

The Miami Herald

Posted on Sun, Feb. 24, 2013

Opinion: Salute to the Brothers to the Rescue fliers shot down on this day by Cuba

By Miraisy Rodriguez



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I was 5 years old and strapped to a tall pole across from my 3-year-old sister. The pole, a mast for a sail that was never very useful, was in the center of a raft being thrown about the Florida Straits.

I don't remember the nights, but I'm told they were so dark my mother, sitting between us, could not see us, but only feel us. I don't remember being wet or cold, but my parents tell me the waves rolling over us were about 20 feet high. I don't remember the sun, but after four days at sea, my skin was two shades darker than what most women would pay for at a tanning salon.

If there were a soundtrack to my life, Willy Chirino's *Nuestro Día* (Our Day) would be one of the first songs on the album. The first two verses always bring tears to my eyes and remind me of the danger my family was in when Brothers to the Rescue saved our lives. Brothers to the Rescue is the organization whose pilots kept a watchful, protective eye for rafters making the perilous

journey from Cuba to freedom. It was 17 years ago today that four of them were ambushed in the sky and killed by Cuban MiGs.

Tired of living in a country where he was persecuted for uttering disapproval of the government's hateful policies and tactics, my father, then 25 years old, decided it was time to leave. My mother refused to stay behind with two young girls and no future. So after hiding in a military neighborhood for most of the summer of 1992 — and six days after Hurricane Andrew had destroyed Homestead — my family left Cuba.

We left just before dawn through the middle of Varadero, a popular, and hence heavily patrolled, beach. We left on a raft engineered and built by my father with the help of a few other men who left with us.

There were nine of us — although it nearly became 10. My parents tell me that a drunk who was

walking the beach helped push the raft away from the shore, then begged to come with us. But our food and water supplies were carefully rationed for nine. Our vessel, if you could call it that, was full.

I remember only snippets of that night. Mostly, I recall darkness, tall grass, running on the sand, and my little sister crying while my mother tried desperately to keep her quiet.

Though it was four days and two more nights before we were spotted by Brothers to the Rescue, the next thing I remember is eating delicious pastelitos. A creative humanitarian in that plane fashioned a parachute, out of a cardboard box filled with Cuban pastries from Miami, and tied it to an actual message in a bottle. The sweet parachute fell to the water and bobbed around just close enough for someone in our party to reach.

My mother recalls it was the first food in almost a week that my sister and I were able to keep down.

The “bottle,” a clear plastic jar with a white sticker and bold red letters that read: “Hermanos Al Rescate” — Brothers to the Rescue — held a message that had my sister and I standing and waving excitedly up at the sky: “Don’t despair. God is with you and the U.S. Coast Guard is on its way from Key West.”

I am now 26, and that plastic jar has had a place of honor in our family’s kitchen for over 20 years.

Today it is filled with coffee beans my aunt sent from Cuba when she heard we were alive and safe.

Since Feb. 24, 1996, these memories are tinged by sadness. That is the day I heard that two Brothers to the Rescue planes had been shot out of the sky by Cuban military planes.

As a 9-year-old child, I don’t think I understood what was going on. All I knew then of Brothers to the Rescue was that we had one of their bottles in our kitchen, and that they had sent us delicious pastries when we couldn’t keep down the tinned spam my mother had tried feeding us on that raft.

Today I am a young Cuban-American about to graduate from law school. When I see the plastic jar, I think of those men who died in the shutdown and wonder if they could have been the same pilots involved in my own family’s rescue.

I may not have known them personally, but they have my eternal respect: Carlos Costa, Armando Alejandre Jr., Mario de la Peña, and Pablo Morales.