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An Undercover Agent's Fantastic Experience: I Faced a Castro Firing Squad

I WOULD HEAR the shuffling sounds of the guards as they came to my cell to take me before the firing squad. Then I would awake from my fitful sleep and realize I had dreamed the noises.

But at 5 a.m., July 7, 1960, I heard the noises again—and this time it was not a dream.

I could sense the eyes of the other prisoners as guards took positions on each side and marched me outside. No one spoke. In the next two hours I would notice that both victims and executioners had difficulty in speaking.

Handcuffed, I was taken to the officers' mess in La Cabaña Fortress, next to famed Morro Castle in Havana. Standing there beneath banners proclaiming the Castro Revolution was Capt. Moises Sio Wong, a Chinese-Cuban, whose family operated a restaurant near my parents' home. We knew each other, but neither of us made any sign of recognition.

I waited, burning with fever and aching with the beatings I had taken. Twenty-four hours before, two fellow prisoners had been marched out of my cell to the firing squad. When more than an hour passed and we heard nothing, we had thought, *They will not kill us after all. It is only a bluff.* Then shots echoed from El Foso de los Laureles, and we knew the Communists were not bluffing.

El Foso de los Laureles is a pit in the prison courtyard where the Spaniards executed Cuban patriots in the 19th century. Castro had put it back into use, and already Captain Wong reportedly had killed 200 prisoners there. On two sides are towering rocks, grass, and flowers; on one side, an entrance for the firing squads; and on the fourth side, the stone wall against which the prisoners stand.

At 6:25 an expressionless army captain took over from Wong and led me downstairs to El Foso de los Laureles. "You can cover your eyes if you wish," he said. I couldn't speak, so I shook my head. Fever was making me faint, but I finally managed to whisper: "The handcuffs—take them off." He refused. Three soldiers marched me to the wall and left me there.

How vividly I recall the scene! About 25 soldiers surrounded the firing squad. Eight men made up the squad; seven carried Garand rifles, and one had a carbine with a 30-cartridge magazine. The captain carried a Thompson submachine gun under his arm. At his side was the .45 pistol he would use for the *coup de grace*.

He shouted orders, "Preepare . . ." The squad snapped the rifles up. I heard the bolts slam cartridges into the chambers. "Take aimmm . . ." The rifles steadied on me. I could not close my eyes. There was a long moment—a deliberately cruel long moment.

My ordeal began in late June when several members of my counterrevolutionary cell were arrested. From that time on, I lived from moment to moment, knowing an informer was in our ranks. But who? And when would he report me? With time, I might escape Cuba, but time ran out on June 30. I entered our apartment and found my wife sitting in the living room in stiff terror. Machine-gun toting members of G-2 (military intelligence) were sitting with her.

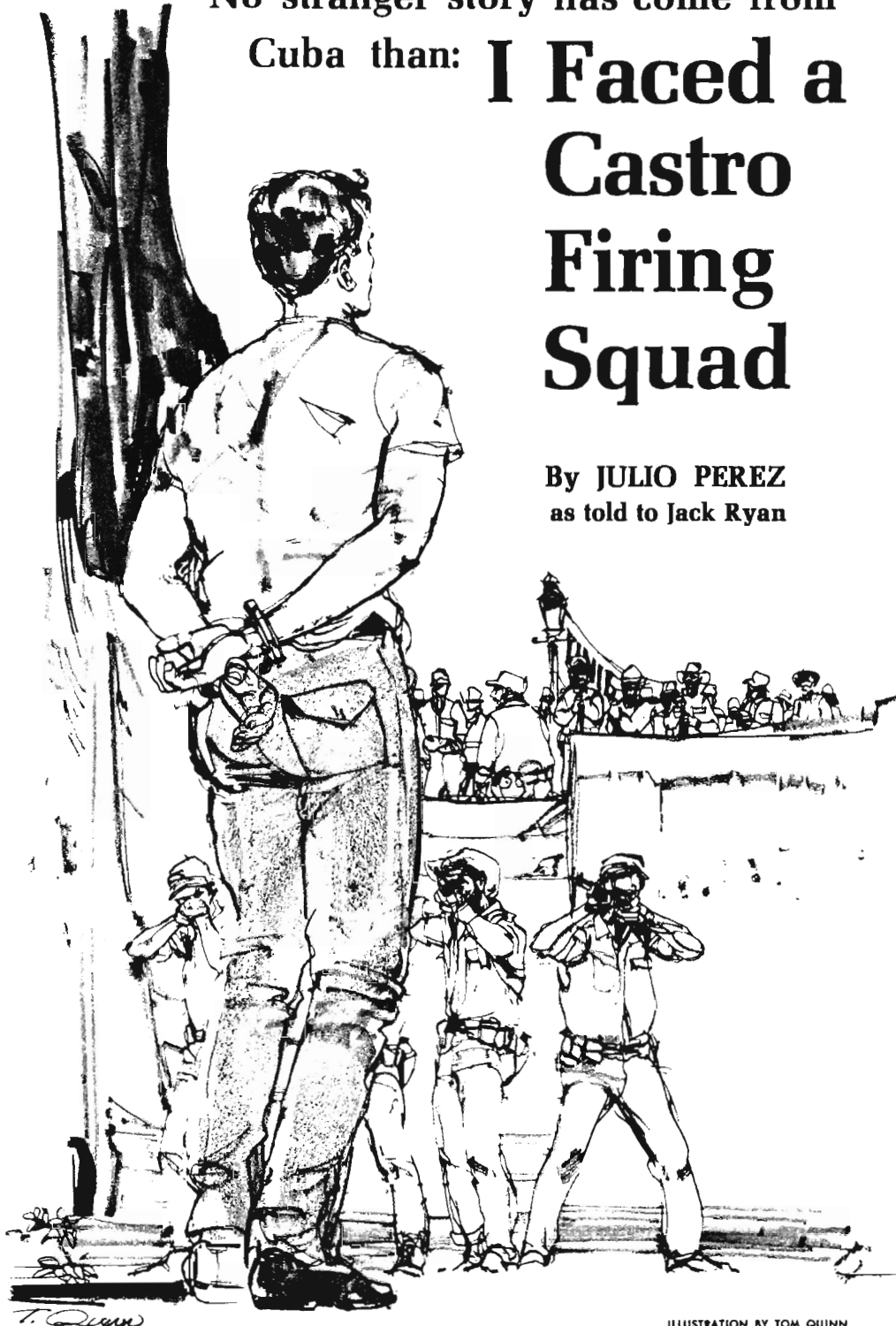
"Naval Ensign Julio Perez? Where have you

He heard the command, "Prepare...aim...fire!"
Then he saw the flash from rifles
pointed at him in a historic death pit.

No stranger story has come from

Cuba than: **I Faced a
Castro
Firing
Squad**

By JULIO PEREZ
as told to Jack Ryan



hidden your radio transmitter?" I pretended I didn't know what they were talking about. They searched me, then began on the apartment. The living room, bedroom—and then the kitchen. I didn't dare look at my wife. Concealed inside the toaster was a .38 pistol and a five-watt radio transmitter, 2x3x4 inches. I used the steeples of a church facing Havana harbor as antennae and guided gunrunners past the coast guard to rendezvous points on the north coast. If the transmitter were found, I would die that night.

After two hours, the searchers gave up and took me to G-2 headquarters, which was located in a former bank building. When we arrived, I went to open the car door, and a guard smashed my ribs with his rifle butt. They pushed me to a second-floor vault and slammed the steel door behind me. The air conditioning had been turned on full blast, and I shook with cold. From a loudspeaker, "The 26th of July March," Castro's rallying music, blared deafeningly over and over.

Early in the morning, the guards stripped me to pants and shirt and took me to another room, steamy hot and blinding with light. A Captain Suarez and a lieutenant whose name I never learned began questioning me. "Why were you in Mariel?" This is a coastal town near La Dominica, where, at the time, mysterious construction was under way. I had entered the security zone and photographed the construction, then turned the pictures over to an anti-Castro agent in a clandestine meeting. We thought the construction was for a Russian submarine base; later we learned it was to be a Russian missile site, one of those which forced the American-Soviet confrontation in October, 1962.

"I go to Mariel because it is near the naval academy where I went to school," I replied. I guessed they had only fragmentary information, so far. If I professed ignorance, I still might live.

The interrogators were joined by Ramiro Valdes, chief of G-2. "Perez," he said, "you will tell us about Mariel. Also about the weapons you brought to Havana."

The last part startled me—and told me who the informer was. One night earlier that summer, four of us had taken a navy truck to a coastal rendezvous point, picked up weapons smuggled from outside Cuba, and driven them to the city. Of the four, three were under arrest. The fourth was still free. He was a warrant officer I had trusted but who had been bribed to betray us. "I have nothing to say," I replied.

Captain Suarez snatched a bayonet from a Springfield rifle and lashed my back. "Stand up!" I did, and he punched me in the stomach. I toppled over, unconscious.

It seemed as if it were snowing, a peaceful snow that covered me as softly as a childhood blanket. Only when I distinguished the blaring sound of "The 26th of July March" did I realize I was half-delirious, locked again in the freezing vault. After hours, the door opened. "Are you ready to talk?" a guard asked.

"I have nothing to say. Please, I need water!" He refused. I asked for a chair so I could get off the ice-cold floor. No. The door slammed shut.

I managed to drag myself upright and lean against the wall, which was not so cold. But the guards reappeared and took me again to the steamy-hot, bright room. Suarez went to work. "What about Mariel? Where are the weapons?"

"I have nothing to say." For 10 minutes he

punched my body. Blood began rushing from my nose. "Tell us about Mariel, and we will be merciful. If not, the firing squad." But I knew I couldn't deal with Communists. I shook my head, and two soldiers pulled my arms tight behind me. Suarez's fists pounded my chest and abdomen.

Sunday, July 3, I was driven to La Cabaña Fortress with other prisoners and locked in a former officer's room with four others. Three days later the first of our group was executed, and at 6 p.m. that evening a guard opened the door and shouted: "Perez, you are next. Do you want a priest?"

"Let me see my wife!" . . . "There is not time" . . . "Let me phone her!" . . . "No" . . . "My mother then. Somebody must know about me" . . . "There is not time. The priest, Perez?" . . . "Yes!"

The priest came but could not help me reach my family. I scribbled a note to my wife and gave it to a seaman I had known before. His name was Rodriguez. "If you live," I said, "deliver this." I wanted somebody to know about Julio Perez and remember the date he died. Then night came, and I listened to footsteps that were not there until I awoke to reality and death.

* * *

The captain's cruel pause ended. "*Fuüre!*" I saw the flash from the rifles' muzzles and wisps of smoke. The flash was inordinately bright. Nothing happened. For a moment, life seemed suspended, then thoughts ran through my mind, all unjoined. *They have missed . . . It's a dream . . . Impossible . . . They will fire again.*

Guards half carried me to the captain. As they did, I realized the significance of the bright flashes. The squad had used blanks, which carry a larger powder charge. "Why haven't you killed me?" I asked.

Still expressionless, the captain said: "They don't tell me these things. Ask Wong." Then he prepared for the next prisoner, this time with live bullets.

In his office, Wong chatted as if nothing were unusual. He recalled his family and mine and the good days in Havana. He said I would have food and water—then I would tell him about Mariel. When I entered my cell, the other prisoners drew back in shock; I was indeed a ghost.

By now, however, Rodriguez had broken down. He shouted hysterically to our guard: "Take me. I'll tell all." The guard pulled him away, and we never saw him again.

The next time I saw Wong, he knew all the details of our plot but still not about my pictures at La Dominica or the location of our weapons. He cajoled me, then beat me. But I felt only silence could buy me time.

On July 9 I was summarily turned out of the prison, miles from home with nothing but my pants, shirt, and shoes. "Go home and stay," an officer shouted. "We will see you again, Perez."

I staggered to a post office and borrowed money to telephone my wife. I almost wept. "Come for me. Please, hurry."

Doctors said I had a nervous breakdown and must rest. But how? A passing car or voices from the street brought me bolt upright in bed. Night was worse; I could see the G-2 men as well as hear them. I went to my mother's home because G-2 did not know her address, but a high-placed friend contacted me with news: "A new death list has come out. You are on it. Get out of Cuba now—or never."

Until I obtained papers, I had to hide. I contacted a former army sergeant on Castro's death list who seemingly had vanished in February, 1959, and he agreed to share his hideout with me. At dusk, he brought me to a remote section of the National Cemetery where iron railings of the fence had been pulled apart. We slipped into the deserted graveyard and headed for a mausoleum. The sergeant unlocked the heavy door, and we entered the crypt.

"Those stairs," said the sergeant, "lead to another burial vault. Go down there." And so for the next six nights I slept with the dead.

By this time, police already had battered down the door of my apartment, only to find it abandoned. A general alarm went out for me and six others, yet each afternoon the sergeant and I would mingle with funeral groups and leave the cemetery with them undetected. I obtained a U. S. visa and a forged passport without much trouble, but most important was an exit permit, without which I could not board a plane.

In 1950 I had been on a frigate with a sailor you Americans would call an "operator" or "wheeler-dealer." This opportunist was now a police officer for Castro, but I knew he was no Communist, only a conniver. I asked him for a permit. Obviously he enjoyed seeing his former officer asking favors. "For you, certainly," he said. "For old times' sake—and \$200."

On Saturday, Aug. 13, my wife and I were at the airport, waiting for the 4 p.m. flight to Miami. My papers, including the precious yellow exit card, were made out to Carlos Perez y Perez—this being such a common Cuban name, I thought it best to keep it.

But an officious inspector for G-2 became suspicious. "A Julio Perez y Perez is on my list. Is that you?" I swore it wasn't. "We must be sure. Come with me while I phone headquarters."

Somehow my wife and I remained unshaken, even while being searched. Four o'clock came and passed, but the airport inspector could not get any information from headquarters over his radio-telephone. The airline pilot's impatience mounted, but he refused to leave without us. I must explain that in those days Castro's G-2 was headed by semilliterate country folk, totally confused by their new power. Nowadays Czechoslovakian intelligence chiefs command G-2, and I am sure I would not be alive now if they had been in control that fateful Saturday.

By 7:45 p.m. we were still stalled. The pilot angrily demanded that the agent release us. I protested I was Carlos Perez. The harassed agent fretted about headquarters' inefficiency. "I will call them again," he said, reddened with embarrassment over the Revolution's inability to check a simple fact. This time nobody at headquarters even bothered to answer his call.

"Bah!" he shouted, hanging up. "I don't care whether you're Julio or Carlos. Get out!" We rushed to the exit, and he called out: "Good luck, whoever you are."

I had been calm for the four hours we waited for a message from G-2 that would signal my death. Now I looked out the plane window, saw the lights of Havana flickering below us, and became violently ill. A woman shouted for my wife, who had just left her seat next to me.

The old fears and nightmares flooded over me again, but I heard my wife say:

"It is all right now, Julio. We are free." ♦