our warnings would be heeded. When Biggins returned a few minutes later, my suspicions were confirmed and he was chastising our masters.

“The stupid bastards won’t believe me.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” I asked, thinking that was the end of the matter, but Biggins had other ideas.

“We’ve got to convince those idiots in the American military before they do anything stupid.”

I looked across at his sweating face, wondering what he had in mind.
“That’s right, Fletcher – we’re off to the Pentagon!”

You're a damn liar

The Yanks finally got hold of their photographic evidence about the missile sites, just as Castro had feared, and they'd convinced themselves that the launchers weren't armed with nuclear weapons.

One of Biggins' chums from the CIA had carelessly acquainted us with the latest situation and then, almost as an afterthought, he made us swear that we wouldn't inform our government until Kennedy had spoken to Macmillan. My God, I thought, it's a hell of a way to run a security service.

Anyway, the damage was done and we loitered at the Pentagon while Biggins vacillated in his usual style, unsure whether he should give his official backing to my version of events.

So I was rather at a loss as to how I could carry out Castro's wishes and save the Cuba for which Consuela had died. As it happened I needn't have worried, because one of the major players sought me out without me having to lift a finger.

His name was General Curtis LeMay, and his reputation preceded him. He was cut from the same cloth as our own 'Bomber Harris', and his idea of diplomacy was to blow the hell out of the enemy and ask questions later. He had a thick head of greying hair and a rather square face with protruding jowls. His dark eyebrows lowered at the sight of me, giving him a most menacing appearance. He was clearly wondering what the devil British operatives were doing at the headquarters of the U.S. Defence Department.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked testily.

"My name is Captain Fletcher, sir, and I work for British Intelligence," I said, handing over my identity card.

"Why are you here?" he snapped.

"I have recently returned from Cuba where I have been working undercover."

It was a pleasure to see the look of surprise dawn on his face. It was obvious that I had piqued his interest – as his next question testified.

"Well, if you've been to Cuba, perhaps you'll know what Castro's up to."

I decided to answer his question with one of my own.

"General, is America going to invade Cuba?"

"That is a matter for the United States government," he said haughtily, "and the British government will be notified through the proper channels in due course."

"Certainly, General, I quite understand. But would I be right in assuming that you would support such an invasion?"

"Perhaps," he said, narrowing his eyes as he looked me up and down in a most disconcerting way.

"Sir, I'm sorry to have to tell you, but there *are* nuclear weapons loaded on the launchers in Cuba, so invading the country would not be a very good idea," I said, trusting that my revelation would keep him from blowing the hell out of my loved-one's home.

He looked startled as he took in this latest nugget of information. He began to look thoughtful before asking his next question.

“Can you prove that?”

“No, General, but you have my word. There *are* nuclear weapons aimed at the United States. I saw the missile sites myself.”

“Captain, may I be blunt?” he asked, scowling.

“Be my guest,” I said, not really caring.

“You’re a damn liar!”

* * *

If you want to know how near we came to wiping ourselves off the face of the planet, you could do worse than listen to the tapes of the Ex Comm meetings which, for some reason, Kennedy decided to record for posterity.⁸

His advisers were split into two camps – the ‘hawks’ and the ‘doves’. That is to say, those that were determined to go to war, and those who sought a peaceful solution to the crisis. General Curtis LeMay was very much one of the hawks.

If you listen to the transcripts, LeMay’s supporters were naturally all for bombing the hell out of Cuba from the outset. But, most surprising of all, the Kennedy brothers agreed - at least in the beginning. Thankfully for you, me and the rest of the world, the ‘doves’ managed to change the president’s mind and he decided to order up a blockade instead. For the next few days the Americans and the Soviets were eyeball to eyeball and, as one chap wisely observed: “The communists were the first to blink.”

So it seems that LeMay really *did* think I was telling a pork pie. It’s ironic when you think about it. There I was, insane with grief and not really caring if the whole world went to blazes, and yet *I* was the one trying to stop the Yanks from doing anything stupid. And in spite of my best efforts, LeMay chose not to believe me and remained hell-bent on invading Cuba.

Just imagine what would have happened if the Americans had gone over to Cuba with all guns blazing. What do you think the communists would have done? Since Khrushchev had given the Soviet commander in Cuba carte blanche, I think we know the answer to that - especially when you consider that General Pliyev was another ‘LeMay’ in Red Army clothing. It would have been World War Three and anyone unfortunate enough to have survived would have ended up in the Dark Ages.

I feel it worth pointing out that there were supposedly sane American generals who genuinely believed they could win a nuclear exchange. If the communists were wiped out but just two Americans survived, so their reasoning went, then the West had won.

As one of Kennedy’s ‘doves’ shrewdly pointed out to the military idiots who held such irrational views: “You’d better hope that the two Americans left are a man and a woman.”

Thankfully wiser heads prevailed and we didn’t blow ourselves to kingdom come. What’s more, the Cuba that Consuela had fought and died for survived.

The ‘Thirteen Days’ finally ended and the crisis was over. Khrushchev backed down and removed the missiles from the island, and in exchange Kennedy promised not to invade Cuba and secretly agreed to remove America’s ‘Jupiter’ missiles from Turkey. The people

of the world breathed a collective sigh of relief, and the Kennedy brothers had to resort to bullets and poison pens as a way of getting rid of Castro.

“Well, Fletcher, it’s finally all over,” said Biggins, once we’d returned to our embassy in Washington.

“Maybe for you,” I said without thinking.

“Look, Thomas,” he began, and I stopped staring at the floor to look him in the eye when he used my first name. “I know Consuela’s death has been a terrible blow, but you’ve got to pull yourself together. You of all people know how dangerous war can be – death is just a fact of life.”

“Yes, I’m sure you’re right, Henry,” I said, hoping to shut him up, but he failed to get the message and pressed on regardless.

“I can tell you’re angry but Consuela’s dead and buried. What can you do – take revenge on the whole world? Besides, Castro’s men executed the pilots who napalmed the forest, so those responsible have been punished,” he said, managing to scare the life out of me.

Did he know more than he was letting on, I wondered? I stared at him, only to be greeted by his usual gormless façade, and to this day I can’t say whether my old school chum knew the score. If he did he must have kept it to himself, or I probably would have ended up in the Tower.

“Remember, Fletcher,” he went on, “those pilots were just following orders. It wasn’t *their* idea to invade Cuba - so you can’t blame them for Consuela’s death.”

“I’ve got the message, Biggins,” I said morosely, and I walked off to take a stroll in the garden of the embassy.

As I smoked one of my Cuban cigars, for which I had grown a taste, my mind began to whirl. He was right, of course. The pilots *had* been following orders – *Kennedy’s* orders. The word had come down and the half-arsed invasion of Cuba had gone ahead - and now Consuela was dead.

I’d spent the past decade living in a shadowy world where killing and murder were condoned by whichever government’s intelligence service you happened to be working for. Albeit unwillingly, I’d become a part of that world and I was thoroughly sick of it.

Why did angels of mercy like Consuela lose their lives, while the men giving the orders never paid the price? But in 1963 things were about to change and no one was safe – not even the most powerful man in the world.

You've got a damn nerve, fella

And now I must tell you of one of the oddest coincidences of my life. But then again, perhaps such things are bound to happen if you live long enough and spend your days in the murky underbelly of the world, as I have.

As you know, I'd helped to smuggle weapons into Cuba and placed them in the hot little hands of Castro's revolutionaries. But what I haven't shared with you until now is that on my trip to Florida, I met a gun-runner who was selling to the highest bidder. Nothing odd about that, you might say, but if I were to tell you that the culprit sported the name of Jack Ruby, perhaps you'll begin to see things differently.

So what, I hear you say? Well, allow me to share with you another part of my story. Since I spoke Russian like a native, the Service had me popping behind the Iron Curtain more times than a whore drops her drawers when the sailors have come to town. But what may be more surprising, especially considering my present tale, is the fact that I crossed paths with another player in the story – an American misfit who had ties with the pro-Castro movement and was looking for a cause – one Lee Harvey Oswald.⁹

The final contribution to this amazing set of circumstances was a fateful meeting with a Mafia boss I happened to bump into while visiting a seedy casino in the city of Miami. Having had enough of the two-faced bureaucrats in Washington, the gambling house in Florida had seemed as good a place as any to waste my time.

The owner of the establishment happened to spot me while he was busy working his way through a plate of spaghetti – and making a damn mess of the proceedings, by the looks of things.

I'd been trying my hand at the blackjack table and the crime boss had recognised me from my early days in Cuba. He'd remembered me because it was the day Batista's commander-in-chief had been killed - nearly taking Biggins and I right along with him.

Two of the owner's henchmen headed my way, relieved me of my revolver, and escorted me to their employer's table so that I could witness the chimp's tea party first-hand.

Spotting some errant sauce which had splashed on to the waistcoat of his suit, the devotee of Italian cuisine lowered his bald head to peer at it through his thick glasses. He wiped at the stain and waved a hand to indicate that I should take a seat.

"You're a limey spook, am I right?" he said, leaning forward so that his fat belly pressed against the edge of the table.

His directness had taken me aback, but I managed to compose myself sufficiently to reply.

"What makes you say that?"

"I make it my business to know," he said flatly.

"So, what do you want with me?" I asked, too tired to play games.

"I heard rumours you ended up fighting for the other side in Cuba."

"What if I did?"

"Well, you've got a damn nerve, fella, coming to my place all alone. Nobody saw you arrive and no one needs to see you leave – you know what I mean?"

I looked across at the muscle-bound man playing with my revolver and wondered if my time had come.

“Relax,” he said suddenly, “I lost my place in Cuba, but that’s all history. You’re not to blame. As a matter of fact I don’t even blame Castro. It’s that pussy in the White House who messed up. And now that son of a bitch is trying to close down legitimate businesses like this.”

He pointed at one of the tables, manned by a croupier you wouldn’t have trusted with a child’s piggy-bank. And then, out of the blue, he said:

“I swear to God I’d have the bastard killed if I thought I could get away with it.”

“Good luck with finding anyone crazy enough to take on that job,” I said, trying to hide my amazement at this latest revelation.

For the first time he smiled and that is why I think his next question shocked me all the more.

“I don’t suppose a guy in your line of business would happen to know anyone who’d fit the bill?”

* * *

The world is such an infernal place that people live and die and nothing much changes. That year of 1963 was no different in that regard. Cuba remained a communist country, and a murdered American president was replaced by his successor; Biggins refused to leave me in peace and kept me in the Service so that he could drag me off to yet more war-torn corners of the world; and I carried on drinking the world’s bars dry while I missed my lovely Consuela.

For my sins I have survived one conflict after another and emerged unscathed. I have enjoyed the company of more than my fair share of beautiful women and now, in retirement, I live well.

All in all, it sounds like a charmed and undeserved life. As I sit overlooking my Antiguan bay, I will say amen to that, like the good-for-nothing atheist I am.

But having relived the most traumatic time of my life for these hallowed memoirs, I will swallow another good measure of brandy from the bottle sitting on my desk. With any luck the alcohol will take effect.

And when I close my eyes I won’t be tormented by Consuela’s burnt and charred body, or make the mistake of dreaming about what might have been.

Postscript

No doubt you are aware of what befell the unlucky President of the United States on November 22nd 1963 in Dealey Plaza.¹⁰ The leader of the Free World was shot by a Mr. Lee Harvey Oswald, who was in turn killed by a Mr. Jack Ruby. Conspiracy theories were rife - among them the speculation that one of America's crime families blamed Kennedy for their troubles and had him killed.

In light of what I have been good enough to share with you, a less than charitable soul might be tempted to suspect that a humble member of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service played a disreputable part.

But I ask you – knowing me as you do – how could anyone suggest such a thing?

[This is where the fifth packet of my uncle's memoirs ends.]

Notes

1. The 26th July Movement took its name from its first action in 1953. This was the attack on the Moncada Barracks in Eastern Cuba, led by Fidel Castro, and it initiated the uprising against Batista.

(*A History of the Cuban Revolution*: Aviva Chomsky).

2. The journalist that Fletcher says made a film in the Sierra Maestra was probably Bob Taber. It was shown in the United States to world acclaim.

(Diary of Che Guevara – April 1957. *Diary of the Cuban Revolution*: Carlos Franqui).

3. Che Guevara met Fidel and Raul Castro in Mexico. Prior to that he had been living in Guatemala, where he witnessed an enormous gap between rich and poor. When the new moderate government tried to bring in reforms, it was removed after a U.S.-backed military coup. This appears to have been the catalyst that caused Che to become a communist and anti-imperialist. Che became part of the new Cuban government after the Revolution, and later he travelled to Bolivia to help organise the guerrillas fighting there. During this time he was increasingly troubled by his asthma and he was captured by the Bolivian Army. Twenty-four hours later he was murdered in the village schoolroom of La Higuera, under the watchful eye of U.S. military advisers.

(*Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution*: Mike Gonzales).

4. It is interesting to note that when Raul Castro discusses the use of home-made bombs in his diary, he also mentions a ‘gringo’ who was employed to provide military training to the men, having learned his trade in the Korean War. He also refers to a second ‘gringo’ who travelled to Santiago. He claims that one of the men was twenty-six years old – which is only a few years younger than Fletcher was at the time. Whether or not Raul is talking about Fletcher and Biggins is unclear, however.

(Diary of Raul Castro – March 1958. Op. cit.: Carlos Franqui).

5. The Nicaro Plant was a nickel refinery owned by the U.S. government.

(Communique to the U.S. State Department from Fidel Castro – October 1958).

6. The French ship, *La Coubre*, was blown up on March 4th 1960.

(*One Hell of a Gamble*: Aleksandr Fursenko / Timothy Naftali).

7. The CIA decided to land a fraudulent defector in Key West, but the hoax failed because a *real* defector landed 340 miles north in Jacksonville. Not only did the CIA’s B-26 bomber sport a fresh coat of paint, but it also had a metal nose, whereas those fitted to the Cuban B-26s were made of Plexiglas.

(*The Bay of Pigs*: Howard Jones).

8. The Ex Comm (Executive Committee of the National Security Council) was a select group of President Kennedy's advisers which met on a daily basis during the Cuban missile crisis. Kennedy recorded the meeting, ostensibly for his future memoirs.

(*The Cuban Missile Crisis*: Don Munton / David A Welch).

9. Fletcher's claim that he met Lee Harvey Oswald behind the Iron Curtain is quite surprising, to say the least. Records show that Oswald travelled to Russia in October 1959 and left in 1960. According to this memoir Fletcher was supposedly in Cuba, Antigua and the United States, so it is hard to see when he would have had time to travel to Russia. What Fletcher would have been doing in the Soviet Union also remains a mystery.

10. There have been a number of conspiracy theories as to who was behind the assassination of President Kennedy. The Warren Commission concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. So too did Jack Ruby who, as witnessed by millions of television viewers, later killed Oswald while he was being escorted by police to the Dallas County jail. The new President of the United States, Lyndon Johnson, was later quoted as saying that he believed Castro was behind the assassination because: "Kennedy was trying to kill Fidel Castro but Castro killed him first." Jack Ruby appeared to have a tenuous connection with the Mafia and claimed he had supplied arms to 'Cuban' forces. He visited Cuba in 1959. Ruby later died of cancer in December 1966, a few months before a new trial was to take place.

(The Dallas Morning News, August 18th 1978 – *Jack Ruby Gun-Runner To Castro Claim*: Earl Golz. *Not In Your Lifetime*: Anthony Summers. FBI Document 602-982-243 June 10th 1976).



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