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José Ramón Fernández, Who Helped Form Cuba's Army, Dies at 95

By The Associated Press

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José Ramón Fernández, a retired brigadier general who helped form Cuba's army after the revolution of 1959 and commanded Cuban defenses at the Bay of Pigs, died on Sunday. He was 95.

His death was reported by Cuban state news media, which did not say where he died or specify the cause.

A founding member of the Communist Party of Cuba, General Fernández served for a time as a vice president on Cuba's Council of Ministers. He was re-elected to the party's ruling Central Committee in 2011, at the age of 87.

General Fernández ran a cadet school that trained officers after revolutionary forces led by Fidel Castro overthrew the government of the dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959. He also played a leading role in one of the great battles of the Cold War, helping command Cuba's nascent militia forces in their victory over invading exile forces at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961.

Cuba won the Bay of Pigs battle because of "the firmness and decision of this people, not because of a professional army," General Fernández told The Associated Press in a 2001 interview.

José Ramón Fernández Álvarez, nicknamed El Gallego (the Galician) for his Spanish parentage, was born in the eastern Cuban city of Santiago on Nov. 4, 1923.

He received a college degree in social sciences before opting for a military career. After graduating from Cuba's School of Cadets in 1947, he studied artillery at Fort Sill, Okla.

In the mid-1950s he joined the Movement of the Pure, a group of young military officers determined to clean up corruption in the Batista government.

He was arrested in 1956 and imprisoned on the Isle of Pines, off the main island's southwestern coast. He remained behind bars until the revolution triumphed three years later.

On Jan. 12, 1959, less than two weeks after Batista fled the country, Castro called General Fernández to a gathering of more than 100 former government officials who had been imprisoned for opposition to the old regime.

Castro “asked me what I would like” in his new government, General Fernández recalled.

Although he had already found a job at a sugar production plant, Castro asked him to run a new cadet school. However, Castro said he could not match the salary of 1,100 Cuban pesos a month — then the equivalent of about \$1,100 — that the sugar plant was paying.

General Fernández did not know what to say.

“You are right,” he recalled Castro as saying. “I’ll go write a book about the Sierra Maestra, you go to the sugar plant, and the revolution can go to hell.”

“Fidel could be very persuasive, sometimes very rocklike,” General Fernández said. “I thought about it for five seconds, and two hours later I was at the school for cadets.”

Two years later, with 1,900 troops under his command at the school, General Fernández received an urgent call from Castro: Enemy troops had entered the Bay of Pigs, off Cuba’s southern coast.

General Fernández commanded militia troops in the battle against about 1,500 Cuban exiles trained and armed by the C.I.A. with the aim of overthrowing the new government. Washington was concerned that Castro’s leftist government would help the Soviet Union establish a beachhead just 90 miles from American shores.

Three days later, on April 19, General Fernández arrived at Playa Girón, on the bay, and Cuba declared victory. He remained with the army and assumed the post of vice defense minister in 1966.

He later worked in the Education Ministry and had been president of the Cuban Olympic Committee since 1997.

Information on survivors was not immediately available.

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