

Piracy, Spies, Phantom Ship Feature Caribbean Dispute

Washington, Dec. 22 (AP)—A fantastic Caribbean story of piracy, spying, a phantom ship, kidnaping and a cargo of avocado plants is being unfolded here before the Inter-American Peace Committee.

A central figure in the current Caribbean drama is the highly controversial president of the Dominican Republic, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo.

Trujillo's enemies, particularly the Dominican exile, Gen. Angel Ramirez, hate him with a tropical passion and work and wait for the day when he can be overthrown.

Trujillo has the best army, navy and air force in the area. He prefers to be let alone, but he's ready if they dare tackle him.

Right now the five-nation Inter-American Peace Committee is hearing the weird story of the latest dispute—between Cuba and the Dominican Republic. The committee is made up of the United States, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and Cuba. It has power only to suggest methods for settling disputes.

Cuba, in bringing the case before the committee, alleged that the Dominican Republic has closed off direct negotiations over the Dominican sentencing of five Cuban crew-members of the Guatemalan ship, Quetzal. Two Guatemalan and two Dominican crew members of the same ship were also sentenced. They were all given 30 years at hard labor on charges of conspiring against the security of the Dominican Republic.

Here are the facts in the case—strange enough to baffle the most avid whodunit fan:

On July 20, 1951, a former U. S. infantry landing craft named the Quetzal, flying the Guatemalan flag and carrying a cargo of avocado plants, left a Cuban port bound for Livingston, Guatemala.

The ship was under the command of a Capt. Alfredo Brito. The Quetzal had been used in an abortive attempt in 1947 to invade the Dominican Republic and overthrow Trujillo from a Cuban base at Cayo Confites — the highly informal group of plotters there being known as the "Caribbean Legion."

Ramirez, owner of the Quetzal and now in Guatemala, was one of the top leaders of that plot. So too was Brito, as captain of one of the small ships in the invasion force. At that time the Quetzal was named the "Maximo Gome" but was known among the revolutionaries as the "Phantom," because of her daring escapades.

From here on out the facts are in dispute.

The Cubans say the 400-ton ship was overtaken by Dominican warships about 50 to 60 miles off the extreme western tip of Cuba and towed under force to the Dominican Republic. The last message from the Quetzal was an intercepted and unfinished radiogram stating Dominican warships were chasing her.

The crew was arrested, imprisoned and held incommunicado for almost four months.

Last August 23, however, Brito

held a press conference in Ciudad Trujillo. Dressed in the flashy uniform of a captain in the Dominican navy and not in jail, he said he had turned over the ship to Dominican authorities because he was tired of working for the Communists in the Caribbean.

But the real shocker in his story was that during the past two years he had been doing "special services abroad" for the Dominican government. He said his captaincy in the Dominican navy was simply a reinstatement.

This meant that during the past two years he had been a Dominican spy working with Ramirez and other top Legionnaires. He had been out of the Dominican Republic for a number of years before that.

But on November 24 Brito and the crew members were brought to trial, charged with conspiring against Dominican national security. Brito switched his story and said that he had really been a revolutionary but while on the high seas he became rependant and decided to give himself up along with the ship. Thereupon he sailed into Dominican waters and signaled a Dominican warship to take him and the ship under custody.

Brito was sentenced to 30 years at hard labor, as were the crew members. So too were Ramirez and other top Dominican exiles in absentia. Brito, however, has appealed.

The Cubans say Brito changed his version because the spy statement laid the Dominican government open to the charge of espionage in a friendly country in time of peace.

Cuban Foreign Minister Aureli-

ano Sanchez Arango told a press conference recently that the Cuban crew members, when interviewed in jail early in November, said the ship was boarded by a Dominican warship on the high seas.

He charged the action amounted to piracy of the ship, kidnaping of the crew, and violation of freedom of the seas.

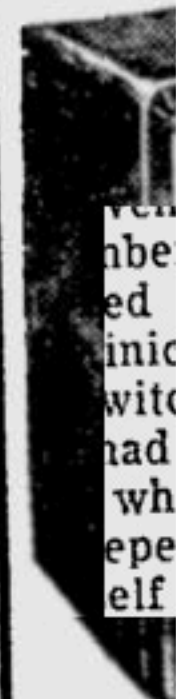
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