

CLANDESTINE CORNER

## EARLY PRO-CASTRO CUBAN ILLICIT BROADCASTS



In the post-World War II era of revolutionary activity, illegal broadcasts provide a way for the political element opposing the government of a country to spread propaganda and in some cases, announce the beginning of an actual revolt. But in the earliest stages of a revolution, the rebels normally have no broadcasting facilities of their own and have to find other ways of reaching the people by radio.

This was the situation in Cuba in the early 1950's when a group, ultimately led by Fidel Castro, was opposing the government of Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar, who had illegally swept back to power in 1952.

The first attempt to broadcast clandestinely occurred on July 26, 1953 at Santiago de Cuba, where 125 armed students and clerks, led by 26-year-old Castro, attacked the army barracks known as Cuartel Moncada. The attack was supposed to signal a revolt and part of the plan was to capture the radio station there and announce the uprising. The assault failed and one of the students, Renato Guitart was shot at the door of the radio station, after nearly reaching his goal. Castro escaped, later surrendered and was imprisoned. At least 70 others participating in the attack were executed.

According to a recent Radio Havana Cuba program, Castro testified later that he had prepared copy prior to the attack to broadcast from the captured radio transmitter, urging the people to rise up against Batista. This broadcast was to include stirring patriotic poetry of a previous Cuban political martyr.

Castro was later pardoned and released. He went to Mexico, from where he launched his revolution in 1957. With a boatload of men, of whom only 12 survived the revolution, he landed in Cuba and took to the mountains. The rest of his adventure is well known.

But in support of Castro's guerrillas, a university student group, Federacion Estudiantes Universidad (FEU) decided on a bold plan to assassinate Batista on March 13, 1957. On that day, a group of students attacked the presidential palace in Havana, four of whom fought their way almost to the dictator's office before they were gunned down. The attempt failed.

Simultaneously with the attack on the palace, another group of young rebels, led by Jose Antonio Echevarria, launched another daring raid. Four carloads of students attempted to seize the broadcasting station of Radio Reloj (Radio Clock), a commercial time and news station in the Havana suburb of Vedado. Then known as CMCB, 1330 kc/s., it operated with 1 kw.

The assault team was to seize the station and broadcast the announcement that the presidential palace had fallen and that Batista was dead. Volunteers were to be asked to assemble at the university, where they would receive arms to carry out further instructions.

U.S. newsman Robert Tabor, who eventually became part of Castro's government, and who later broadcast on Radio Havana Cuba, wrote: "Radio Reloj reporting...Radio Reloj reporting...At this moment, armed civilians are attacking the presidential palace! Radio Reloj reporting...President Batista has been struck down by bullets in the presidential palace." Taber continued, "The time: 3:25 p.m. The date: March 13, 1957. The radio announcement, preceded by the clatter of a telegraph key and delivered in the dramatic, bulletin style of Havana's familiar news-and-time channel, carried a note of urgency that sent a shiver of apprehension through the capital. Traffic slowed on the broad Malacon as drivers, hearing it, reached to turn up the volume of their automobile radios. An unaccustomed ripple of excitement interrupted the drowsy afternoon routine of banks and business offices, halted the chatter in bars and cafes along the Prado, quickened the pulse of police precinct commanders and aging army staff officers at Camp Columbia."

"The voice of another announcer cut in, reporting that General Francisco Tabernilla, the chief of staff, had been relieved of command and was under arrest, along with other high ranking officers of the regime. The announcer introduced a third speaker. The voice that was heard after a moment's hesitation, beginning a formal (Continued)

CLANDESTINE CORNER (Continued)

proclamation, was that of Jose Antonio Echevarria, president of the FEU and head of the revolutionary directory: 'People of Havana! The Revolution is in progress. The presidential palace has been taken by our forces and the dictator has been executed in his den...'

"The voice was abruptly cut off," Taber's report continued, "as a switch was thrown in the radio transmitting plant. A moment later, a fusillade of pistol shots smashed the central control panel of the Radio Center building in Vedado and the three students who had seized the Radio Reloj studio hurried out of the building, pushing one of the announcers ahead of them. (The announcer was Floreal Chaumont, a brother of Faure Chaumont, one of the leaders of the conspiracy. While not actually a party to the plot, Floreal had known something of it, and it was thought best to get him out of the building before police arrived. He went into hiding, two months later took refuge in the El Salvador embassy, and left the country under a safe conduct. The two students who seized Radio Reloj with Echevarria were Jose Westbrook, propaganda secretary of the FEU, and Fructuoso Rodriguez, for a time secretary-general of an off-shoot student organization. Both survived the events of the day, only to be killed by police a week later.)"

The assault team and their associates outside the building escaped in two autos, heading toward the university, even as sirens were beginning to sound the arrival of the first police vehicles.

An auto was intercepted. There was a roar of automatic weapon fire. The students scattered on foot. One of them was left behind...Echevarria. For him the revolution was over. He lay dead in the gutter.

With Echevarria, some 75 to 80 died during and in the days that followed the assassination attempt and clandestine broadcast.

Havana says that a tape recording of the proclamation read over Radio Reloj by Echevarria is still in existence. Needless to say, there was no public response to this rash act since the assassination attempt failed. More time had to pass before Castro's revolution was successful in Cuba.

(Digested from "The History of Clandestine Radio Operations," a DXRA publication)