

The Bay of Pigs Revisited

An Interview with Jacob Esterline and Col. Jack Hawkins

In October 1996, the two chief managers of the Bay of Pigs operation met in a Washington D.C. hotel to conduct a lengthy interview on the invasion. The meeting marked the first time they had seen each other since the weekend of April 17-19, 1961, and the first time they had recalled, together, the events surrounding the failed invasion. The interviewer is Peter Kornbluh.

About JACOB ESTERLINE: Jacob D. Esterline, aka Jake Engler, served as chief of the special Cuba Task Force established to run the Bay of Pigs operation (C/WH/4). In 1954 he had held a similar position during Operation PBSUCCESS, the CIA effort to overthrow the government of Jacobo Arbenz; he served as the first post-coup chief of station in Guatemala City from 1954-1957, and then chief of station in Caracas, Venezuela until 1960 when he was selected for the Cuba Task Force. After the Bay of Pigs he had several assignments, including chief of station in Miami from 1967-1972. He retired from the CIA in 1973.

About Col. JACK HAWKINS: Col. Hawkins, aka John Haskins, served as the chief paramilitary specialist on the Cuba Task Force in charge of the invasion (C/WH/4/PM). In October, 1960, when the concept of the operation expanded from an infiltration plan to an amphibious assault, he was detailed from the Marine Corps to the CIA. Awarded a Bronze Medal and Silver Star in World War II and Korea, he retired from the Marines in 1965.

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Q. Do you recall how you became involved in the Cuba operation?

Esterline: I was finishing a tour in Venezuela. [CIA Deputy Director Frank] Wisner came through in and around that time and mentioned that they were probably going to be doing something about, about Castro, beginning to think about it at least. And I said, well, if there's anything I can do when I finish my tour here let me know. Those were fatal words because a month or so later I was told that upon my return to the United States I was going to be put in charge of the initial thinking about what we were going to do about Castro.

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Q. What covert warfa on Cuba?

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Hawkins: I reported to the [Marine] Commandant in his office, General David Shoup, and he said the CIA wants to land a few Cuban exile troops in Cuba and they have asked for a Marine colonel to give them some help on this. And he says, "I'm going to send you over there on a temporary basis."

Q. What covert warfare experience did you draw on for the initial planning on Cuba?

Esterline: We thought back to the original things we had tried in terms of Guatemala in the broad sense of the word, not in the specific. We would have to begin to develop a fairly substantial cadre of military specialists and to that end we began the selection process of people who were available or would be available either outside of Cuba or inside of Cuba—people that we could exfiltrate. Also in that timeframe we had to begin to look for places that we could securely train these people and, as I recall, the United States, in the early stages, the United States was absolutely verboten in terms of where we would train. Having had a long experience in Guatemala and [previously] being chief of station, I was in the strongest position in terms of getting the real estate and the kind of support that would be necessary in Guatemala. To that end I went to Guatemala with the then chief of station who had actually replaced me there. We began to develop the ties to the folks in the Guatemalan government, namely Ydigoras Fuentes—that was the president—that would enable us to obtain relatively secure training camps.

Q. The initial landing site was the city of Trinidad. Why did you pick that location?

Esterline: I wanted to be absolutely sure that we didn't take any step that we couldn't back away from and to that end that is the reason that I had very early on developed a fondness for the eastern end of the island of Cuba, the Escambray mountains, what they now call the Trinidad area, because I thought if we could put people in there, they could survive and we could think very seriously about a greater effort.

If these teams that we put in survive, they would proliferate if the situation was correct and we could then begin to put in whatever additional material support we needed to be dictated by the situation. And I still think that that

approach was right except that there was no question that time was not on our side.

Hawkins: My understanding after arriving there was that the original concept was, as Mr. Esterline says³, primarily to develop guerrilla warfare within Cuba through the medium of the agent teams, who would have radio contact with the CIA in the United States and to whom we would deliver arms through overflight airdrops. This was the major effort of the plan to start with and Mr. Esterline proposed that a small infantry force of perhaps 300 men would be organized for possible employment but in conjunction with guerrilla warfare that was already going on in Cuba or had been developed by the teams.

Q. You both drafted a key planning paper in January 1961, laying out some of the assumptions and necessities of a successful invasion. Could you read the most important passages and comment on their significance?

Esterline: [reading from document] "It is expected that these operations will precipitate a large uprising throughout Cuba and cause a revolt of a large segment of the Cuban Army and Militia. An internal revolt in Cuba, if one is triggered by our actions may serve to topple the Castro government within a couple of weeks."

We had reason to believe that there was a fairly active and fairly sizable resistance at least in spirit opposed to Castro at that time but we did not know it definitively. The problem was how to begin operations that would allow us to get a better feeling for how serious and how successful — what the chances of success would be.

Hawkins: We did have intelligence from our agents that the whole province of Las Villas was anti-Castro for the most part and were sympathetic to the guerrillas then operating in the Escambray Mountains. We thought that we would have the opportunity to arm considerable numbers of them but, if not, the brigade would enter the mountains and begin guerrilla activity.

My belief and hope at the time was that we would have established absolute control of the air before we ever landed this force which I described as being absolutely essential and that the air operations in support of our force in the Trinidad area would be very spectacular in Cuba and inflict serious

casualties on Castro's side. It would produce unrest and would have occurred before

Hawkins: [reading from document] "As predicted above, the lodgment in the United States and other American countries will then be paved for the overthrow of Cuba. This is a government." So even in a provisional government that time be assisted by

It really was essential to the objective and of course we had to be in place. We should have known that the national government would overthrow Castro." No one there [when Kennedy was

Q. Kennedy defeated Castro and that leave preparations

Esterline: I really thought the new administration would have more time to develop their own way to deal with this problem. I was writing and I got nowhere. I thought that we would go ahead and be put to this new administration just . . . it was such a hard

Q. Were you involved in

Hawkins: I did go with Mr. White House meetings in the members of this cabinet. Mr.

casualties on Castro's forces, the Militia. We thought that this would gradually produce unrest and further uprising. I still believe that that probably would have occurred had we done it as we recommended.

Hawkins: [reading from document] "If matters do not eventuate as predicted above, the lodgment established by our force can be used as the site to establish a provisional government which can be recognized by the United States and other American states and be given overt military assistance. The way will then be paved for United States military intervention and the pacification of Cuba. This will result in the prompt overthrow of the Castro government." So even in that time in January, I visualized the possibility of a provisional government in the Escambray Mountain area which would at that time be assisted by the United States, at least logistically.

It really was essential to overthrow Castro. I thoroughly believed in that objective and of course it later proved, later on, that that should have taken place. We should have gotten rid of that communist regime. I really assumed that the national government meant what it said when it said "We want to overthrow Castro." Now, of course, we had a change of administration in there [when Kennedy was elected] and that changed things considerably.

Q. Kennedy defeated Vice-President Nixon in November 1960. Where did that leave preparations for the Cuba operation?

Esterline: I really thought that what we were doing should stop and that this new administration coming in should have time, in an orderly manner, have time to develop their own options and think about how they might want to deal with this problem. I put that forward to [Deputy Director] Bissell in writing and I got nowhere. I was told that it was not good to be that way and that we would go ahead and develop and continue with our plans that would be put to this new administration. I was very uneasy about it because I just . . . it was such a hairy thing to begin with.

Q. Were you involved in any direct briefings for President Kennedy?

Hawkins: I did go with [CIA Director] Dulles two or three times over to the White House meetings in the Oval office with President Kennedy and members of this cabinet. Mr. Rusk spoke out more than any of the other cabinet

members and he was adamantly opposed to this operation and to the use of any aircraft whatever.

I don't believe that anyone was explaining to him that you can't take a thin-skinned troop transport onto a hostile beach and drop anchor and start unloading troops with hostile fighters and bombers overhead. It can't be done. Nobody in the administration at high levels seemed to know that and nobody made it clear to President Kennedy that I know of.

Q. Did you brief the President on the Trinidad Plan?

Hawkins: The area lent itself to what we call in military terms isolation of the area. In other words, we could take certain measures that would make it difficult for the enemy to come into that area. The mountains on the west, that was one barrier and there was an unforgeable river on the north and east that had only two bridges over it. One of them was a railroad bridge and we thought we could knock those out. Tanks and vehicles would then not be able to come into Trinidad.

The plan was to land there at Trinidad; that location had good landing beaches, good defensible terrain; and we were going to block these ways for vehicles to come in there and we were going to hold there as long as we could and we were going to try and arm some of the residents and if we weren't having any luck or we were being pressed, we go right up into the western mountains and join the guerrillas already there.

Q. But Kennedy objected to Trinidad.

Hawkins: Well [Richard Bissell] came and told me that the president had completely rejected the Trinidad plan because it was too noisy and looked too much like an invasion. And he told me that the State Department and the president had imposed conditions on the landing—that we had to capture on the first day an airfield capable of supporting B-26 operations.

He wanted me immediately, that night, to find out such a place where that could be done. There was only one such a place that we could seize and hold for a limited time and had such an airstrip and that was the Bay of Pigs.

The president only gave [Bissell] three days to come up with a plan and so we told him what I had just said that this was the only place that satisfied this

requirement. Now I hold this area for a through the swamps can hold this for a v chance whatever of I gave him, about the n is the only place that we're going to do. At Pigs.

Q. What was your r landing site?

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requirement. Now I made it clear to him that, yes, we could land there and hold this area for a little while anyway because of the narrow approach through the swamps and a third along the coast from Cienfuegos. Now we can hold this for a while but not very long. Moreover, the brigade has no chance whatever of breaking out of there. In spite of these warnings that I gave him, about the military dangers involved in this area, [Bissell] said if this is the only place that satisfies the president's requirements then that's what we're going to do. And he said go ahead and develop a plan on the Bay of Pigs.

Q. What was your reaction when you found out about the change of landing site?

Esterline: Jack said [pointing to a map] the Bay of Pigs, and I looked down and I said "Bay of Pigs, that's not a very good name for success." But I looked at it and I thought to myself, it does look very secure, no one is going to get in there very easily but how are we going to get any more recruits, how are we going to expand this front because there is nobody there except alligators and ducks.

Q. Your superior, Richard Bissell made some critical decisions that affected the invasion. What were your opinions about him?

Esterline: I guess I have to say that he used us just as he used a lot of other things to his own advantage entirely.

Hawkins: Mr. Bissell acted unwisely in not defending the Trinidad operation. If they wanted to really get rid of Castro, he should of defended that, 'cause that was the only chance.

Later on, he didn't defend the need for air operations. I didn't know that the president had never really been informed about the necessity for eliminating Castro's air force and apparently he wasn't. And I didn't know that. I resented the fact that at the last moment Bissell did not fight harder to preserve our own air capability and particularly not to allow the final strike to be completely canceled. I thought that it behooved us to have enough honor not to do that to those Cuban troops. I would never have done it, and neither would Mr. Esterline.

Esterline: I am forced to a very unhappy conclusion and that is that he was lying down and lying up for reasons that I don't yet totally understand. I am convinced of this right now. I think the fact that someone would deliberately misrepresent a situation like that to the ultimate head of state, that's pretty unforgivable, I think.

Q. In early April, you both actually went to Bissell's house and said you were resigning because the invasion was going to be a disaster.

Esterline: We looked at every aspect and the odds and the percentages of success and we finally decided that we couldn't deliver on them.

Hawkins: I finally came to the conclusion that this could not work and was going to be a disaster.

Esterline: I called Bissell directly and said that we simply had to sit down with him. And I said that we can't tell you in good faith that we can give you any reasonable expectation that this thing is going to come to a successful conclusion as it stands. And he kind of impugned our loyalty. I certainly get the feeling that he impugned my loyalty, that because I didn't like something I was deserting a ship.

Hawkins: I remember this: Bissell said that as far as the air is concerned, he said I think I can persuade the president to allow us to conduct enough air operations to get rid of the Castro air force. He said he thought he could.

Esterline: I know he promised us that there would be no further reduction. And I said well if you promise there'll be no more reductions on air strikes as we lay them out, then I'll go along.

Q. Bissell may have expected Castro to be assassinated prior to the invasion. Were either of you aware of the assassination plot that was part of his Bay of Pigs planning?

Esterline: All of a sudden I started getting requests to authorize big payments, \$60,000, \$100,000, and I refused them. I just put them aside. And J.C. King [head of the CIA's Western Hemisphere division] called me and he said, "say, you're going to have to sign these things." Well I said that you'll

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have to tell me what I'm signing or I won't. He said: "well I can't because your not cleared." Get someone else to sign them, then, and he said, "Oh no, we can't do that."

A few days later I got a call and he said "you're going to be briefed," and so Shef Edwards, who was then the chief of security and one of his aides came over. I met with them and they unfolded to me. I couldn't believe they were telling me! This plan that they had laid out with Sam Giancana, their gambling interests—Traficante was another name that comes back to my mind. They [the Mafia] were being threatened, their interests were being threatened in Cuba, and therefore they had decided they were going to do something about Castro. So all of a sudden the agency gets sucked into being a part of it, which I never could understand how this made any sense, how this added up, but in point of fact, [the CIA] had the relationship with Giancana and he needed half a million dollars to perform his part of this.

When I went back to J.C. and I said, "J.C." I said, "do you realize that this is going to make people take this whole thing less seriously if somebody thinks there's an easy way out with Castro being killed?" And he said, "Nobody's going to find out" and I said "What are we going to tell Bissell?" And he said "Don't tell Bissell, Bissell's not cleared." It wasn't till years later that I found out Bissell was the guy behind it.

I thought it was absolutely amoral that we involve ourselves for the record in anything of this sort. Number one, I was just having trouble coming to grips with that, but number two I thought it would also be the most self-defeating thing for the operation which was going to be [difficult] at best. . . . I was saddled with this, I never told Jack [Hawkins].

Q. What factors, in your opinion, led to the failure of the invasion?

Hawkins: We should have done it so we could succeed. That was the whole thing. No one seemed to have success in mind. What they had in mind was is someone going to know about this. Success was what they should have been thinking about. It was a fundamental error that was really the underpinning of all the other errors made because everybody at the political level was trying for plausible deniability and that caused so many restrictions that the operation really could not be successful.

Esterline: It failed, I guess, primarily because starting at the top of government nobody wanted to do it so badly that they were prepared to take the steps to ensure success.

Hawkins: We wanted to use enough aircraft to do what had to be done. State opposed that from the very first they every heard about it and never stopped opposing it. They opposed the use of American pilots, they opposed the use of American bases. It was really State that convinced the president to cut down the airstrikes. That was Mr. Rusk, the Secretary of State. So the Department of State crippled and destroyed this operation. That is my considered judgment that I thought at the time and for years after, and they were never blamed for anything.

Q. And today? What do you think about current U.S. policy toward Cuba?

Hawkins: I think we should be willing to act like the great power that we are and make it felt wherever our interests are at play. I don't think we need to sneak around about anything.

Esterline: All I know is that this is a ridiculous situation we're living in now. It doesn't serve anyone. It doesn't serve us. It doesn't serve the Cuban people. We need some kind of a knight in shining armor who says "all right, lets get this thing under control," but I'm not volunteering for the job, believe me.

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