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Anti-Castro militant Posada Carriles is dead at 90

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Luis Posada Carriles, the Cuban exile militant who left no bomb or bullet unturned in a fruitless four-decade-long series of attempts to kill Fidel Castro, died early Wednesday morning after a long battle with throat cancer.

Probably the last of an aging cadre of Miami exiles who pursued Castro with a violent vengeance — at first with the not-so-silent support of the United States government, later in an increasingly lonely solo mission — Posada Carriles died peacefully in his sleep at Memorial Regional Hospital in Hollywood. It was a stark contrast with the way he lived his life.

From joining the CIA-backed exile army that in 1961 invaded Cuba at the Bay of Pigs to his arrest in Panama in 2000 just as Fidel Castro entered the country for a regional political summit, Posada Carriles roamed Latin America in search of opportunities to combat Cuba's Communist regime.

In the process, Posada Carriles was jailed many times and shot nearly to pieces. (He once jovially described to a Herald reporter how his tongue was left "hanging out like a piece of liver" after a Castro *pistolero* shot him in the mouth during a gunfight in Guatemala.)

He was courted by many of the hemisphere's spy agencies — and employed at one time or another by the CIA and intelligence services in Venezuela, Guatemala and El Salvador — but in the end denied by them all. In 1998, when Posada Carriles was crisscrossing Central America recruiting help for a bombing campaign against tourist facilities in Cuba, the State Department sent a stern cable to embassies there (and followed it up with visits by FBI agents) to warn against helping him.

"Our message is that we're not behind Posada, that we're concerned about his activities and we want them stopped," said one U.S. diplomat.

Posada Carriles always denied any specific criminal charges in connection with anti-Castro violence of which he was accused — particularly a 1976 midair bombing of a Cubana airliner with 73 people aboard and a 1997 hotel bombing in Havana that killed an Italian tourist — but never contested his general intent to do away with the man he considered a venal, vicious dictator.

"Wherever Castro was," he told the Herald in a 1991 interview, "there was I."

Among the dwindling number of Posada Carriles' aging contemporaries in Miami, the reaction to the news of his death was like grief for a passing soldier. The firebrand exile radio station La Poderosa observed a moment of silence, after which a sobbing listener called in to lament the death of "a leader of liberty and justice . . . a man of real dignity."

In Havana, the response was stony. Read the headline in the Communist Party newspaper Granma: "The murderer Luis Posada Carriles, who made Cuba grieve, died unpunished." Underneath was a photo of Cubans mourning over caskets of those who died in the Cubana jetliner.

Long before they became blood enemies, Posada Carriles and Castro were acquaintances at the University of Havana, where they both were students in the late 1940s and shared a revulsion for Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. But they soon parted ways, with Castro going to Mexico to raise an army against Batista and Posada Carriles joining the underground resistance while holding down a day job in an American tire company in Havana.

Castro came to power in 1959 and, not long after, had Posada Carriles briefly jailed. Two years later, Posada Carriles fled the island for Argentina before working his way to the United States, where the CIA was recruiting for the Bay of Pigs invasion force. For the rest of his life, Posada Carriles never had any profession other than seeking the overthrow of Castro.

At least, any *known* profession. Government documents declassified in 2017 showed that the U.S. Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs — the predecessor of the DEA — believed in 1973 that there was "little doubt that Posada is a [drug] trafficker" who should be kept under tight surveillance.

The bureau also suspected him of dealing in stolen watches and counterfeit dollars. But after Posada Carriles passed a lie detector test, government suspicions waned.

His longest association was with the CIA, starting with the Bay of Pigs. Like many of the veterans of that fight, he enlisted in the U.S. Army afterward for a two-year stint, then returned to the intelligence agency. He spent much of the 1960s running guns and supplies to anti-Castro rebels inside Cuba — and, according to recently declassified documents, spying on his fellow Castro-fighters for the CIA, where he was known by the code name [WKSCARLET-3](#).

Even when he wasn't working directly for the agency, his close contacts there paid off in other ways. Another former CIA operative, Felix Rodriguez, recruited Posada Carriles to help him manage covert supply flights to Nicaragua's anti-communist contra rebels in the 1980s.

The flights, funded with clandestine money from Reagan administration security official Oliver North, were a jackleg operation that used radar detectors purchased over the counter at Radio Shack to evade anti-aircraft missiles, a strategy that proved fatally deficient when the Nicaraguan army shot down one of the planes and exposed the supply ring. Even before that, Posada Carriles would later tell the FBI, the flights were so dicey that when he exited from one of them, he found tree branches stuck in the engine — at some point in the night, the plane had just missed crashing into the jungle by a foot or two.

Posada Carriles' last known anti-Castro adventure was in Panama in 2000, when he and three other Miami exile militants were arrested on suspicion that they were planning to car-bomb the route of Castro's vehicle from the airport to a downtown hotel where a Latin American presidential summit was being held. In the end, though, they were acquitted of attempted murder charges and convicted only of threatening the peace and possession of forged document.

Through it all, Posada Carriles was widely regarded as a hero among his contemporaries in Little Havana, who also raised money to fund both his clandestine operations and the legal fees for his scrapes with law enforcement. (There was no shortage of detractors, either. Miami journalist and broadcaster Max Lesnik, a close friend of Castro, said Wednesday that he didn't want to politicize Posada Carriles' death but quickly added that the militant's "aberrational and extremely violent attitudes" would make it difficult to "find God's forgiveness" in the afterlife.)

His supporters noted, correctly, that he was never convicted of a violent act.

Even the nine years or so he spent in a Venezuelan prison for the bombing of the Cubana airliner was while he was awaiting trial. Venezuelan courts acquitted him of the crime twice, but Posada Carriles remained jailed when prosecutors filed appeals. (Finally he escaped prison.)

Most recently, he had been living in a veterans home in Pembroke Pines. He never fully recovered from serious injuries in a 2015 automobile accident, and more recently he suffered from throat cancer. His relationship with his two adult children, Yanet and Jorge Posada, grew distant during the many years he was absent, and his funeral was being planned by old friends, including those in Brigade 2506, the organization for Bay of Pigs alumni. They said his body would be cremated and his ashes scattered off the coast of Cuba.

"He was a very good man, very affectionate, dutiful, a brother and a patriot," one of those Bay of Pigs veterans, former WQBA news director Tony Calatayud, said of Posada Carriles. "He's an icon of the fight for liberty of our country."

But among younger Cubans, the generation of Posada Carriles — and Castro — has largely receded into the misty corners of history, along with its passions.

"Sadly, he's another Cuban who died without seeing a free Cuba, despite having fought for it so long," said Spanish talk-radio host Ninoska Perez, head of the Council for Liberty of Cuba. "Some may have criticized him, others may have admired him, but he was always somebody for whom Cuba was the point of everything."

Miami Herald staff writer Mimi Whitefield and *El Nuevo Herald* writers Sonia Osorio and Mario J. Pentón contributed to this report.