

THE SATURDAY PROFILE

## Bomb Resonates With Diplomats, Not With the Bomber

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#)

THERE are not many places where a man convicted in the bombing of a commercial airliner that killed 73 people can be found roaming the streets. This city, home to Freddy Lugo, is one of them.

Mr. Lugo, like an uneasy memory from the cold war, is tucked away here, obscure to most of his countrymen but not completely forgotten. He was one of two men sentenced to 20 years in prison for placing explosives on a DC-8 jetliner flown by Cubana Airlines in 1976.

The plane blew up in the sky above Barbados, killing everyone on board, including two dozen members of Cuba's national fencing team and a 9-year-old Guyanese girl. That explosion, considered the first act of midair terrorism in the Americas, poisons relations between Havana and Washington to this day.

Mr. Lugo, 65, who was released in 1993 after 17 years in prison, has tried to put the past behind him. "I have a tranquil life now," he said in a rare 90-minute interview, his eyes darting around him, at a bakery cafe near his home. "I have a clean conscience."

But the past has a way of catching up with him. There is the occasional journalist to contend with, and glimmers of recognition from among the many Cubans who live here. As many Americans would recognize [Mohamed Atta](#) if he were alive and walking the streets of New York, to Venezuelans, Mr. Lugo's face is haunting.

A new book on the Cubana bombing, called "Terrorist of the Bush Family," by two Venezuelan journalists, Alexis Rosas and Ernesto Villegas, has not helped either. The book has become a best seller since its release here last November. It has focused new attention on the bombing and the request by Venezuela for Washington to extradite the Cuban exile accused of masterminding the bombing, Luis Posada Carriles, to face terrorism charges here.

So far the Bush administration has refused, and Mr. Posada Carriles, 78, a naturalized Venezuelan citizen who sneaked into the United States in 2005, currently sits in a jail in southern New Mexico on [immigration](#) charges.

PRESIDENT [HUGO CHÁVEZ'S](#) government, a staunch Cuban ally these days, says the difficulty in extraditing Mr. Posada Carriles illustrates American hypocrisy in battling terrorists. Likewise, Cuba's government points to documents that show the [C.I.A.](#) had knowledge that such an attack was being plotted in Caracas.

Since the book's publication, academic researchers and reporters have tried more than ever to track down Mr. Lugo for interviews, but he has almost always turned them away, preferring the banality of an anonymous life.

Mr. Lugo, who drives a gypsy cab to make ends meet, has tried his best to remain in the shadows of the diplomatic uproar surrounding Mr. Posada Carriles, whom he described simply as "an adventurer, capable of anything."

Despite his conviction, Mr. Lugo said he considered himself a pawn in the machinations of Cuban exiles to topple [Fidel Castro](#). Along with many of those Cubans, Mr. Lugo, a Venezuelan, found himself in Caracas in the 1970s.

Ann Louise Bardach, a journalist and authority on Cuban politics, called the Caracas of that era the Casablanca of the Caribbean, as the city attracted a sordid collection of spies, guerrillas and drug traffickers.

It was here that Mr. Lugo, then a news photographer, met the man who recruited him for the bomb plot, a fellow Venezuelan journalist named Hernán Ricardo Lozano, according to police records.

Mr. Ricardo, it turned out, had been working on the side for Mr. Posada Carriles, doing photography and surveillance. Mr. Posada Carriles had a long history as a C.I.A. operative in the 1960s before moving to Caracas, where he became chief of operations at Venezuela's secret intelligence police, Disip, in the 1970s.

"My life would have taken a completely different path if I had never met Hernán Ricardo," Mr. Lugo said.

The two men boarded Cubana Airlines Flight 455 on Oct. 6, 1976, in Port-of-Spain, the capital of Trinidad and Tobago. They got off in Barbados, where the plane stopped en route to Havana. Before leaving the plane, they left C-4 plastic explosive in a camera bag and a tube of Colgate toothpaste on board, according to statements obtained by the police in Trinidad after the two men were arrested there in the days after the attack.

"We have an explosion," the Cubana pilot said with fear in his voice in a recording of the plane's last frantic moments before it crashed into the Caribbean. The recording, broadcast repeatedly here and in Havana last October in remembrances of the 30th anniversary of the episode, continued: "We are descending immediately. We have fire on board."

Documents recently obtained by the National Security Archive in Washington describe some of the mundane organizational details involved in the bombing. In questioning by Trinidadian police officials, Mr. Lugo said Mr. Ricardo had "told him he was going to blow up a Cubana airplane." He said he saw Mr. Ricardo "kneading a handful of something looking like dough" before boarding the flight.

Mr. Ricardo, after slitting his left wrist in a suicide attempt while in police custody in Port-of-Spain, said that he had been paid \$16,000 for the job and that Mr. Lugo had received \$8,000.

AN intelligence report prepared by Clarence Kelly, the [F.B.I.](#) director at the time, suggested that Mr. Posada Carriles had attended meetings in Caracas where the bombing was planned.

The report, quoting an informant in Caracas, said Mr. Ricardo had called Orlando Bosch, another Cuban exile in Caracas charged with planning the bombing, saying, "A bus with 73 dogs went off a cliff and all got killed."

Mr. Bosch was eventually cleared by Venezuelan courts and lives quietly in Miami, having been spared from deportation in 1990 by the administration of President [George H. W. Bush](#), who was the C.I.A. director at the time of the bombing.

Mr. Posada Carriles escaped from prison here in 1985 and made his way to Central America, and from there entered the United States in 2005 and was caught.

Mr. Ricardo served 17 years along with Mr. Lugo. Today his whereabouts are hard to ascertain, though Mr. Lugo said he believed he had left Venezuela.

FOR his part, Mr. Lugo divides his time now between an apartment where he lives with his wife, in an elegant if decaying building on a quiet, tree-lined street, and his son's home in a poor district. He says he avoids any involvement in politics.

He says his taxi, an aging beige sedan, is his only source of income. His journalist friends still greet him and shake his hand, he said, even though they know of his history. He is missing a few teeth, but otherwise appears younger than his 65 years. A recently discovered heart ailment, he said, had made him a teetotaler.

Asked if he felt remorse over the deaths of 73 people, including many teenagers on the Cuban fencing team, Mr. Lugo said he did not. He explained somewhat cryptically that he considered himself manipulated in an act beyond his control. "I am a normal man," he said. "I am innocent."

Others disagree. "Freddy Lugo may not want to admit it, but he's a mass murderer," said José Pertierra, a lawyer in Washington representing Venezuela's government in its attempt to extradite Mr. Posada Carriles. "He can claim he wasn't the mastermind; maybe he can claim he was duped. But he participated in a terrorist act that killed 73 people."