

Operation RED, WHITE, and BLUE: Eglin AFB and the Mariel Boatlift

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Paths to the Present FLASHBACK

“New Wave of Refugees Rolling In.”¹ Sounds as if this statement is taken from today’s headlines, doesn’t it? It’s not. This byline, published on 6 May 1980 by the Miami Herald, discussed the “massive new wave of refugees”² entering the United States from Cuba. The influx of refugees, also known as the Mariel Boatlift, taxed the federal government’s humanitarian relief efforts. What role did the Air Force, specifically Eglin Air Force Base and the antecedents of Air Force Materiel Command, play in the Mariel Boatlift? In a time when immigration is a hot button topic, it is useful to review history to understand how the Air Force has responded to such events in the past.

The history of the Cuban exodus began in 1959 with the overthrow of the Batista government. Individuals fled the new regime, led by Fidel Castro, in search of economic opportunities and political freedom. Housing and job shortages caused by the downturn in the economy further increased internal tensions on the island. Frustration and despair with the regime came to a head on 1 April 1980. Five Cubans, in a desperate attempt to gain political asylum, drove a bus through a fence at the Peruvian embassy. Cuban guards, posted on the street to “protect”³ the embassy, opened fire and one guard died in the crossfire. The Cuban government demanded that the asylum seekers stand trial. When the Peruvian government refused, Castro withdrew his guards from the embassy and announced that all those who wished to obtain Peruvian visas could do so and leave Cuba. Some 10,000 Cubans crowded into the embassy and requested asylum. Other embassies agreed to take a small number of people and on 14 April President Jimmy Carter authorized up to 3,500 Cubans to enter the United States. On 20 April, the Castro regime announced that Cubans who wanted to emigrate to the US could board boats at the port of Mariel west



of Havana. The first of the refugees reached Florida the next day.⁴ The overall operation received its name from a comment made by Secretary of the Air Force (SECAF) Hans Mark. In conversation with Maj Gen Robert Bond, Commander of Eglin’s Armament Division, Air Force Systems Command (AFSC), the SECAF commented that, once they arrived, we should “paint them red, white, and blue and make Americans out of them.”⁶

In all, 125,000 Cubans fled to US shores on approximately 1,700 boats over a four month period, including a number of Cubans the Castro regime released from jails and mental institutions.⁷ One boat captain described the island “as a large concentration camp with spotlights going across your boat all day long and with machine gun nests set up on the shore...”⁸ Cuban guards beat the refugees and attacked them with dogs as they herded them onto packed

boats. Some of the overcrowded boats were barely seaworthy and 27 people died, including 14 on an overloaded boat that capsized.⁹

As the activities at the port of Mariel and in the flotilla grew more and more chaotic, the plans of the US government became more and more uncertain. No one knew the magnitude of the exodus, how soon before Castro changed his mind and refused to allow anyone to leave Cuba, or how to administer thousands of unknown and unprocessed Cuban refugees. As part of the solution, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), tasked with dealing with the crisis, visited Eglin Air Force Base (AFB), Florida, on 25 April to determine the suitability of Eglin as a site for a temporary refugee center. On 1 May, the Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) advised the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) that the Department of the Army (DA) and the Department of the Air Force (DAF) were to assist FEMA in processing the Cuban refugees. Additionally, Headquarters Air Force (HAF) advised AFSC and the Armament Division that, along with assisting FEMA with the processing of refugees, they were to establish a federal Cuban Refugee Processing Center near the City of Fort Walton Beach Fairgrounds. General Bond appointed Brig Gen Robert Chapman, the Vice Commander of the Armament Division (a unit assigned to Air Force Systems Command), as the Task Force Commander for the Cuban Refugee Processing Center located at the Fairgrounds.¹⁰

The Fairgrounds sat along the south boundary of Eglin, adjacent to civilian housing, next to a vocational school, and directly across a highway from the City's Municipal Golf Course. As a suitable periphery site, it allowed the Armament Division's testing mission to continue without interruption. It also had a 27,000 square foot metal building from which numerous federal and volunteer agencies could process the refugees. It was also near required utilities owned by the City of Fort Walton Beach. In addition, it was on a main access road leading to Fort Walton Beach and surrounding towns. Road location was important in order to provide easy access for civilian support agencies and sponsors to locate the center when the latter arrived in Fort Walton Beach to carry out their sponsorship.¹¹

As waves of refugees poured into the Fairgrounds, units and personnel from Eglin provided humanitarian support to the refugees. Eglin chaplains greeted the refugees, provided religious services, and organized a clothing collection drive at the request of General Chapman that collected over 60 tons of clothing. The 3202d Civil Engineering Squadron constructed and assembled 413 tents, to include 370 sleeping tents in just 10 days. Morale, Welfare, and Recreation staff provided entertainment and recreational activities. Services personnel fed the Cubans, supplied cots, issued linens, assigned refugees to cots, and ordered supplies. Lastly, the Eglin Regional Hospital (along with the 363rd Tactical Hospital, from Shaw AFB, South Carolina) provided health care, which peaked on 9 May with 1,174 emergency room visits.¹²



Further, Eglin units supplied unique services. The 1972d Communications Squadron installed communications equipment, to include 5,000 feet of cable, telephones, public address systems, and a Military Affiliated Radio System (MARS) facility. Over 1,178 personnel augmented operations, with most of the personnel coming from security police, medical, civil engineering, services, and interpreters. Units provided reprographic (printing) support for various forms, iden-

tity card meal tickets, weekly newsletters, religious material, and informational posters. The various squadrons under the Director of Logistics, Armament Division, amassed over 44,313 man-hours of logistical support from May to September 1980. The Directorate of Accounting and Finance, Armament Division, established unique procedures for cost reporting by implementing new tracking, reporting, and billeting procedures for base and tenant reimbursements from FEMA with over \$8 million identified. Disaster Preparedness staff provided the Mobile Command Post vehicle and two personnel around the clock for communications linkage to the base; and the 3201st Security Police Squadron maintained law and order.¹⁴

The first 125 refugees arrived at Eglin AFB from Key West, Florida, on 3 May 1980. By 11 May, 10,025 refugees had flowed into Eglin AFB and been in-processed. The refugees received meals, clothes, medical attention, and sleeping accommodations. During this time, Immigration and Naturalization Services, Public Health, investigative agencies, and placement agencies eventually out-processed the refugees. Immigration and naturalization processing continued 24 hours a day until the last Cuban completed the tedious process. Crowded conditions and the slow pace of out-processing, due to the need for immigration clearance security checks, delays in public health screening, and setbacks in the placement process (sponsors were slow in coming to the camp), led to discontent among the refugees. On 24 May, the refugees staged a hunger strike. Later in the day, 200 to 300 Cubans jumped the fences and threw bricks and stones at the security police. Security police restored order after reinforcements arrived from Hurlburt Field and Eglin, but the slow out-processing and crowded conditions continued to vex officials.¹⁵ Gen Alton D. Slay, Commander of AFSC, expressed his concern regarding the slow out-processing pace of the refugees to the CSAF. He said, "We have processed over 10,000 in and only 97 out. On the other hand, over 13,500 have been processed out at Miami. This disparity of out-processing effort is not understood by the local residents around Eglin nor by me. Also, the refugees at Eglin are becoming visibly more restive..." He continued, "I'll say it again Chief: our people are doing the very best job possible under extremely adverse circumstances. Those circumstances are just bound to become more and more adverse with each passing hour unless the logjam in out-processing is broken. If that logjam cannot be broken, I again urge in the strongest possible terms that a civilian law enforcement agency move in quickly to take charge of internal security in the camp..."¹⁶ To head off future riots, on 29 May US Marshals assumed responsibility for internal security.¹⁷

Eventually the pace of out-processing picked up and Eglin officials recommended the closure of the center and the relocation of the refugees. They determined it was no longer economical to maintain the processing center. On 5 August, a White House representative announced the selection of Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, as a consolidation location for Cuban refugees. By 24 September, only 619 refugees remained. On 26 September, the last of the refugees departed for Fort Chaffee and the Cuban Refugee Processing Center closed. In October, the US government and Cuban government mutually agreed to end the exodus. On 9 October, Special Order G-125 inactivated the Support Squadron Provisional (AFSC), 3250th, Eglin AFB, Florida (the Air Force designation for Cuban Refugee Processing Center), effective 15 October.¹⁸

Operation RED, WHITE, AND BLUE, "was the Air Force[s] successful effort with little forewarning to utilize military expertise for a humanitarian mission and coordinate actions with other government and civilian nongovernmental organizations."¹⁹ The major focus of the effort was construction, namely the construction of tents, but the operation also focused on the installation of communications, recruitment of military and civilian personnel, security, and logistical support for in-processing, housing, and out-processing the newly arrived refugees. It demonstrated how the Air Force could successfully respond to a humanitarian crisis.

Questions to Think About:

What were the lessons learned from the Mariel Boatlift? How were they applied?

Recommended Readings:

3201st Air Base Group (3201 ABG) Office of History, *Operation Red, White, and Blue, 1 May 1980-26 September 1980*, (Eglin Air Force Base, 3201 ABG, Dec 1980).

Kathleen Dupes Hawk, Robin Villella, Adolfo Leyva de Barona, *Florida and the Mariel Boatlift of 1980: The First Twenty Days*, (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2014).

Endnotes

- 1) Dan Williams and Barbara O'Reilley, "New Wave of Refugees Rolling In," *The Miami Herald*, 6 May 1980, 1.
- 2) *Ibid.*
- 3) According to the Castro regime, the guards "protected" the embassy. Under Article 22 of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, "the receiving State [in this case Cuba] is under a special duty to take all appropriate steps to protect the premises of the mission against any intrusion or damage and to prevent any disturbance of the peace of the mission or impairment of its dignity" per the following: Report, United Nations, "Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations," 18 April 1961, 7. However, a New York Times article dated 6 April 1980 stated that, "previously, the Peruvian Embassy...had been guarded by officers of the Interior Ministry carrying machine guns" per the following: Jo Thomas, "2,000 Who Want to Leave Cuba Crowd Peru's Embassy in Havana," *New York Times*, 6 April 1980, 2.
- 4) 3201st Air Base Group (3201 ABG) Office of History, *Operation Red, White, and Blue, 1 May 1980-26 September 1980*, (Eglin Air Force Base, 3201 ABG, Dec 1980), 1-4, 39; Website, This Day in History, "1980 Castro Announces Mariel Boatlift," <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/castro-announces-mariel-boatlift> (accessed on 5 November 2018); "Peru's Embassy in Havana," 2.
- 5) Website, Moments in US Diplomatic History: A Flood of Cuban Migrants-The Mariel Boatlift, April-October 1980," <https://adst.org/2015/04/a-flood-of-cuban-migrants-the-mariel-boatlift-april-october-1980/> (accessed on 9 November 2018).
- 6) 3201 ABG, *Operation Red, White, and Blue*, 4.
- 7) This Day in History.
- 8) Kathleen Dupes Hawk, Robin Villella, Adolfo Leyva de Barona, *Florida and the Mariel Boatlift of 1980: The First Twenty Days*, (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 125.
- 9) 3201 ABG, *Operation Red, White, and Blue*, 2; This Day in History.
- 10) 3201 ABG, *Operation Red, White, and Blue*, 3-5, 41; Message, CSAF/CVA to ALZICOM-SOA/CC, et al., "Cuban Refugee Support," 1 May 1980; Message, HQ USAF/XOO to AFSC/CC, et al., "Cuban Refugee Support," 1 May 1980; Message, HQ DA/DAMO-ODS, "CONUS Support of Cuban Refugee Situation," 6 May 1980.
- 11) 3201 ABG, *Operation Red, White, and Blue*, 3, 14-15.
- 12) 3201 ABG, *Operation Red, White, and Blue*, 6-33, 217-244; Memo, HQ AD/DE to 3201 ABG/HO, "Reports on Cuban Refugee Operations at Eglin AFB (Your Letter 9 Oct 80)," 1 Dec 1980; Memo, HQ 3201 ABG/SV to 3201 ABG/HO, "Reports on Cuban Refugee Operations at Eglin AFB (Your Letter 9 Oct 80)," 23 Oct 1980.
- 13) Website, National Archives-The Unwritten Record, "From Mariel Harbor to Eglin Air Force Base: Cuban Refugees and the Mariel Boatlift," <https://unwritten-record.blogs.archives.gov/2015/09/08/from-mariel-harbor-to-eglin-air-force-base-cuban-refugees-and-the-mariel-boatlift/> (accessed on 8 November 2018).
- 14) 3201 ABG, *Operation Red, White, and Blue*, iii, 6-33, 307-337; Memo, 3201 ABG/DP to 3201 ABG/HO, "Reports on Cuban Refugee Operations at Eglin AFB (Your Letter 9 Oct 80)," 24 Oct 1980; Memo, HQ 3201 ABG/DAR to 3201 ABG/HO, "Printing Support for Refugee Camp," 24 Oct 1980; Memo, HQ AD/LGMA to 3201 ABG/HO, "Reports on Cuban Refugee Operations at Eglin AFB (Your Letter 9 Oct 80)," 21 Oct 1980; Memo, HQ 3201 ABG/DW to 3201 ABG/HO, "Reports on Cuban Refugee Operations at Eglin AFB (Your Letter 19 Jun 80)," 2 Jul 1980.
- 15) 3201 ABG, *Operation Red, White, and Blue*, 32-33, 58, 63, 73-75, 78, 152, 155, 158, 162, 167, 320-321; National Archives-The Unwritten Record, 4.
- 16) Message, AFSC/CC to CSAF/CC, "Refugee Situation at Eglin," 14 May 1980.
- 17) 3201 ABG, *Operation Red, White, and Blue*, 78-79.
- 18) 3201 ABG, *Operation Red, White, and Blue*, 133-134; Message, HQ AFSC/TE to HQ USAF/XOO, et al., "Cuban Refugee Support," 26 Jun 1980; Message, HQ DA//DAMO-OOS to AIG 9180, "Cuban Camp Consolidation," 7 Aug 1980; Message, AD/CV to HQ USAF/XOO, et al., "Cuban Refugee Support Final Sitrep," 27 Sept 1980; SO G-125, HQ AFSC, 9 Oct 1980; This Day in History.
- 19) 3201 ABG, *Operation Red, White, and Blue*, iii.



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