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Juan Clark, Cuba scholar and Bay of Pigs vet, dies

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Al Diaz / Miami Herald Staff

Bay of Pigs member Juan Clark at his home in Miami on March 22, 2011.

Juan Clark fought for a democratic Cuba as a paratrooper in the Bay of Pigs invasion and then in academia, by chronicling the lies of the Castro revolution and the stories of waves of exiles arriving on U.S shores.

Clark, professor emeritus of sociology at Miami Dade College, died Wednesday at the age of 74, said his brother, Jose Benito Clark, a member of the infiltration teams sent ahead to prepare the way for the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Just two years ago, Clark had smiled as he recalled how his group of Brigade 2506 fighters, hungry after hiding for four days in the swamps near the site of the disastrously failed CIA-backed invasion, had captured a small pig.

To avoid the noise of a gunshot, another brigade member strangled the animal while muttering, "Forgive me, God! Look what Fidel Castro has driven me to do!" Clark recalled in an interview for a report marking the 50th anniversary of the 1961 invasion.

"Juan was one of the most prominent members of the paratrooper units, very beloved by all and a very intelligent man,"

said former brigade president Felix Rodriguez. "He was a great companion, a great friend and an eternal fighter for the freedom of Cuba."

"This is a day of great sorrow for Miami Dade College," said MDC President Eduardo Padrón. Clark "defended his principles, first with gun in hand and later with the power of the word and an unbreakable civic commitment."

Clark's greatest contribution to the struggle over Cuba may well have been his Spanish-language book, *Cuba, mito y realidad: Testimonios de un pueblo*, published in 1990. Through personal stories, he chronicled the myths and realities of life in Cuba.

While Fidel Castro cultivated the myth of a Robin Hood revolution dedicated to helping the poor in Cuba and abroad in the early 60s, Clark noted that the Cuban security apparatus was keeping about 60,000 peaceful political opponents in prison. Comparing the populations of Cuba and the United States at the time, that would have amounted to at least 1,410,000 American political prisoners, he wrote in the book.

Clark parachuted into Cuba several miles inland from the beach landings at the Bay of Pigs and was a member of a mortar crew that helped block the advance of Castro's troops until they ran out of ammunition and were forced to retreat.

Eventually captured along with 1,173 other brigade members, he spent about 20 months in Havana prisons until Castro was paid the \$53 million ransom that he demanded and freed most of the invaders.

Cubans on the island would never again pose a challenge to Castro, Clark told The Miami Herald for the 50th anniversary report.

"This castrated the spirit of rebellion" against Castro in Cuba, he said.

When he returned to the United States, he enrolled at the University of Florida to study sociology and later was the first academic to detail the waves of Cubans that went into exile in the United States and other countries.

He also wrote two books on the Catholic Church in Cuba, and last year was responsible for a chapter in a new book, [*Cubans: An Epic Journey, on the struggles to free Cuba*](#).

"Juan was a great spokesman for the brigade. He was a well-educated man who could intelligently explain why the Bay of Pigs invasion happened, why it failed and why it mattered — and as a professor, he often explained it to the younger generation," said Julio Gonzalez Rebull, a fellow brigade veteran.

And as recently as Monday, he told The Miami Herald he did not believe Cuban President Raúl Castro's promise that he would leave power in five years.

"I think many people were eager to see the end of the system and unfortunately that hasn't happened," Clark said.

He is survived by his widow, Clara de Leon, and sons Juan and Jose Alberto Clark. Funeral arrangements are pending.