

Naval War College Review

Volume 43
Number 2 *Spring*

Article 32

1990

The 1980 Cuban Boatlift

John C. Trainor

Alex Larzelere

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Trainor, John C. and Larzelere, Alex (1990) "The 1980 Cuban Boatlift," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 43 : No. 2 , Article 32.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol43/iss2/32>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

fits very nicely into this large gap in military literature.

In *No Picnic*, the author recounts his participation in the Falklands campaign as commander of 3 Commando Brigade. Although he does not draw such a distinction in the book, his account can be viewed as a description of two separate, but related, operations. The first was the amphibious operation for which Brigadier Thompson was the commander of the landing force. The second operation was the land campaign to seize Stanley. During this phase the author was one of two brigade commanders in a division that had been formed upon the arrival of an army brigade in the Falklands.

Brigadier Thompson's account of the amphibious operation starts with the receipt of a warning order and ends with the Brigade firmly established ashore at San Carlos. The many intervening steps between these two events, such as embarkation, rehearsal (or lack of same), movement to the objective, and the actual landing, are all covered with an attention to professional detail not found in more general accounts of the war. One example that I found particularly interesting was a description of the process by which San Carlos was chosen as the site for the landing. *No Picnic* also forces the reader to think about what assets are required to conduct an amphibious operation. On one hand, the case can be made that the British were lucky to have succeeded in conducting the operation on such a shoestring. On

the other hand, the application of any U.S. standards of required amphibious lift and other support would have dictated that the operation never be attempted.

In his account of the land campaign, Brigadier Thompson continues to describe events with an eye to details that are invaluable to readers with a professional interest in the campaign. The margins of my copy of *No Picnic* are filled with notes pointing out the author's views on such subjects as the amount of artillery preparation required for an attack, the location of control measures, such as lines of departure and assembly areas, and the employment of night patrolling.

Throughout the book, by means of many examples, Brigadier Thompson hammers home his view that the deciding factor in the campaign was the superiority of the individual British fighting man and his training. The professional manner in which the author delivers this message makes *No Picnic* particularly instructive for field and company grade officers. On second thought, I would guess that field marshals and squad leaders would find this book equally interesting.

T.L. GATCHEL
Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps
Naval War College

Larzelere, Alex. *The 1980 Cuban Boatlift*. Washington, D.C.: National Defense Univ. Press, 1988. 543pp. \$16

Do not let the size of this book deter you from reading it. The author, Captain Alex Larzelere, U.S. Coast Guard (Ret.), has written a highly readable chronicle of the 1980 Cuban exodus, and his analyses and interpretations of events bring the narrative to life. Skillfully he takes us from the death of a Cuban guard at the Peruvian Embassy in Cuba to the chess game between Jimmy Carter and Fidel Castro over whether the humanitarian acceptance of political refugees also prescribes the acceptance of refugee criminals and mental patients.

Questions of refugee acceptance that surfaced within the time frame of this brief event—roughly from April to November 1980—are now being played out in Hong Kong with the Southeast Asian refugee problem. How does a government limit the influx of people fleeing an oppressive regime? President Carter made a decision to accept a manageable 3,500 refugees, but this escalated to over 100,000 who safely made the journey across the Straits of Florida. Most refugees have exceptional needs and limited resources. Thus, a humanitarian opportunity is often followed by long-term economic and social costs. Compounding the boatlift problem was Castro's requirement that the boatloads include prisoners and the mentally ill along with the voluntary expatriates. Today, nine years later, the United States is still faced with huge prison and mental hospital costs to retain and rehabilitate these people.

Captain Larzelere traces the circumstances that led to the 1980 Cuban exodus. There were internal economic pressures of insufficient housing, unemployment, an aging population, and reduced infant mortality. There was dissatisfaction with the communist form of government and collective economic rewards. Finally there was the consciousness that friends and relatives (800,000 had left since 1959), living just ninety miles away, were enjoying a prosperity that could not be realized in Cuba.

The tales of some refugees, especially those who sought safety on the Peruvian Embassy grounds, are vividly recounted. Their courage is documented in words and pictures. Some of them made perilous voyages in boats too small for the sea conditions, and all left most of their possessions behind.

Captain Larzelere served in key positions both afloat and ashore in the boatlift operation area. From those vantage points, he describes the stream of empty boats headed from Florida to Mariel Harbor, and the boats' return trip loaded with refugees. From the Coast Guard's perspective, this was first and foremost a massive search and rescue operation. All available air and sea resources were deployed from as far away as New England to render assistance to boats in trouble. Fortunately, the U.S. Navy was able to augment Coast Guard forces and share some of the overwhelming rescue task. The operations will be immediately familiar to those who

served in this or similar large-scale rescues, especially the author's vivid accounts of the chaos that occurred during the Sunday storm of 27 April or the tragedy of the *Olo Yumi* on 17 May.

Whether Castro lost prestige in the eyes of the world when so many Cuban citizens were willing to forsake their country, or did himself a favor by getting rid of malcontents and criminals who were a drain on the economy will be determined later. The question remains, if pressure should again build in Cuba, would he seek relief through another boatlift to the United States? The author urges comprehensive reviews of policies, strategies, and executive decision-making processes to avoid being surprised by another exodus of this magnitude. This book will serve as a valuable primer for those tasked with those reviews.

JOHN C. TRAINOR
 Captain, U.S. Coast Guard
 Washington, D.C.

Fernández, Damián J. *Cuba's Foreign Policy in the Middle East*. Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1988. 160pp. \$19.95

Premier Fidel Castro long ago expanded his original notions of sponsoring liberationist guerrilla wars into a full spectrum of politico-military services. Where once his peripatetic revolutionists schemed romantically—and unsuccessfully—at implanting Maoist *focos*, later he led a diplomatic and military array

of overt and clandestine forces aimed at creating a Marxist-Leninist world.

Professor Damián J. Fernández, political science professor at Colorado College, traces Castro's efforts to become a significant player in the world's hottest region, the Middle East. His study was performed in the archives of the Cuban Information System at the University of Miami Graduate School of International Studies and in the Hispanic Division of the Library of Congress. The book is written primarily for Latin Americanists, and most of the Middle Eastern scholarly source materials appear to be secondary.

The first chapter is a summary of Cuban foreign policy from 1960-1985. It is easily the best of its kind in print.

Next is a survey chapter on Cuban policies in the Middle East, as a region, followed by a chapter containing a country-by-country implementation of those policies. These two chapters form the centerpiece of the book. A special case study on Cuban-Libyan relations follows, and it contains some surprises. Where the casual observer might expect Muammar el-Qaddafi and Fidel Castro to find common ground as leading scourges of the industrial West, Qaddafi, while sharing Castro's anti-Zionist and anti-U.S. enthusiasm, in fact, finds Castro to be too faithful a Soviet ally.

The summary chapter develops some interesting conjectures on how