

CUBA: THE JULY 6, 1980 CANIMAR RIVER MASSACRE

At least 56 killed for attempting to flee Cuba

The Canimar is a scenic Cuban river that flows into Matanzas Bay, near Varadero beach. In 1980, a tourist excursion service was inaugurated using the "XX Aniversario," a large boat with two decks of chairs and capacity for one hundred passengers. It was to navigate for around five miles inland along the Canimar river.

On 6 July, 1980, the excursion boat was hijacked by three youngsters seeking to flee Cuba for the United States—Ramón Calbeiro León (15) and the brothers Silvio Aguila Yanes (18) and Sergio Aguila Yanes (19). Sergio was in the Cuban Armed Forces doing his obligatory military service and had taken several firearms for the hijacking.

Upon taking control of the vessel, the youngsters shouted: "To Miami!" amid screams of approval on the part of the surprised passengers. A security guard resisted and shot at the youngsters, who wounded him with the firearms they had brought on board. Concerned for his health, they placed him on a small boat, together with a passenger who wanted to leave, sending them back to shore. Upon arriving, they alerted authorities. Meanwhile, the "XX Aniversario" had turned around and heading out to open seas.

Julián Rizo Alvarez, Secretary of the Communist party in Matanzas Province, commanded a chase. He dispatched two high-speed Cuban Navy patrol boats with orders to prevent the escape and sink the vessel if necessary. They opened fire on the boat and the youngsters fired back. Because the vessel was built with cement fiber, it proved difficult to sink and the patrol boat withdrew. Several dead and wounded passengers lay on deck. A Cuban Air Force plane then flew over. Parents held children up in the air, hoping this would prevent an attack, but it came back and opened fire, leaving more dead and wounded.

A huge boat used for heavy industrial work was brought in to ram the "XX Aniversario." It was very close to international waters when it was finally sunk. The surviving passengers, now in the water, were fired at and soon also had to contend with sharks attracted by all the blood. Silvio Aguila Yanes dove into the water and saved several survivors from drowning. Ten survivors were reportedly taken ashore.

Sergio Aguila Yanes is said to have committed suicide when the boat sank. There are reports, however, that he was taken from the water by the crew of the Cuban Navy patrol boats, perhaps still alive. Silvio Aguila Yanes and Ramón Calbeiro León were sentenced to thirty years in prison. They served long sentences at "Combinado del Este" prison in Havana, where witnesses reported they had been subjected to psychiatric torture with psychotropic drugs. Reportedly, both were released and live in exile. Three other youngsters who knew about the plot or helped in the planning were sentenced to two to three years of prison. All five youngsters were subjected to court-mandated confiscation of all of their belongings.

The Cuban government claims that the boat was accidentally sunk when the larger vessel collided with it by the force of waves. The only victim who had a funeral was one of the guards, who had actually been killed by the attackers. Recovered bodies, if any, were not handed to the families for funerals or burials.

Survivors were ordered to keep silent and to never gather in groups with more than two of them present. They were threatened with trials as accomplices to the hijackings if they talked. For years, government agents monitored their activities while they and victims' relatives were offered gifts of televisions and appliances usually reserved for high government officials.

The toll of this disaster was at least 56 victims. The actual number was kept secret. Among the children assassinated were Lilian González López, age 3, Marisol Martínez Aragonés, age 17, Osmanly Rosales Valdés, age 9, and Marisel San Juan Aragonés, age 11.

Haydée Santamaría Hart, veteran of the 1953 attack on the Moncada Army barracks, Director of the "Casa de Las Americas," and wife of the then Cuban Minister of Education, may have been a final indirect victim of this tragedy. Immediately after the tragedy, she is reported to have visited survivors at hospitals in the city of Matanzas. Less than a month later, on July 25, 1980. Haydee, already in despair because of the "Mariel" boat exodus, committed suicide.

Sources: *Interview with Eduardo Lolo (author and professor living in New York city who lived in Matanzas at the time of the massacre and knew survivors), May 27, 2007. Testimony of María Julia Hernandez, niece of victim Vicente Fleites Cabrera. Official record of the Provincial Court of Matanzas, published in Dr. Alberto Fibla, Barbarie: Hundi-miento del Remolcador 13 de Marzo. Miami: Rodes Printing, 1996. "Cuba reportedly sank hijacked excursion boat in 1980," Associated Press, Washington D.C., 8 December, 1985. Joseph B. Treaster, "Radio Martí Says Cuba Sank Hijacked Boat in '80," *The New York Times*, 8 September 1985. José Pérez-Marat, La Masacre del Canimar, Miami, undated report. Tim Bower, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea, Endowment for Cuban American National Foundation*, Miami, 1993. Norberto Fuentes, ed. Modesto Arocha, *Children of the Enemy*, The International Republican Institute, October 1996, [/www.sigloxxi.org/Archivo/children.htm](http://www.sigloxxi.org/Archivo/children.htm). Armando M. Lago, "Cuba: The Human Cost of Social Revolution," Unpublished manuscript.*

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