

## DREW FETHERSTON and JOHN CUMMINGS on American germ warfare

# Opening the phials of the CIA

WITH AT LEAST the tacit backing of US Central Intelligence Agency officials, operatives linked to anti-Castro terrorists introduced African swine fever virus into Cuba in 1971. Six weeks later an outbreak of the disease forced the slaughter of 500,000 pigs to prevent a nationwide animal epidemic.

A United States intelligence operative claims he was given the virus in a sealed, unmarked container at an American Army base and CIA training ground in the Panama Canal zone, with instructions to turn it over to the anti-Castro group.

The 1971 outbreak, the first and only time the disease has hit the Western Hemisphere, was labelled the "most alarming event" of 1971 by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation. African swine fever is a highly contagious and usually lethal viral disease that infects only pigs and, unlike swine flu, cannot be transmitted to humans. There were no human deaths involved in the outbreak, but all production of pork, a Cuban staple, came

to a halt, apparently for several months.

A CIA spokesman, Dennis Berend, in response to a request for comment, said: "We don't comment on information from unnamed and, at best, obscure sources."

Why the virus turned up in Cuba has been a mystery to animal investigators since the outbreak. Informed speculation assumed the virus entered Cuba either in garbage from a commercial airliner or in sausages brought in by merchant seamen.

However, on the basis of numerous interviews over four months with US intelligence sources, Cuban exiles and scientists concerning the outbreak—which occurred two years after then President Richard Nixon had banned the use of offensive chemical and biological warfare—we were able to piece together the following account of events leading up to the outbreak.

Fort Gulick, where the operative says he was given the virus, is a CIA-run paramilitary training centre for career personnel and mercenaries as well as an Army base.

After he had passed the virus to the anti-Castro group it was given to a person in the Canal Zone, who took it by boat and turned it over to a fishing trawler off the Panamanian coast. The source said the substance was not identified to him until months after the outbreak in Cuba. He would not elaborate further.

Another man involved in the operation, a Cuban exile who asked not to be identified, said he was on the trawler when the virus was put aboard at a prearranged rendezvous point off Bocas del Toro, Panama. He said the trawler carried the virus to Navassa, a deserted, tiny, US-owned island between Jamaica and Haiti. From there, the container was taken to Cuba and given to other operatives on the southern coast near the US Navy base at Guantanamo Bay in late March, according to the source on the trawler. The base is 100 miles due north of Navassa.

A paper prepared by the Cubans for a scientific conference in Mexico City said the first sick pigs were found about May 6, but no precise location was given. A non-

Soviet block agricultural technician then in Cuba said the disease easily could have gone undetected for months.

The source on the trawler, who had been trained by the CIA and had carried out previous missions for the agency, said he saw no CIA officials aboard the boat that delivered the virus to the trawler off Panama, but added: "We were well paid for this and Cuban exile groups don't have that kind of money." He suspected, but never knew for sure, what was in the container. "When I asked about this stuff all they told me was 'It's from Gulick'," he said.

Congressional sources with access to some CIA records said the swine fever operation was not mentioned in the list of approved covert operations. But Congress's efforts to probe CIA activities in chemical and biological warfare have been frustrated. The Senate select committee on intelligence said in its final report last year that the Army and the CIA had entered into a special agreement to build biochemical agents and delivery systems, but that the written records of these activities were destroyed.—Newsday.