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Did Fidel Push the Button?

Communists like their leaders to be larger than life and to have accomplishments to match. For example, China's Chairman Mao Tse-tung made a big splash in 1966, when at age 72 he reportedly swam nine miles down the Yangtze River. Then Rumania's Party Boss Nicolae Ceausescu made hunting history in 1978 by bagging the largest bear ever shot in Europe. Now it appears that Fidel Castro too can boast of a fancy feat. During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, he is said to have shot down singlehanded an American U-2 plane.

That is what Carlos Franqui, a Cuban emigré writer living in Italy, contends in *Family Portrait*, a chronicle of the Castro years to be published in Spain next month. According to Franqui, an old Castro comrade who left Cuba years ago in anger over Moscow's increasing influence, the incident occurred Oct. 27, 1962, at the height of the U.S.-Soviet confrontation over the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba. On that day, the Cuban President was visiting a Soviet missile base in Pinar del Rio, southwest of Havana. When a U-2 appeared on the base's radar, Castro asked the Soviets how to shoot down an attacking plane. The officers obligingly showed him the button that would fire off an SA-2 ground-to-air missile. Suddenly, Castro pushed the button. A missile went up and, Franqui writes dryly, "the plane came down amidst the consternation of the generals." The U-2's pilot, Air Force Major Rudolph Anderson Jr., was the only known



Castro



Military funeral for U-2 Pilot Anderson in 1962

U.S. combat casualty of the six-day crisis.

Why would Castro have fired the missile? Franqui writes that Castro went to the base "with intent" to create an incident that would tell him if "there was going to be a war or not." While the U-2 downing was no secret, there has never been any hint before that Castro fired the missile, nor

any corroboration now of the Franqui version. U.S. intelligence officials find Franqui's account "intriguing" but point out that if Castro did push the button, the SA-2 would not have hit the plane unless the Soviets had already been tracking it on radar and taken other steps to ensure a kill.