

CHAPTER X

PROGRESS AND POLITICS

The next day, as Donovan was returning to the United States, relations between the United States and Cuba hit a new low. The Soviet Union announced that it would furnish Cuba with arms, and provide technical assistance to the Cuban Armed Forces. Throughout the period of the prisoners of war negotiations, Major Ernesto "Che" Guevara and the head of the Cuban Militia had been in Moscow asking for aid *"in connection with threats of aggressive imperialist quarters with regard to Cuba,"* according to a Cuban communiqué. Senator Kenneth Keating of New York was charging the Kennedy administration with a do-nothing attitude and Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina called for an invasion. Senator Barry Goldwater, of Arizona said that Castro must be driven from the island, and that *"if it takes military force, I wouldn't hesitate to use it."*

On September 6, Harry Ruiz-Williams and Berta's son, Pablo, arrived in Donovan's office bearing the Cuban list of products divided in seven categories that was delivered to them by a Pan American pilot from Havana. The list included such tremendous quantities of foodstuffs that the problem of shipping began to strike Donovan as a potentially significant issue, and to make matters more difficult, a longshoreman's strike was looming on the horizon which had the potential to disrupt shipping operations from Maine to Florida.

Harry also carried a letter from Castro. The Cuban Premier wrote that wholesale drugs would be worth much more in Havana because Cuba had to obtain American products from foreign countries at much higher prices. He said he would agree to accept these prices as the market value. He also mentioned the

high cost of transportation and marine insurance that would be involved in the shipment of foodstuffs.

Donovan and Castro's thinking were beginning to approach each other very closely now on these practical matters. Later that night, as he considered the problem sitting in his Brooklyn apartment, it suddenly occurred to Donovan that a solution may be closer than he thought—as close as the man living in the apartment directly above his.

Having the head of America's largest drug company in the apartment above his, turned out to be helpful indeed. John E. McKeen was the Chairman and President of the Pfizer Co., and had personally supervised much of Pfizer's extensive business in Latin America. Donovan sought McKeen's opinion about the idea of sending drugs to Cuba, instead of food, and told him that Pfizer's contribution would go a long way toward enhancing the image of the firm throughout Latin America. McKeen said he would be willing to look into the possibility of making donations from unused inventories, but said that these were not large inventories, and that he doubted that his company could handle the project alone.

Equally helpful to Donovan was having the principal of another large drug company as a friend and former law school classmate. John T. Connor was President of Merk, Sharp and Dohme and later, President Lyndon B. Johnson's Secretary of Commerce. At that time, Connor's initial reaction, however, was a strongly negative one. He emphatically told Donovan that the idea of helping any cause close to the Kennedy's did not appeal to him in the slightest, in view of some of the anti-trust attacks made against the companies by the Kennedy administration. *"The publicity resulting from these attacks had created a terrific antagonism toward the administration among the drug companies"* — Connor bluntly told Donovan.

Again, Donovan argued with his friend from the public relations angle. Eventually, Connor agreed to the contribution on two conditions: first, the Families Committee must explain to the

Justice Department that it would not amount to “*trust activity*” for the drug companies to work together on a project like this, and secondly, that the U.S. Government provide the drug companies donating the medicine with a substantial tax deduction.

Donovan was grateful for his friend’s willingness to cooperate, and to risk the potential opposition of his stockholders and board members. Many years later, when Donovan was President of the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, he awarded Connor an honorary doctorate for this and for other contributions in the public interest. He viewed men like Connor and McKeen as examples of the public service American business can provide the public interest when given the opportunity. Indeed, this was one more dimension of the “*citizen diplomacy*” that was proving successful in the prisoners negotiations.

On September 10, 1962, Donovan announced his intention to run against Sen. Jacob Javits at a meeting of the New York Committee for Democratic Voters which was preparing to send a hundred delegates to the upcoming Democratic State Convention in Syracuse. Becoming more open about the prisoners negotiations, Donovan said he was highly optimistic, and added:

“This is a private, humanitarian effort. It is not a question of exchange, not a question of ransom, and not a question of a tribute. Through the private efforts of the Cuban Families Committee for the Liberation of the Bay of Pigs Prisoners of War, of which I am general counsel, food and medicine will be sent to the sick and poor in Cuba. It can only be regarded as an expression of the traditional friendship for the Cuban people by the American people.”

During these last few days of summer, Cuban-American relations continued to approach an atmosphere of crisis. A group of Cuban exiles in Miami called Alpha 66 fired on a British and a Cuban ship on September 11. The Soviet Union immediately declared that any attack on Cuba or on Soviet ships bound for Cuba would mean war. Meanwhile, Havana was now ringed by defensive batteries in anticipation of the impending attack that was being constantly heralded over the Cuban airwaves.

President Kennedy, meanwhile, said in a press conference that Cuba did not constitute a threat to the American people at that time, and that he hoped that—*“the only people talking about a war or an invasion at that time are the Communist spokesmen in Moscow and Havana”*—rather than in the United States. But Republican criticism of the President’s “inaction” continued unabated, with Senator Hugh Scott calling for a military and economic blockade, and Richard Nixon, a candidate for Governor of California, declaring that the—*“risks of inaction are greater than those of nuclear war.”*

Senator Javits seized on these issues and jumped on this bandwagon as well—*“If it (the flow of arms) does not stop”*— he asserted in a campaign broadcast—*“then it will be the President’s duty as Commander-in-Chief to stop it by whatever means he deemed appropriate.”*

On September 20, a Joint Resolution of the Armed Forces and Foreign Relations Committees in the U.S. Senate seemed to reaffirm American intentions with respect to Cuba. Without calling for any specific action, it said the United States was determined:

1. *To prevent by whatever means necessary, including the use of arms, the Marxist-Leninist regime in Cuba from extending by force or threat of force its aggressive or subversive activities to any part of this hemisphere;*
2. *To prevent in Cuba the creation or use of an externally supported military capability endangering the security of the United States;*
3. *To work with the Organization of American States (O.A.S.) and with freedom-loving Cubans to support the aspirations of the Cuban people for self-determination.*

A few days later, this was followed by a strong statement at the United Nations by U.S. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson:

“I marvel at the bland hypocrisy of the nation that subverted the wholesome Cuban social revolution to Communism and that crushed

with tanks the independence of Hungary, that holds in thrall all of the Eastern Europe from the Baltic to the Black Sea, yet who presumes to lecture us on interference in the affairs of others."

Donovan won his party's senatorial nomination on September 18th amid the usual uproar of the New York State convention. Because he did not have the time to travel about the state enlisting the support of delegates, he recruited students from neighboring LeMoyne College to march around the auditorium for the demonstration just before the vote. He handily defeated Paul O'Dwyer (who was to face Javits later in the 1968 election), and the Brooklyn delegation held a wild celebration.

Donovan's time now had to be dedicated to campaigning. President Kennedy met with Donovan and Robert Morgenthau, the Democratic candidate for Governor. The President thanked Donovan for his efforts on behalf of the prisoners, and told him he agreed with Donovan's campaign theme: that New York needed a senator that would truly support the administration's policies, which Javits had not been doing with respect to Cuba. Kennedy was also, of course, interested in having Rockefeller defeated by Morgenthau, since Rockefeller would then be weakened as a potential opponent of Kennedy for the Presidency. As agreed during this meeting, Kennedy later appeared on behalf of both of the candidates in New York City.

Donovan was preparing to leave for Havana again when a painful attack of bursitis struck, and his doctor insisted that he stay in New York. His wife Mary was becoming more and more concerned with his trips to such cold-war flash points, and insisted once again that he should be more worried about the results of overwork than about hurrying off to Havana. *"That man does so much talking"* – she commented about Castro – *"I'm afraid he'll keep you down there too long. Are you going to be talking too?"*

"I'll have a few things to say" – Donovan replied.

"Then it could take months" – she said with a groan.

As October 1962 arrived, President Kennedy and the Foreign Secretary of Great Britain, Lord Hume, held a discussion about the possible ways of *"containing further Communist expansion and subversion in the Caribbean area."* A few days later Kennedy told the representatives of the Organization of American States:

"What we have to do is prevent the expansion from Cuba itself of the Communist doctrine ... and to take those steps which will finally provide for the freedom of the people of Cuba." The intention of the United States – he said – "was to get rid of the Castro regime."

Later that same day, Donovan's plane arrived in Havana. In spite of his lack of sleep because of the bursitis in his shoulder, he greeted Berta, Sánchez and Freyre effusively at Havana's José Martí International Airport. This time he was strongly optimistic about the imminent success of the negotiations and felt he could return with the prisoners in just a couple of days. Everything was looking up, he thought. Even the Cuban officials at José Martí Airport seemed friendly and considerate.

The next morning, October 4, he rose after a night of extreme pain. Berta and Jesús called a friend, Dr. Clemente Inclán, who was reputed to be one of the world's foremost orthopedic experts. As Donovan reported on one of the debriefing tapes he later made for the U.S. Government, Dr. Inclán was – *"a courtly gentleman in his seventies who, as soon as the other Cubans left the room at his office, passed me notes to please call his relatives in New York."* Dr. Inclán gave him an injection for the bursitis pain, plus various pills, and told him that his assistant would see him later for an ultrasonic treatment.

Donovan and Jesús returned to the house to await news about the next conference with Fidel Castro. When they arrived back, Berta informed them that she had talked with Celia Sánchez, with whom she was now quite good friends. Celia regretted to say that Castro was out of town, but that Dr. José S. Cuba Fernández (the shoemaker turned Cuba's Attorney General) and Captain José Abrahantes, Under-Secretary of the Minister of the Interior, would be coming instead.

It was at about this time that Donovan became especially impressed with the fact that Castro had driven home his propaganda with great effectiveness among the black residents of the island. He recalled the difference between the white guards and the black guards assigned to Berta's home. Where the whites would remain discretely in a foyer while showing someone into the house, the black guards would often barge right in. Sometimes they would look at Donovan as though he were, in his own phrase, "*a lynch organizer from Jackson, Mississippi.*" This formed an impression in Donovan's overall picture of what Castro had done in Cuba. He felt that Castro had done everything possible for the lowest class and also for the black residents to win them to his side, and virtually nothing for anyone else. Aside from a small ring of intellectuals and Communist sympathizers, he felt the cream of the crop in Cuba had left in disgust.

Attorney General Cuba Fernández, accompanied by Captain José Abrahantes arrived, and as Donovan later recalled, Cuba was his usual friendly self, but "*a real lightweight,*" while Captain Abrahantes was exactly the opposite. The Captain began to cross-examine Donovan brusquely for almost two hours. It appeared to Donovan that Abrahantes was somehow directly responsible for the prisoners. Donovan classified him as one of the hard-liners among Castro's advisors—a tough-minded Communist who had also been with Castro in the Sierra Maestra mountains. Donovan was to have three talks with him during the next few days, each creating more problems than the one before.

Abrahantes wanted a full explanation of the system of pricing in the drug industry, and Donovan obliged as best he could, spelling out how much a certain quality of medicine would cost the Families Committee, and how much more it would really be worth to the Cubans.

Although Donovan told both, the Attorney General and the Captain about how Pfizer had agreed to sell inventory items at cost, several other factors he did not disclose. One was the fact that Pfizer's inventory consisted of items which were not

as clinically advanced as others more recently developed by the company, even though they were still excellent. Thus, the transaction was beneficial to Pfizer to liquidate its outdated inventories.

Second, because Pfizer had no retail outlets, the “wholesale” price was the equivalent to a “sales” price, which was, of course, different from Pfizer’s actual cost.

As a result, the real cost to the American side would not be more than \$10 million, or only one-sixth of the figure demanded for the “indemnity.” Donovan offered some remarks about the “*great heart of the American people*,” while handing them a letter from McKean, an effective piece of business diplomacy.

October 1, 1962

Mr. James B. Donovan

Watters and Donovan

181 William Street

New York, 38, New York

Dear Mr. Donovan:

This will acknowledge your letter of September 28 requesting medical supplies for the sick in Cuba. The key members of the Pfizer Management have carefully considered your proposal and we are pleased to inform you of our desire to cooperate fully. You have assured us that such supplies may favorably affect a decision by the Cuban Government to release the “invasion” prisoners. This Company has always stood ready to respond favorably to humanitarian needs involving medical supplies for and in the saving of lives of men, women and children in all parts of the world. In fact, we and other members of the drug industry keep ourselves currently alert to such words and have contributed drugs in situations created by natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes and other misfortunes around the world.

It is therefore our intention to comply with your request. We will furnish your Committee a substantially non-profit basis for transshipment to Cuba of medical supplies produced by our firm.

In arriving at our decision to help in this humanitarian endeavor, we were influenced by what you have indicated is the immediate need, as well as by the fact that your Committee is sponsored by an eminent list of Americans well known for their work in the humanitarian field, and by the fact that your efforts have the endorsement of the United States Government officials at the highest levels.

Substantial quantities of these medical supplies can be made immediately available for shipment to Cuba, and we will produce the balance needed to complete deliveries as soon as production schedules permit. In this undertaking, Pfizer will be joined by other members in the drug industry in a sincere effort to help obtain the release of all the prisoners for whom you and other members of the Cuban Families Committee are currently negotiating. You have our best wishes and wholehearted cooperation in your efforts to accomplish a truly benevolent objective.

*Sincerely yours,
John E. McKeen
President*

Before Cuba and Abrahantes left in the middle of the afternoon, Donovan also explained how the \$2.9 million for the 60 wounded men released on credit would be insured by means of a letter of credit issued on that same day to Pfizer and assignable to other parties. Captain Abrahantes continued to behave in a hostile manner while duly taking down Donovan's explanations. He left after telling him that Castro would be able to see him the next day.

The following day, Captain Abrahantes arrived at Berta's house alone. Donovan had spent a sleepless night with the pain of the bursitis and occasional nausea. As Donovan recalled their second meeting, Abrahantes asked him how he felt, and Donovan said — *"Not too well."* According to Donovan's recollection, the Captain *"got this crooked smile on his face,"* and said that Fidel was not in town, but would still like to see Donovan. *"Would you like to take a little ride with me?"* — he asked.

To his ultimate regret, Donovan agreed. The Captain's "little ride" turned out to be one of the most frightening experiences of his life. Shortly after noon, he climbed into an Oldsmobile. Two carloads of militiamen were to follow them. Donovan sat in back, while Captain Abrahantes sat in the driver's seat with one soldier next to him. He pulled away from Berta's house with a screech and picked up speed until he reached something nearing to ninety miles an hour. This was not on a wide, well-maintained highway but on narrow city streets and then on a bumpy, country road.

As Donovan later told Berta, Abrahantes had the odd habit of picking up speed while approaching a turn, rather than in the middle of it. The brakes would utter a penetrating squeal whenever they approached an animal cart or an intersection. Donovan's bursitis was worse than ever as he rocked side to side, and he found it impossible to light a cigarette with his right arm in a sling. "*Needless to say, neither man offered to light it for me*" – he recalled – "*Abrahantes was obviously enjoying himself. From the time of departure until the time we returned, neither said a word to me.*"

The "little ride" finally led to a good road that ended at Varadero, a seacoast resort about ninety miles from Havana. The Captain opened Donovan's door, led him to the veranda of a house, indicated a chair for him on which to sit, and disappeared. The lawyer was puzzled and irritated, but he managed to calm himself down amidst the pleasant atmosphere of the well-kept grounds and the nearby pounding surf.

A few minutes later, a caravan of older American cars pulled up and Castro jumped out with another man who presented a similar appearance with a beard and army fatigues. "*How are you, Doctor*" – he greeted Donovan, shaking his left hand and seeming cordial in a casual way.

Castro then introduced Donovan to the man who was to act as an interpreter that afternoon, but who was also ultimately to be key to the success of the mission – Major René Vallejo.

Vallejo served as Castro's personal physician and, apparently, his most trusted advisor next to Celia Sánchez.

As they conversed on the veranda for a few minutes, Donovan became intrigued with this new addition. Like Castro, he wore the single star in his uniform indicating the rank of Major, the highest rank in the Revolutionary Army at that time. He seemed to be in his early fifties, and was quite handsome with a full beard streaked with gray. Perhaps the most striking aspect about Vallejo was his command of the English language. This was *"beautiful drawing-room English,"* and his entire manner had a charm and grace that left Donovan thinking, *"What's he doing with this crowd?"*

Major Vallejo had known Castro as a child in the Oriente Province, where Castro's guerrillas had organized and lived in their fight against Batista. Later, Vallejo was chosen to become the governor of the province and leader of its agricultural reforms.

Castro suggested a drive around to show Donovan the *"accomplishments of the Revolution."* He and Donovan got into the back of the car, while Vallejo acted as chauffeur. *"What exactly is wrong with your shoulder, Dr. Donovan?"* – asked Castro.

"Explain to Dr. Castro" – Donovan said to Vallejo – *"that it is an inflammation of the bursar muscle cause by a deposit of calcium."*

Vallejo smiled – *"I should tell you, Doctor, that I am a medical doctor and thoroughly familiar with the situation."* He explained the medical condition to Castro in Spanish. Meanwhile, this revelation that he was a medical doctor lit a thought in Donovan's mind – here was a man who would probably be very interested in helping the drug shortage in Cuba. Donovan was suddenly quite happy about his trip to Varadero.

As they drove toward a school for fisherman, Castro dispensed propaganda about how almost no one had lived in the area before, and how he was bringing out workers to live there. Donovan was also capable of propaganda, and he told Castro how *"the workers"* enjoyed Long Beach in Long Island, and how New York planner, Robert Moses, had done a good deal to transform that area for their use.

In the middle of his talks about Jones Beach, the car stopped and a rifle was suddenly shoved through the open window on Donovan's side. A teenage boy in uniform was peering in, but suddenly jumped to attention after a stern reprimand from Castro.

They had arrived at the Club Kawama, located in a formally fashionable area, now a school for fishermen's children. *"The boys have their own militia" – said Castro – "and they like it very much. Their discipline is excellent."*

Platoons of these boys were goose stepping in formation but, when Castro got out of the car, all discipline evaporated. They gathered around him, shouting *"Fidel, Fidel."*

"You'd think you were Babe Ruth or something" – Donovan remarked to him. Castro answered that the main reason for all the excitement was that many of them were headed for a special four-year training period in the Soviet Union. He said he had just concluded a deal with the Soviet Union in which the Russians would have a base in Cuba for deep-sea fishing while, in return, Cubans would receive training in the latest fishing techniques.

Castro, Donovan and Vallejo left the school and rode along a wide, uncluttered beach out to the end of the Hicacos Peninsula, where they boarded a cabin cruiser. As they headed out across open water toward a small island, Castro explained what he had in mind.

"I had a reason for inviting you here" – he told Donovan – "Those Cubans of the Families Committee you are with are good people, but I cannot talk freely around them. They are quite emotionally involved in the matter. You and I had an interesting time when you were here last, so I thought it would be much better if we could come out here alone." He spoke the last sentence in his halting English. This was the first time he was to do this, but afterwards began to speak English now and then when the conversation did not involve difficult points of negotiation.

Donovan also asked Vallejo how his English came to be so good, and Vallejo said he had it learned in high school.

"You must have kept it up pretty well to be able to speak it so fluently today" – said Donovan.

"Well" – he replied – *"I return every year to Massachusetts General Hospital for additional training."* Donovan later learned that Vallejo was apparently holding out on him. His wife was an American, and they probably spoke English much of the time.

The four men, including Captain Abrahantes who had joined them, walked toward a cottage on the island where they could sit and talk. On the way, small hedgehog or cactus balls (guizacillo) began sticking to Donovan's socks and annoying him. *"Now this will show how gracious a man Vallejo was"* – Donovan recalled later. He did things the others just wouldn't think of doing. Before I could take the cactus balls off, he said – *"Please permit me"* – and leaned down and took them out.

The four men arrived at a small cottage with a porch, where they sat in Adirondack-style chairs. It seemed that Castro had a few complaints to share. He began harping on the \$62 million, and complained that he first told his people that he would accept only cash, then that he would accept food and medicine, then that he would accept just medicine, and now he is being forced to speak to them in terms of a retail value that "makes no sense."

Major Vallejo was very obviously trying to be helpful. His translations seemed to have a quality of sympathy to Donovan, even though Donovan didn't understand most of what was said in Spanish.

"Captain Abrahantes here was under the impression when he saw you yesterday at Berta's house that you were offering \$60 million in wholesale values of drugs" – Castro declared. *"No, that's a misunderstanding"* – Donovan answered – *"It was partly due to my poor presentation of the matter. But your Attorney General, Mr. Cuba seemed to understand. I saw him write down the figures."*

"Well let's just say it was a misunderstanding" – said Castro – gesturing toward the Captain, who sat there silently, glower-

ing with resentment. He had contributed nothing to any of the conversation.

Castro continued: *"But Captain Abrahantes did make a report to some of our people last night. It was slightly embarrassing for him when he explained the situation."*

"We all have our embarrassing moments from time to time"—Donovan replied—*"Meanwhile, it's absolutely idle for us to talk in terms of you getting \$62 million in wholesale prices. It just isn't in the cards and you ought to forget about it."*

The atmosphere was getting uncomfortable, in spite of the ocean breeze. Fortunately, Vallejo chose this moment to explain his great personal interest in the matter. He started explaining the dire need of the country for medical equipment. *"I think you realize"*—he said to Donovan—*"that without some of these supplies we couldn't use the drugs and medicine."*

Donovan said that these items were not included only because he could not get them at the *"special price"* at which he could get the medicine.

Vallejo also made a pitch for baby food. He said that this could be classified as medicine and wouldn't present the shipping problems that bulk food would present. *"You will be much more able to justify your position to the American public, the more baby food you get"*—he said, adding that it would eliminate the contention that the supplies will be turned over to Soviet technicians.

Castro also brought up the contentious issue of the guarantee again, and tried a new demand—that the prisoners be brought out in groups. *"This is the only way we can handle this"*—he asserted—*"You can assure me that these contracts will be lived up to after the initial delivery is made?"*

Donovan rejected this out of hand and said: *"The prisoners must be released as soon as the initial delivery is made"*—he said, and went into some discussion about how there were no absolute guarantees in life, but that the drug companies involved do a large business in Latin America and have their good reputation at stake.

Castro didn't look impressed by that. Donovan mentioned that if a satisfactory relationship of trust were created, a channel of communication could be opened for the mutual benefit of both countries. Castro replied — *“Yes, in fact we have discussed this at great length.”*

The bargaining returned to the question of the true value of the promised goods, with Castro steadfastly holding out for more. It was in this context that Donovan broached a new topic — that of Americans being held for political reasons by the regime. *“It is possible”* — he said — *“that by re-soliciting some large American corporations that have not as yet come through with pledges that I could increase these by a few million dollars if a few Americans came out with me.”*

Castro pondered this among clouds of cigar smoke. The result: *“The questions of the Americans must be handled separately from the question of the Brigade. My decision on this is final. However, I would like to tell this to you, that as soon as this matter has been concluded, I think I would like to take up with you the question of these Americans.”*

Toward the end of the talks, Castro turned to Vallejo and said — *“Major, now make some calculations on where I could come out on this.”*

After some scribbling, Vallejo came up with figures that were amazingly close to the estimates that Donovan had made earlier at Berta's house to the members of the Families Committee: *“I figure you could increase the letter of credit to an amount between \$16 and \$17 million, and this would give reasonable assurance of getting close to the desired amount in wholesale values. And, of course, it is understood that you can deliver the stuff.”*

As Donovan recalled, he stalled saying things to the effect of: *“Well, now I really have no idea. Sixteen million dollars is a lot of money and the Families Committee has spent month's now making public appeals, and we don't want to delay things any further.”*

Castro interrupted — *“My mind is made up. If you want a deal, it will have to be as Major Vallejo has indicated. After all, you are still*

under \$20 million for the whole thing. This is very reasonable from my point of view." He then paraphrased his own understanding of the deal and asked Donovan if this was correct.

"According to the calculations I've made with Pfizer and Merk, yes"—Donovan said—*"but the Families Committee will have to shop around to see if other companies with such inventories might be interested. I want to make it clear that I cannot commit these companies to doing something of that magnitude alone."*

"Why not?"—asked Castro—*"They don't lose any money."*

Donovan took up the side of the drug companies and asked Castro—*"In fact, how long did he think the drug companies could stay on the good side of their stockholders if they did things of this nature on too large a scale, plus the fact that many businessmen were not too enthusiastic about it in the first place."* In fact, there had been some objections to Pfizer's participation on a very large scale from its executive committee. As Donovan recalled, at this point the meeting broke up without any firm resolution on this point.

On the way back to the boat, Donovan fixed his attention on the physician-Major Vallejo, telling him about how his father had been a surgeon for fifty years, and asking him more details about the medical needs in Cuba. By this time, their relationship was getting *"muy simpático."* When they arrived back at the original house in Varadero, Castro and Vallejo left together, leaving Donovan with his *"bugbear"*—Captain Abrahantes, who was starting the engine of the dreaded Oldsmobile.

The ride back was even worse than the ride from Havana, because it was now dark. The daredevil Captain was driving on a road called *"Vía Blanca"* and passing cars on the right, on curves, on hills and bridges while all the time keeping the gas pedal on the floor. In addition to his concern for his safety, Donovan was also irritated that no one had offered him anything to eat or drink during the day. When he finally arrived back at Berta's villa, Jesús, Berta, Sánchez, Jr. and the others greeted him with unusual warmth. *"We thought we would be told that an unfortunate accident had occurred"*—said Sánchez.

"I'm surprised you weren't informed of that"—Donovan muttered.

Later that evening, after telephoning a pre-arranged secret U.S. government contact about the progress of the talks, Donovan began to learn first-hand about the medical situation in Cuba and the possible benefits for the Cuban people of any deal which would provide them with the medicines. As Donovan was learning from personal experience, there was simply no oral medicine in Cuba, and Donovan needed regular injections for his bursitis. These had to be administered by Berta's husband, Jesús. As former President and General Manager of the Marianao Racetrack, he was able to obtain for this purpose a hypodermic needle from a local veterinarian (Dr. Crespo), a friend of his. As a result, Donovan began calling Jesús his "horse doctor." This joke wore thin, however, when the area became infected and he developed a baseball-sized lump.

However, Donovan most aggravating "pain in the rear" during this period was Captain Abrahantes who appeared early the following afternoon and announced that Castro had decided to impose a condition that Donovan had previously rejected. It seemed that Castro had a long talk the night before with his advisors and the decision was made that they would insist that all the officers of the defeated Brigade must be held until the final shipments for the exchange of the prisoners of war were made. *"Upon consulting with his advisors"*—asserted the Captain—*Dr. Castro realized that it is impossible for you to absolutely assure delivery after the first shipment."*

Donovan, who thought this had been settled on the small island the day before, didn't see this as a proposal that even deserved serious consideration. For the next two hours he had Jesús and Freyre write down—translating into Spanish as he went along—a categorical rejection of any human guarantee. Nevertheless, the document he dictated was not intended to be a snub, but rather a testament to his continuing desire to negotiate in good faith. He painstakingly spelled out his view of the entire

proposal, while Freyre and Sánchez looked increasingly worried and upset at this turn of events. Even the usually strong Berta broke into tears. Only Jesús agreed with what Donovan was dictating. The final document was typed by Sánchez and read as follows:

“I have appreciated very much the courtesies that have been showed to the members of the Families Committee and me. My relations with Dr. Castro continue as before. Following my last visit to Cuba I sought to obtain a solution to a problem that appears unsolvable. As Dr. Castro knows, I returned to this country in good faith with a solution unique in its class, a solution which neither the Cuban nor the American government could present. This solution will not only provide the Cuban people with great benefits which they would not be able to obtain by other means, but will additionally permit the Cuban government to explain honorably to its people, to the other Latin American people and to world of public opinion that a humanitarian gesture has acknowledged the justification for the petition for indemnification of the Cuban government. In addition to the solution of the specific problem, the happy termination of this negotiation in good faith could create a bridge between the United States and Cuba, which both parties will find favorable for each in the current international situation.

Yesterday Dr. Castro and I arrived at a solution in principle on this specific problem, with the exception that Dr. Castro explained with convincing reasons that a mutually acceptable solution was only possible from his point of view if I could only change your offer with respect to the requested materials, that is, obtaining food for children “at wholesale prices” for five million dollars and, in addition, substantial quantities of surgical implements and at the same time augment the irrevocable letter of international credit in the amount of more than six million dollars. Within the framework of the current political conditions in the United States, of which Dr. Castro is well aware, he requested that I perform one more miracle – I had been converting water into wine, and now I think

I have to walk on the waters. Nevertheless, in order to obtain a rapid solution to an urgent problem, I agreed with Dr. Castro that I would attempt to honor all his requests.

After returning from our meeting last night, I spoke to an assistant of mine in New York and gave my firm recommendation that all of Dr. Castro's stipulations should be accepted and made possible, making final requests to all the Cuban Families and important American corporations and that we have to honor not only the stipulations indicated by Dr. Castro, but also to acquire the additional six million dollars to fortify my proposition.

I communicated to him my firm resolve to remain here, in this country until your efforts have had results. I still have not received the official reply of the sponsors and other members of the Families Committee in the United States, including the sick and wounded prisoners. But the friends of Mrs. Berta Barreto de los Heros in Havana have informed us that the radio in the United States has confirmed that the prisoners of war will be freed in a short period of time, which I interpreted to mean that the specific conditions of Dr. Castro have been accepted.

I repeat that which I said yesterday – that in my opinion, upon attaining this agreement, the Cuban government with great benefits for its people has found an honorable form of resolving freeing itself of that which in world opinion is very grave. At the moment I was hoping to be informed from the United States that all the conditions of Dr. Castro have been accepted, I receive these new requests.

The guarantees given to Dr. Castro include an enormous down payment and the payment of almost three million dollars before, in effect, a single prisoner has been liberated. At the same time, the Cubans have an irrevocable letter of credit to the Royal Bank of Canada, the firm offers of the top executives of the largest medical and drug companies which do business in Latin America, as well as the good faith of the Families Committee for the Liberation of the Bay of Pigs Prisoners of War and my own good faith.

At the same time, Dr. Castro must understand that none of

the activities by the Families Committee or me could have been achieved without the permission and approval of the United States government.

Reviewing all these guarantees as well as the approval manifested in American public opinion as demonstrated in many American newspapers in favor of the humanitarian gesture which I am bringing about, even though my mission is neither pro-Castro nor anti-Castro, it is clearly evident that the definite solution of this tragic problem, as was agreed upon, in our meeting yesterday between Dr. Castro and myself, will eliminate permanently a great source of propaganda against Castro.

The considering of additional guarantees in the sense of human lives is not only impossible from the point of view of the Families Committee, which represents all the members, but also will at the same time create new and more powerful propaganda against Castro. If I receive from the United States the official report of the Families Committee accepting the new terms of our meeting yesterday and those terms are guaranteed by the Royal Bank of Canada irrevocably; we will be able to finish these negotiations within the next few days; on the other hand, if the Cuban government notifies me of an irrevocable decision that even one prisoner must remain as a human guarantee, I shall consider myself obliged much against my desires, to consider my humanitarian mission hopeless and shall return to my country.

Captain Abrahantes sat talking to Donovan, Berta and Sánchez while Jesús and Freyre were typing the above document. Sipping on a glass of water, he began speaking in what Donovan described as an *“exasperatingly overconfident tone,”* while Berta was still in tears. *“We are actually very liberal with the prisoners, permitting them to get off this well”* – he remarked.

“How do you figure that?” – Donovan retorted – *“You know, you’re foolish in holding these prisoners of war under inhumane conditions. Instead of bargaining, you ought to be practical. We are the only market for these boys. Where else are you going to sell them?”*

Perhaps you're thinking of reverting to something Hitler found very profitable. He found that the prisoners in the concentration camps were very good for soap. If that is what you have in mind, maybe you can arrange to be put in charge. You would qualify, I think."

Captain Abrahantes flew into a rage, and expressed astonishment that Donovan would say such a thing. Recovering some self-control, he said — *"We don't think that way about things."*

Donovan was at the peak of his irritation after been driven wildly off to Varadero Beach the day before by this man, in such an insane fashion while he was still sick, only to have the rug about to be pulled out from under his plans by what he called *"this hood."*

He pushed his attack into the specifics of the bargain. *"You keep talking about the \$62 million. You would think this were some amount ordained in heaven. But in reality it is a figure Castro just pulled out of an opium dream. The important question is simply this: 'What can we reasonably offer for these men, since there is no market in human lives, and we can't sell them to anyone else?' That's the important question right there."*

Abrahantes replied coldly: *"This is the \$62 million established by the military tribunals."*

"Military tribunals?" — Donovan thundered — *"who are these military tribunals? No one ever heard of them. If Castro told the tribunals to get on their hands and walk around the house right now, they'd start walking. Military tribunals! This is a joke. I don't mind playing charades once in a while, but let's be realistic once in a while too."*

The conversation didn't continue long after this, and Captain Abrahantes left the house in a foul mood with the typed letter.

That evening, Celia Sánchez called Berta with a message from Castro: *"Fidel still wanted the Brigade officers to remain as prisoners until all the shipments are completed. She said that after the liberation of the Brigade her government would have to depend on companies they don't know the way they know Donovan, and the Families Committee will have no interest in complying with their obligations. The companies also can fail in both quality and quantity"* — she said.

Donovan argued again that the reputations of the companies in Latin America were at stake, that these companies have subsidiaries in countries that have relations with Cuba and so on. He proceeded with another long preamble to a rejection. This time he concluded: *"Since a special airplane is coming for me tomorrow morning, I would like to know whether I should plan to return."*

After this call, Donovan, Berta, Jesús, Freyre and Sánchez held a discussion and all agreed with the position taken by Donovan over the telephone with Celia, even though it had the definite ring of an ultimatum.

"For Castro to bring up last minute objections shows that it is he who is breaking off negotiations" – Jesús contended.

Álvaro Sánchez Jr. also said that he had received word from Celia through Berta, indicating that Captain Abrahantes was leading a campaign among Castro's advisors to convince Fidel to hold back the officers of the 2506 Brigade. Another leader in this effort was supposedly Captain Osmany Cienfuegos—the very one responsible for the suffocation and death of ten prisoners of war that were placed by him inside a closed trailer-truck with over 130 other prisoners just after their capture at Girón. Sánchez, Jr., Freyre and Jesús agreed that these men hated the prisoners and were trying to persuade Castro that Donovan was out to trick him. Álvaro Sánchez, Jr. even speculated that they were trying to line up Raúl Castro and 'Che' Guevara for a coup-diktat on the grounds that Donovan and Castro were conspiring to betray the Revolution.

Freyre believed that Abrahantes might succeed in such a plot if they tried it. *"After all, now there are Russian missiles here and..."*

"Russian what?"—inquired Donovan, looking up from the suitcase he was packing.

"Missiles. I saw ships with Russian flags unloading missiles quite openly in Havana harbor. They were what appeared to be Nike missiles!"

Donovan was stunned and then skeptical. He asked several questions about exactly what Freyre saw. What intrigued him

was that there seemed to be no secrecy about the operation. He made a note to report this as soon as he could to the American government, since he held a high opinion of Freyre's reliability as an accurate observer.

Donovan also recalled something that Jesús has told him—that reliable friends of his had been in the Pinar del Rio province, on the western part of the island, and had seen convoys of trucks loaded with concrete and steel beams, and that all Cubans were forbidden access to the areas where these materials were being used. Donovan took in all this information and made a mental note to prepare a report to the American government.

Later that evening, Celia Sánchez called again and told Donovan that she had been in touch with Castro. "I told him that word would be spread in the Cuban community that the Americans had done everything possible, and that Fidel was the one showing bad faith."

Celia rambled on about how they knew he was a man of good faith and about how Castro wanted him to continue with his mission. *"The sole question is the guarantee of the quality and quantity of the merchandise. Will you please study this aspect?"*

Capt. José Abrahantes was for many years Fidel Castro's personal assistant, Head of Security and later, Interior Minister. In 1989, Abrahantes was tried for corruption by a Military Tribunal and sentenced to 20 years in prison, but soon died while in confinement on January 21, 1991. Courtesy: Berta Barreto de los Heros.

She added that Castro ratified the objectives reached in the discussions of the previous day, and that full agreement could be achieved when this one aspect was explored. Donovan realized that he would have to think of something to help Castro save face. This seemed to be the central dilemma—how to make as few concessions as possible while arranging for a mechanism by which Castro could save face?

His response was as follows: *"Please tell Dr. Castro, that I too confirm the principles arrived at in yesterday's agreement taking into consideration Dr. Castro's preoccupation with*



respect to the guarantees. I will spend the greater part of my time in Miami tomorrow in consultation with experts in international commerce and banking guarantees. I will then be able to offer the Cuban government a guarantee over and above what I have thus far shown. I want to reiterate my position, however: under no circumstances will I or the Cuban Families Committee consider human lives as a guarantee."

Donovan couldn't sleep that night. He was plagued by bursitis and also severe pain from the site where he had received the injections. The other Cubans in the house slept well—they were extremely happy about the talk with Celia Sánchez. The next day, the Sunday *New York Times* reported that an agreement had been reached, apparently based on rumors from Havana and Miami. Washington declined comment and Berta, on advice from Donovan, simply reaffirmed her optimism and said that an announcement could probably be made soon. Donovan returned to Miami the next day.

He had three ideas regarding the guarantees. First, he felt the Canadian government could issue a statement that its good faith rode on any letter of credit issued by the Royal Bank of Canada, which was the Canadian equivalent of the U.S. Federal Reserve System. He compared this to Abraham Lincoln's notable statement: *"People, who like this kind of thing, will find the kind of thing they like."*

Second, an international agency could perhaps be persuaded to offer the same assurances. Third, a surety bond could be obtained from Lloyds of London, the world's most prestigious insurance organization. However, this would be expensive.

While in Miami, Donovan had the infected lump in his buttocks and the stabbing bursitis pain in his right shoulder attended to. The doctor advised him to enter a hospital immediately, but the lawyer told him that present obligations forced him to decline his advice.

While still in this condition and also fatigued, he held several meetings with the Families Committee, and also with his Washington "contact." Through Harry Ruiz-Williams, he docu-

mented the agreements they had reached at the meeting on the small island near Varadero, and was told by his Washington contact that arrangements were being made for the immediate reception of the prisoners of war in America. They were to be bussed from Miami International Airport to the small Opa-locka Airport (a former WW II Airbase), where beds and doctors would be waiting for them. The Cuban refugee community in Miami awaited their heroes in a state of vivid anticipation.