





The Flamingo Incident, also known as the Cuban Incident, the Cay Santo Domingo Incident, or the Sinking of HMBS Flamingo, occurred on 10 May 1980, just under six weeks of the Defence Force's official establishment.

The Flamingo Incident was a nation building exercise which legitimized the need for a Defence Force in the minds of Bahamians at last. It proceeded to do what no Bahamian politician was able to do before. This instance of widespread national shock helped Bahamians to grasp the idea of sovereignty and independence and brought out the first instance of patriotism to the Bahamian flag.

As this incident has become known as one of the most formative and definitive events in the life of a small sovereign nation and her first line of defence, this section will present a detailed account of events and its significance in the Bahamian and Defence Force's history.

HMBS Flamingo, a 103" patrol vessel purchased at 4.5 million dollars from Vosper Thorneycroft had been in service for nearly two years.

Commander Amos Rolle was the Commanding Officer of HMBS Flamingo when they left Coral Harbour Base on Thursday 08 May 1980 on what should have been a routine ten-day patrol of Bahamian territorial waters. He and his 18 crew members had been tasked with stemming poaching in this particular quadrant. All remained quiet until about 1700. on Saturday 10 May, when they spotted two foreign fishing vessels, some 500 yards north of Cay Santo Domingo, engaged in fishing.

The crew of the two vessels tried to escape in a southwesterly direction. HMBS Flamingo gained on the vessels and finally caught up with them at about a mile from the Cay. The fishing vessels maintained their course and speed, even after orders to stop were passed to them over the loud hailer and warning shots fired in the air and then across the bow of their vessels. Finally, shots were directed to the bow of the vessels, bringing them to a complete stop nearly five miles away from the Cay.

Both vessels were boarded and searched by the HMBS Flamingo boarding team and the eight Cuban males that were found onboard both craft (4 on each), were arrested and the large quantity of fish found on-board the two vessels were confiscated. The two vessels, Ferrocem 165 and Ferrocem 54, were taken into tow.

They were heading back towards Cay Santo Domingo, when the first two Cuban military MiG fighter jets buzzed the Bahamian military ship, letting go several volleys of machine gun fire parallel to its starboard side and directly in front of the ship's bow. No one was hurt and it was assumed that the exercise was aimed at frightening them to release the captured fishermen. Willing to take no risks though, Commander Rolle ordered his men to hoist a second ensign and a Bahamian flag. With perfect weather, there would be no way that the pilots in their low flying jets could mistake the identity of the Flamingo or that they were in the territorial waters of The Bahamas.

About forty five minutes later the jets returned. The Flamingo was less than 1.5 miles from the Cay when the Cuban military aircraft began its second assault of rockets and machine gun fire on the military grey Bahamian vessel. This time, the patrol craft was hit. The Operations room filled with water and

rendered all communication equipment down. The bridge burst into flames. Melting steel appeared all around from the rocket attack and as it was in danger of imminent sinking, the crew abandoned ship. Even as the ship sank and the crew attempted to swim to safety, the jets returned, strafing the surrounding waters with machine gun fire and tearing apart the two lifeboats that had been jettisoned overboard. Though the jets disappeared, a military helicopter remained in the area.

The dory, driven by M/S Whitfield Neely, now Lieutenant Commander, who had been stationed on one of the captured craft, collected all the survivors, four of whom were wounded. Roll-call revealed that four marines; A/B Fenrick Sturup, Marine Seamen David Tucker, Edward Williams and Austin Smith-were missing.

HMBS Flamingo's crew had managed to secure a sub machine gun with one magazine of 30 rounds and a pistol before they abandoned ship. This was no match for their menacing machine chaperone hovering above. Thankfully, the helicopter left after the Flamingo had completely sunk. A search of the area for the four missing men ensued, in lifeboats, to no avail. All persons were then transferred to the Ferrocem 165 and they departed the area under the cloak of darkness to find cover at Ragged Island.

The other vessel, Ferrocem 54 was left drifting as the Engine was shot out). The remaining crew took turns smoking cigarettes as a means of light with which to navigate in a darkened ship state. This proved to be a wise decision, as the Cubans returned, in hopes of leaving no survivors and rescuing their own. The Bahamian crew and their prisoners arrived at the Bay of Anchorage at the southern tip of Ragged Island at 1330 on Sunday morning and proceeded to Duncan Town on foot. Telegraphs were sent to Nassau informing about the tragedy and bold attacks by the Cubans.

The Cuban jet fighters returned at 0930 on Sunday 11 May along with a large long range transport aircraft and a helicopter in Duncan Town. They simulated rocket attacks over the island and at one point, the helicopter landed on the island opposite where the Cuban fishing vessel was anchored, tearing off roof shingles and tree branches in the process. The men got out of the helicopter, armed with guns and looked around their immediate area.

The Cuban helicopter and transport aircraft continued their assault by flying on alternate sides of a Bahamian DC 3 aircraft, carrying fully uniformed Defence Force and Police force officials, as it landed on Ragged Island. The MiGs withdrew at 1015 hours with the helicopter. The other aircraft followed suit 2 hours and 15 minutes later, thus preventing the DC 3 from taking off before noon. It wasn't until a US scramble jet flew over and around that the Cubans withdrew and the Bahamian contingent was enabled to leave. The small island community had been harassed for over three hours.

Then on Monday 12 May 1980 at 1420 p.m. RBDF personnel spotted a Cuban fishing boat as they were heading to Nassau. It remained in the vicinity for about 15 minutes. In 3 separate and deliberate acts of

military aggression, the Cubans had demonstrated their lack of respect for the puerile archipelagic nation.

The brave survivors through numerous interviews recall how they were still picking melting steel from their skin and hair many months later from the rocket blasts. They unanimously agree that the traumatic happenings were a frightful reminder of the frailty of life and the dangers associated with the career they had chosen.

Upon their return to Nassau, Commander Rolle was summoned to an emergency National Security meeting where he would describe the events before Acting Prime Minister Arthur Hanna and other top government officials. Prime Minister Pindling at this time was attending the Templeton Prize for Religion awards presentation ceremony, where he had been expected to officiate at the Guildhall in London. Outraged when he was informed about the atrocious attack, he cancelled his trip and made plans to return to The Bahamas immediately. The Bahamas government was enraged at the hostile, deadly and unprovoked attack by their neighbours to the South. As a young nation, the Bahamas had to be very careful to use this opportunity to stand on its own.

A strongly worded note was sent to Cuba, in protest of the incident and violations to international law and Bahamian sovereignty. In the note, Minister Paul Adderley said that the Bahamas demanded that the "Government of the Republic of Cuba apologize in appropriate terms to the Government and the people of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas for its violent acts of aggression." They demanded assurance of the Cuban government that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Bahamas would be respected and would not be violated in the future.

On 12 May, Cuba sent a 7-member team to The Bahamas to engage in urgent discussions with The Bahamian government. The team was headed by Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Calegrino Torres, Cuban Ambassador to the Bahamas Raul Rouri and brother of then Cuban President, Raul Castro. Diplomatic relations between Cuba and The Bahamas before the attack was very peaceful. This tragic incident would produce a rift between the two neighbouring countries especially in the ensuing months, but diplomatic relations were maintained. Prime Minister Pindling during an impromptu press conference on Coral Harbour Base three days later revealed that "diplomatic relations with Cuba would be broken off only as a last resort...it's easier to talk when one has diplomatic relations. It makes talking much more difficult when one does not have proper relations."

Cuban officials attempted to come up with a story that would exonerate them completely. The eight Cubans, Captain Javier Fuentes Maranda, 37, Angel Roberto Perez Naranjo, 30, Israel Avila Mesa, 40, Pamolinales Canales, 58, Juan Rawson Merino, 22, Idaelio Suarez, 25, Antonia Batista, 52, and Juan V. Bermude, 30 were represented by J. Henry Bostwick, who urged the courts not to be influenced by the emotional and political factors surrounding their capture. He put forward that others facing the same charge were allowed bail and that he was operating on the premise that in the Bahamas, persons are innocent until proven guilty.

They appeared before the Acting Magistrate Ian Bethel and were charged with using their two vessels as Captain and crew to engage in foreign fishing in The Bahamas' exclusive fishing zone. Prosecuting Attorneys objected outrightly to the consideration of bail. However, their Defence Attorney was able to secure them bail in the sum of \$10,000.00 cash each. The trial was set for July 1.

First Cuban authorities reported that they thought HMBS Flamingo was a pirate ship. Persons onboard the Ferrocem 165 admitted that they had radioed Cuba for help, alleging that a pirate ship was attacking them and admitted also that they had actually expected the attack. However, the Bahamian military patrol vessel was clearly marked on all sides and visibility on that day was clear, so the story would not hold. It was proven that five of the eight men onboard the two vessels had been arrested by Bahamian authorities before, as well as one of the ships. It was more than likely the fear of a second sentencing that drove them to evade imminent capture.

The Cuban government then offered compensation and alleged in an official statement that they cabled directly to the two dailies in Nassau:

2 The Tribune, Wed May 14, 1980

Saturday's incident, north of Sama Bay, 20 miles off the Cuban coast, cannot be something casual. It is another of a series of events: the episodes at the Peruvian Embassy, the incident at the Yankee interests section and the monstrous attempt to murder 570 Cuban children in the day care centre. 'Le Van Tam.'

It has been possible to ascertain with accuracy now that a Bahamian patrol boat attacked, shooting at them without previous warning, the Cuban ferrocement fishing boats number 165 and 54 which were in international waters completely unarmed. It furthermore boarded them afterwards and towed them away. This had never happened before. There, have been of course many pirate attacks in that area, but never an attack of this type by a Bahamian patrol boat.

The CIA's hand cannot be alien and must certainly be behind this. In other occasions, Cuban fishing boats have been captured by vessels of the Bahamian government with the pretext that they were fishing in waters which, as a matter of fact, are very close, according to the maps, to those of Cuba. The waters of each of the two countries have not been delimited with precision yet. The Cuban government always accepted every claim from the Bahamas and settled with respect and friendship each problem. What cannot really be explained is that two Cuban fishing vessels were criminally attacked in international waters by a patrol boat from the Bahamas, thus creating the appearances of a pirate attack, which is what caused the incident.

Do not blame the Government of the Bahamas. The CIA works through agents. In the Bahamas, complete mafias of Yankee gangsters, which monopolize smuggling, gambling and drugs operate. The Government of the Bahamas itself is a victim of the actions of these elements. With regards to Cuba that government has not had an unfriendly policy and we are certain that it has also wished to develop good relations with our country.

Yesterday, on Monday, a delegation led by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cuba, Pelgrin Torras, and the Cuban Ambassador to the Bahamas, Raul Roa Kouri, travelled to that country, to hold discussions with the authorities and clarify matters. Our delegation spoke with the eight Cuban fishermen who are in Nassau. They explained in detail the events. In our opinion, all the responsibility falls in the illegal, improper and unjust action of the patrol boat from the Bahamas...The CIA's hand can not be alien and must certainly be behind this."

Finally they apologized and offered compensation for the loss of the four men and the patrol vessel. In the end, \$100,000.00 was given to each of the four families and \$5 million was given as reparation for the ship and her supplies. In offering a completely comprehensive account, it may be of interest for readers to know that a Latin American site³ identifies the two MIG jet fighter pilots as Colonel Jorge Vilardel and Major Juan Colina.

It is also interesting to note that the Cubans were found in possession of licenses issued by their government conclusively authorizing them to fish in Zone 129, which happens to be in Bahamian waters. The Bahamas began in earnest defending its territory in the early 1970s and the boats of the Cubans had been arrested many times, so they were quite aware that this move was illegal and would be contested. www.lamilitary.org/BS_RBDFCG.html

In actuality, records for arrests of Cuban poachers and boats date back to 16 July 1971, when the Cuban vessel Omicron (Registration number: F499/L.3-632203Z4-1) was arrested in the area of Johnson Cay Cut in the Ragged Island Chain. Six fishermen were found onboard and charged and convicted in Bahamian courts for poaching.

Records reveal that two of the eight men who had been arrested on 10 May 1980 onboard the Ferrocem 165 and Ferrocem 54 had similar names to two men who had also been arrested on 20 August 1971 on a boat called the 2 Diciembre by Police Marines. There are numerous files about the arrests, charging and conviction of these and other Cuban poachers who had been found illegally fishing in The Bahamas, especially in the Ragged Island chain. There had been no argument from Cuban authorities in any of the cases.

There had been one instance on 19 December 1975, according to Police files, where Cuban military presence was seen, though. The Police patrol boats Acklins and Andros had arrested five Cuban vessels nearly a mile off Cay Verde, one of the Cays in the Ragged Island chain. The vessels: Ferrocem 77 (Registration number: C27D150), Ferrocem 42 (Registration Number: C27D147), Ferrocem 54, Ferrocem 120 and Escamero No. 96, were found with large quantities of marine produce and fishing gear onboard.

Navigating some 8-10 miles past Cay Verde, a Cuban fighter jet, N-21 circled over the two vessels, Acklins and Andros, at an approximate altitude of 200 feet. Shortly after this, a DC-3 Coast Guard plane with the words CUBAN AREO REVOLUTIONARY, bearing „No.-12-55“ circled Andros and Acklins four

times. This last aircraft flew at about 100-130 feet above the patrol boats. The five boats were taken safely to New Providence and the men charged and convicted for poaching. Fortunately, no direct attacks took place during this instance. However, it was pejorative for the Cubans in the May 10 Incident Court Case. Evidence also showed that the Ferrocem 54 did not stop when ordered to do so in 1975, just as she refused to stop when similarly challenged in May 1980.