

Testimony of Michael D. Bengé before the House International Relations Committee

**Chaired by the Honorable Benjamin A. Gilman,
November 4, 1999.**

My name is Michael D. Bengé. While serving as a civilian Economic Development Officer in the Central Highlands of South Viet Nam, I was captured by the North Vietnamese during the Tet Offensive on January 28, 1968. I was held in numerous camps in South Viet Nam, Cambodia, Laos and North Viet Nam. I was a POW for over five years, and spent 27 months in solitary confinement, one year in a "black box," and one year in a cage in Cambodia. I served for almost 11 years in Viet Nam. I was released during Operation Homecoming in 1973. I am a Board Member of the National Alliance of Families for the Return of America's Missing Servicemen. And, I am a POW/MIA activist; that is, I am one who is actively seeking the truth regarding the fate of our Prisoners of War and Missing in Action.

I was not tortured by the Cubans, nor was I part of the "Cuban Program." There were 19 American POWs that I know of who were tortured by the Cubans in Hanoi during the Vietnam War. These brave men include Colonel Jack Bomar and Captain Ray Vohden, who will testify, and also Commander Al Carpenter, who is with us today. They named their torturers "Fidel," "Chico" and "Pancho." The torture took place in a POW camp called the Zoo, and the Vietnamese camp commander was a man they called the "Lump." He was called that because of the presence of a rather large fatty tumor in the middle of his forehead.

No, I was not tortured by Cubans in Vietnam, but I was interrogated by the "Lump," and a person who appeared to be a Latino and who spoke a few words of Spanish to the "Lump" during my interrogation in the early part of 1970. Upon my return to the US, I was shown a picture taken in Cuba of the "Lump," who was with an American antiwar group. Yes, it was the same person who had interrogated me in 1970. I was told by a Congressional Investigator that he was the man who was in charge of funneling Soviet KGB money to American antiwar groups and activists, such as Jane Fonda. After researching my paper, this made more sense, for who would be better suited to liaison with the Cubans. This was my first piece of the puzzle.

I decided to research the "Cuban Program" after repeated claims by the Administration, Senators John McCain and John Kerry, Ambassador Pete Peterson, and members of the Department of Defense (DOD) that the Vietnamese Government was "cooperating fully" in resolving the POW/MIA issue. This is far from the truth.

If the Vietnamese communists were fully cooperating as purported, they would have told us the true fate of the 173 US servicemen who were last known to be alive and in the hands of the North Vietnamese communists. They would have helped us resolve the fate of over 600 American servicemen who were lost in Laos, of which over 80% were lost in areas under the total control of the North Vietnamese. If the Vietnamese were fully cooperating, we would not be here today, for they would have revealed the names of the Cubans "Fidel," "Chico" and "Pancho," who were responsible for the torture of 19 American POWs; beating one so severely that it resulted in his death.

Upon their return to the US, the POWs in the "Cuban Program" were told by our

government not to tell of their torture by the Cubans, but they resisted, as they had in the "Cuban Program, and some broke the silence. Regardless, the "Cuban Program" was swept under the rug by the US Government.

Thus, I chose to research the "Cuba Program" -- one segment of the POW/MIA issue-- to prove my point that the Vietnamese communists were not fully cooperating as purported. I first produced a draft paper in 1996 for presentation at the annual meeting of the National Alliance of Families.

Commander Chip Beck, who at that time was with the Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO), became interested in my research, and tried to find out what DPMO knew. He was basically told by DPMO to back off. Congressman Bob Dornan also became interested. He held hearings, and requested that DPMO provide them with their analysis of the Cuban Program. A compilation was presented, and Mr. Robert Destatte from DPMO testified as to his and DPMO's analysis. Commander Beck also testified; after which, he was told by DPMO that his services were no longer needed.

With the release of DPMO's compilation and analysis, and the declassification of additional documents related to Cuba's involvement in Vietnam, I reassessed this information. In the DPMO compilation, there were memoranda stating that the CIA had identified Cuban military attaches Eduardo Morjon Esteves and Luis Perez Jaen with backgrounds that seemed to correspond with information on "Fidel" and "Chico" provided by returned POWs. Reportedly, Esteves served under diplomatic cover as a brigadier general at the United Nations in New York during 1977-78. Documents indicate that the FBI and DIA were "tasked" to ID these people; however, neither the CIA, the DIA, nor the FBI could produce a decent picture for identification by the returned POWs. It makes one wonder as to their level of effort.

Nonetheless, just from my reading the documents in the DPMO compilation, I found the profile of a man that that seemed to match almost perfectly the POWs' description of the Cuban called "Chico." However, this profile also partially fit the POWs' characterization of "Fidel." The profile was that of Major Fernando Vecino Alegret.

On August 22, 1999, the Miami Herald published an article on the "Cuban Program" based partially on my report. However, the reporter got it wrong and said that I believed Raul Valdes Vivo, the DGI agent attached to COSVN (ref. my submitted report), might be "Fidel." Independent of my report, a Cuban exile in the Miami area identified Fernando Vecino Alegret as "Fidel," based on information emanating from contacts within the exile community and Cuba. He also produced a picture of Alegret that

was subsequently identified by Col. Hubbard, who said he was 99% sure he was "Fidel." Alegret is now Cuba's Minister of Education, and Fidel Castro has issued a denial that Alegret was ever in Vietnam. However, DIA documentation in DPMO's compilation proves otherwise.

In Mr. Destatte's testimony, he claims he "was never responsible for any investigations or analysis related to the "Cuban Program." "Responsible" is the key word here that Mr. Destatte parses.

The Administration and the Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) has mastered the art of obfuscation. I grew up on a farm in the West, and I used to try to catch greased pigs at the county fair, and I can assure you that trying to pin down DPMO to truthful facts is sometimes much more difficult than trying to catch a greased pig.

Mr. Chuck Trowbridge of DPMO is also implicated as participating in the investigation and analysis; however, it has never been revealed who was in fact in charge. One would hope that someone at DPMO is in charge.

Mr. Destatte testified to DPMO's conclusions and that the "Cuban Program" was nothing more than a program "to provide instruction in basic English to PAVN [North Vietnamese Army] personnel working with American prisoners."

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I have taught English to Vietnamese, and have been tortured by the Vietnamese, and I can tell the difference between the two. One might conclude from Mr. Destatte's testimony that neither he nor Mr. Trowbridge know the difference. I can also read English and understand what I read. One might also conclude that they may have a problem here too. Perhaps they should have taken basic English instruction from the Cubans.

Mr. Destatte also had the audacity to testify that the Vietnamese high-command was unaware that the Cubans were torturing American POWs, and it was stopped once they found out. However, it is crystal clear from the POW debriefings, as well as the Air Force Intelligence Analysis, that the "Cuban Program" was sanctioned by the Vietnamese. This then leads one to ask, "How did Mr. Destatte reach his conclusion?"

Mr. Destatte reached his conclusion by asking North Vietnamese communist Colonel Pham Teo, who told Destatte he was in South Viet Nam in 1967-68 and knew nothing of the "Cuban Program." However, he had heard rumors that it was an English language instruction program that had "gone awry." Mr. Destatte testified that the Vietnamese explanation "is...fully consistent with what we know about the conduct of the Cubans in question."

Evidently, Destatte chose to believe a Vietnamese communist colonel over American POWs who had been brutally tortured in the "Cuban Program" and had clearly stated in their debriefings that the Vietnamese were well aware of and participated in their torture. Destatte chooses to believe a member of a draconian regime, which had systematically murdered 70-80,000 political prisoners after they took over power in Vietnam in 1975, and who had broken every agreement ever made with the US and South Vietnamese governments.

What bewilders me, as it should you, is that Destatte's superiors at DPMO had the audacity to let him testify before Congress to this foolishness. This exemplifies the quality of DPMO's investigation and analysis of the "Cuban Program."

I am neither a trained investigator nor an analyst, but I do know how to research. And I have concluded that at best, DPMO's investigation and analysis of the "Cuban Program" was not up to professional standards, and DPMO's conclusions are shameful! However, they did a great job of obfuscating the issue.

Since the "Cuban Program" was sanctioned by the Vietnamese, what then was the driving force behind it?" According to POW debriefings, supported by CIA and other reports, the "Cuba Program" was part of a Hanoi medical university's "psychological study." It was conducted to obtain full compliance from the American POWs, and to force them to make propaganda statements against the American government and the war in Vietnam. The real reason for the termination of the "Cuban Program" was so "Fidel," "Chico" and "Pancho" could return to Cuba as planned in time to prepare a presentation for the October 18-21, 1968, Communist Internationale Second Symposium Against Yankee Genocide In Vietnam. This symposium in Cuba was a continuum of the Bertrand Russell War Crimes Tribunal kangaroo court and dog-and-pony show held in Denmark the previous year.

My paper is based partially on what DPMO gave to Congressman Dornan's Committee, as well as on documents obtained from the DIA and the CIA through the Freedom of Information Act, and it is thoroughly referenced. I would like to submit a copy of it and the referenced material to the Committee at this time for the record.

However, I have just scratched the surface, but I found enough documents to indicate that there should be a plethora of others related to the Cuban involvement in Vietnam if they are ever declassified as 2 US Presidents have decreed. I also recommend that this matter be thoroughly investigated by professional investigators, not DPMO analysts.

Besides evidence contrary to DPMO's stated position on the "Cuban Program," the documents I examined reveal:

documents examined reveal:

- the possibility that a number of American POWs from the Vietnam War had been held in Los Maristas, a secret Cuban prison run by Castro's G-2 intelligence service. The Cuban who claims to have seen them later escaped and made it to the United States, and was reportedly debriefed by the FBI;
- a Cuban Official had offered the State Department to ransom some American POWs from Vietnam, but there was no follow up;
- that Cubans, along with Russians, guarded a number of American POWs in Laos;
- the Cubans photographed a number of American POWs in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia;
- that besides the "Cuban Program," the Cubans were very heavily involved in Vietnam. They had several thousand "engineers" in Vietnam constructing, repairing and guarding the Ho Chi Minh Trail where a large number of Americans disappeared;
- the possibility that American POWs were "treated" in Cuban hospitals in Hanoi;
- the Cubans had a permanent DGI agent assigned to the COSVN headquarters in Cambodia, the North Vietnamese command center directing the war in South Vietnam. This is a fact not found in the history books on the Vietnam War. He was assigned there on the insistence of Raul Castro, the head of Cuba's military and the brother of the real Fidel. This fact belies Mr. Destatte's testimony that "the Soviet and Cuban governments did not successfully dictate policies or actions to the North Vietnamese government;"
- two unrelated documents telling of American POWs being taken from Vietnam to Cuba;
- the Cubans were also actively engaged in subversive activities, infiltrating a number of communist youth into the US, and were funneling KGB money through Vietnamese communist agents to antiwar groups and individuals in the US;
- as recent as 1996, the Vietnamese trained Cuban Special Forces to undertake limited attacks in the USA

Instead of hiring analysts at DPMO, DOD should hire some good professional investigators, such as former FBI or police investigators, and some people who know how to do systematic research. However, every time DPMO gets good ones, it seems to find a way to get rid of them.

My paper raises more questions than it answers, but only history will prove me right or wrong; however, I think I am on the right track. Only through full disclosure by the US government agencies, which were gathering information on the depth of Cuban involvement in the Vietnam war and with American POWs, will we know the truth.

As you can see from my document, the Cubans were heavily involved in the Vietnam War. They were in charge of building and maintaining a good portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Recently, I was invited as a representative of the National Alliance of Families to a briefing at DPMO by its head, Bob Jones. Among things he discussed was his proposal for DPMO to sponsor a meeting between the US, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos to discuss American Servicemen lost along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. I suggested to Mr. Jones that he should also invite Cuba to the conference, for they were heavily involved. He told me that I was ridiculous, for the Cubans weren't involved in Vietnam. I recommended to him that he read both the material presented to Congress on the Cuban Program and Raul Valdes Vivo's book.

I was brought up with old fashion values. My mother taught me at a young age that no matter how hard you search for the truth, you won't find it unless you want to.

We are not seeking revenge. We will leave that issue to the courts. We are also not

seeking to get someone fired, we leave that up to you to judge. We are only seeking an honest accounting for the POW/MIAs. We, like every American should, only seek honest answers from our government and its representatives, and competent investigations as to the fate of the POW/MIAs so that their families might find closure to their long suffering grief.

Ignorance? Arrogance? Disinterest? Lack of caring? Incompetence? Obfuscation? I rest my case.

Respectfully Submitted

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For efforts in rescuing several Americans prior to capture, he received the State Department's highest award for heroism and a second one for valor. He also received three of South Vietnam's highest medals for civilians.