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Dead Man's Bluff;

Was Colombia's most feared paramilitary chieftain really killed in the jungles of his war-torn country eight years ago? Or did Fidel Castano simply disappear, leaving his brother responsible for their empire--and their sins?

by Steven Dudley

The rain came down in sheets the night Carlos Castano returned to his older brother Fidel's grave in the jungles of northern Colombia.

Carlos and two of his cousins dug furiously into the muddy terrain on the edge of one of his brother's many cattle ranches. But the hole that held the legendary paramilitary chieftain's body kept filling with water, which turned an eerie white.

Carlos didn't want to move Fidel's body, but the hastily dug grave was eroding. The stench from the grave site made him double over and vomit, he recounted last year in his authorized biography, *My Confession*. His cousins looked at him in consternation and kept digging until they uncovered Fidel's casket with their shovels. The rudimentary wooden box was so waterlogged they couldn't move it.

Carlos and his cousins reached in to retrieve the body, but the bones came apart in their hands. Carlos was left holding the skull. The exhumation was almost more than he could handle. He fell into a trance, he told his biographer, and watched aimlessly as his cousins finished the job.

He thought about abandoning the decades-old civil war that had left his father and now his brother dead. He thought about the randomness of battle, the way some died and others lived. He thought about the burden of taking his brother's place, of leading the struggle against leftist insurgents that had splintered the country. Then Carlos helped his cousins rebury his brother on the side of a nearby mountain, for what he prayed would be the last time.

Colombians were aghast and delighted at Carlos's tale (and bought his book in record numbers). This is, after all, the land of magical realism, an Andean country where myths flourish and stories about larger-than-life figures like Fidel Castano grow more powerful over time.

For almost 15 years, Fidel was at the center of Colombia's chaos, enmeshed in its massacres, land grabs and cocaine deals. He was the founding father of the country's right-wing paramilitaries, which financed their fierce war against the leftists with drug money. He was a self-made millionaire, amassing a cattle empire and trafficking in illegal drugs and stolen art. He was the man who had taken on one of the world's most fearsome drug lords, Pablo Escobar, and helped snuff him out.

Then, on January 6, 1994, it all came to an end, Carlos told his biographer, with a single bullet to the heart near a guerrilla roadblock. With that shot, Fidel Castano was dead at 45.

Or was he? It was hard to believe, even for those who read Carlos's book cover to cover. Carlos maintains he learned of his brother's death immediately, but hid the news from the country for months while he consolidated his control of the Castano empire. When rumors began circulating in newspapers that Fidel was dead, Carlos was tight-lipped about what had happened. What's more, there was no corpse, no fingerprints, no eyewitness testimony, no death certificate. For years, there were only rumors of his whereabouts, not his grave. He was living in Portugal. He had an apartment in Paris. He ran a kibbutz in Israel. He was spotted in Monteria, at an inauguration of a military battalion in central Colombia, on a balcony in Madrid. The stories came from lawyers, politicians, shop owners, peasant farmers, fishermen and taxi drivers. People talked about Fidel in the present tense. Even the government didn't buy Fidel's

death. Prosecutors continued to charge him with crimes long after his disappearance.

Why were so many Colombians convinced that his death had been staged? Was it possible that he was still operating from the shadows, still contributing to Colombia's tumult and reaping profits from its travails? I decided to find out more about what had happened to Fidel--and to the forces he'd unleashed on his country.

I started by poking around a lonely village called Valencia, where Fidel owned land and had spent most of the last years of his public life. Valencia is in the province of Cordoba, at the base of the Sinu Valley, a vast wetlands that stretches from the mountains in the south to the coast in the north. Aside from cattle ranchers like Fidel, the area is dirt poor. The town itself has a few dozen one-story houses and no paved roads. The local government was just putting in a sewer system. A few donkeys roamed freely in the town market, and peasants walked the streets with the plodding pace of poverty. Occasionally, the local bus passed by, kicking up dust in their faces.

To get to the village, I had to cross the torrential Sinu River on a crude ferry that maintained its course by attaching itself to two reinforced steel wires that stretched across the fast-moving muddy water. Fidel used to swim the river for exercise. A visiting professor once saw him dive into whirlpools that would suck the life from most. Fidel, of course, came up some 20 yards away and swam freestyle for another hour. He often complemented his swims with long jogs. And he was an avid chess player.

"He was always attacking, never on the defensive," said one old compatriot who played with Fidel frequently. "And when he was waiting for me to move, he used to just sit there and say, 'I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill you,' and tap the pieces on the table and whistle."

The two would play until Fidel had outmaneuvered his opponent in a sufficient number of matches. "Sometimes we'd play until 8 or 9 in the morning. He never lost."

The few townspeople in Valencia who would speak to me remembered Fidel as an "uncomplicated" person, a man of the countryside. He owned a big ranch outside of town, they said, but he dressed like them: a pair of jeans, boots and a cowboy hat. He was tall and fit, built like a soldier, with wide shoulders and a firm torso. He had a stern, serious face, but soft eyes that charmed. He greeted everyone he saw with a smile and a strong handshake, remembering their names and asking after their wives, their children, their businesses. They called him "Tio Fidel," or Uncle Fidel. "Whatever you need, you just come by the house," he would urge at the end of conversations.

As I traveled through the countryside around Valencia, I passed dozens of ranches with hundreds of Cebu cattle grazing behind the wooden fences. Much of the land belongs to the Castano family. Following his move to Valencia, Fidel bought two large farms, which added to his holdings in the neighboring provinces of Choco and Antioquia. His timing was impeccable. The neighbors were fleeing increasingly aggressive and brash guerrilla forces. Two rebel groups--one Maoist, the other Marxist--had extorted the region to death, and the cattle ranchers were looking to sell at any price.

Sensing opportunity, Fidel bought more tracts of land, many of them in rebel-held territory. Then he went to work. By Carlos's account, Fidel recruited a fighting force of close to 100 men and trained them on his farm, Las Tangas. The "Tangueros," as Fidel's army became known, eliminated suspected guerrillas and their supporters with startling efficiency. People began calling him Rambo. The nickname fit perfectly. Like the Sylvester Stallone antihero, Fidel was a loner who fought battles that the government couldn't or wouldn't. In one particularly brutal massacre, one of his men told investigators, the Tangueros dragged some 40 people from a neighboring village back to Las Tangas. There they tortured them all night with crude instruments before shooting some and burying others alive.

Valencia, once an area teeming with rebels, was "liberated" in months. The land values shot up, and the shrewd Fidel started to sell. It was a pattern he would repeat wherever he went. Others, particularly drug traffickers, did the same in different parts of the country.

While Fidel grew fabulously rich, he also gave away large tracts of land and set up a school, which I visited while I was in the Valencia area. An administrator named Lola Martinez showed me around the one-story building, where teachers were holding physics, chemistry and English classes. Martinez said they tried to teach the kids values, and each classroom had a slogan like "Tolerance" or "Respect" pasted above the door.

"I should say that I had the honor to meet Fidel," Martinez told me as we walked into the library. "He was a great man, an intellectual. He was very nice and gave his life to humanitarian causes. He was one of those people who had a certain charisma."

And it was apparently every bit as potent as his ruthlessness.

After Fidel was gone, his mantle fell to Carlos, who didn't speak publicly about his brother's death until 1996. At that time, he told *Semana* magazine that Fidel disappeared as he traveled with a five-man entourage toward the Darien Gap, a thick canopy of trees and undergrowth that runs along the Panama-Colombia border.

"The jungle swallowed him," Carlos was quoted as saying, comparing his brother to the main character of a popular novel who suffered a similar fate. He said nothing more until the publication of *My Confession*. By then, his account of Fidel's death had grown far more detailed and dramatic, with his brother felled by a single bullet to the heart. Not surprisingly, Carlos didn't like being pressed about the contradictions in his stories. "I don't lie," he growled during one interview. The reporter backed off.

When I flew to Valencia to see Carlos, one of his paramilitary commanders gave me a lift in a two-seat airplane from the banana-growing region along the northern coast. The plane skimmed the tops of banana trees, then skirted some mountains and entered into cattle country. We touched down on a grassy 500-foot airstrip on the edge of a dirt road. Two paramilitary guards in a jeep drove me to a small village: a dozen houses clustered around a run-down basketball court that functioned as a park. There I met my guide, Commander 04, a towering, mustachioed figure who walked with a limp and grunted short answers to questions.

How did you injure yourself? I asked.

"Hurt my hip in battle," he muttered.

As we bounced down the road toward our destination, I dragged out of him that he'd joined Fidel Castano's troops in the late 1980s.

"A great man, great commander," he said.

How did Fidel die? I ventured.

04 paused. "Don't know," he finally mumbled.

As we pulled into camp, Carlos was yelling at 20 paramilitary soldiers dressed in camouflage and lined up in two rows. Spit flew from his mouth as he barked at them. He was sweating when he entered the tent where I was waiting.

"I'm Carlos Castano," he said in a thick, hoarse voice. He took off his camouflage baseball hat to reveal a dark-haired crew cut atop a handsome, stubbled face. He exuded authority, and it was easy to see why he'd emerged as one of the country's most visible paramilitary leaders after Fidel was gone.

"In our war, the enemy is difficult to see," he began explaining to me once we sat down. "It's like a snake; it comes from the bushes, it comes out of a bunker. It attacks and then disappears into the shade without anyone knowing where it is."

For the last several years, Carlos, now 37, has had close to 10,000 troops under his command as head of the loosely knit United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, or AUC. The AUC is a greatly expanded version of the Tangueros, and many believe it's the only thing keeping the powerful leftist guerrillas from overrunning more of Colombia's countryside. But the group, which has long operated with the tacit approval and at times direct support of the Colombian government, is also responsible for killing thousands of civilians suspected of collaborating with the guerrillas. And it has enlisted the country's most powerful drug traffickers to help finance its war.

The United States has spent nearly \$ 2 billion in the last three years trying to help Colombia break the grip of its drug traffickers. It considers the AUC a terrorist organization. And it considers Carlos Castano a criminal. In September, he was one of three paramilitary leaders indicted in Washington on charges of bringing more than 17 tons of cocaine into the United States and Europe over the past five years. The United States is seeking his extradition.

In a recent interview, Carlos acknowledged that he "taxes" traffickers to finance his war, but denied profiting from the drug trade himself. When he took over the paramilitaries from his brother, he wanted to shake their image as cocaine-enriched mercenaries. He thought of himself as an intellectual and frequently invited professors to stay with him for weeks at a time. Carlos once told reporters that he wanted to study sociology in the United States when the conflict in Colombia was over. Now, in the wake of the indictment, he was holed up in a jungle hideout, struggling to maintain his grip on the AUC and giving mixed signals about whether he would surrender to U.S. authorities. His greatest fear, he said, is of being thrown into a U.S. jail "without any light, without any access to anyone." It is a fate his brother was determined to avoid.

Carlos was just 14 in 1979 when Marxist guerrillas from the country's largest rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, kidnapped his father, Jesus, from a cattle farm his father and Fidel owned together in the province of Antioquia. Fidel paid two ransoms. The guerrillas demanded more. But Fidel, believing his father was already dead, balked.

"Even if I had the money," he wrote back, "I would use it to fight you." Jesus Castano's body was never found. In his book, Carlos said the guerrillas shot his father between the shoulder blades because they thought the army was closing in on them.

"For me, the death of my father was a tragedy that affects me even today," Carlos told me during our meeting at his camp. "It ended my childhood."

Carlos was much closer to his father than Fidel was--a point of tension between the brothers. There were other differences. Fidel was a shadowy, secretive figure far more focused on protecting his ever-growing assets than on rescuing Colombia from the guerrillas' grip. It was Carlos who transformed the paramilitaries into a large army and stepped forward as its public leader in recent years. And it was Carlos who relished the limelight, granting interviews, posing for photos and writing a bestseller.

Carlos acknowledged some differences, describing himself as fiery and impulsive and his brother as colder and more calculating, but he dismissed reports that he hated Fidel. "We were always the most united in the house," Carlos said. "He was like my father. The union was absolute."

The Castanos didn't start out as wealthy landowners. Jesus owned a modest farm with about 200 cattle and made his children work just as hard as the hired hands, Carlos said. As a teenager, Fidel rebelled against his father's authoritarian ways, and set off for Venezuela and Guyana, where he made a fortune in smuggled diamonds and other contraband. Carlos stayed behind, tending cattle for Jesus, the man he would later call his hero.

After their father's death, Fidel "got us together," Carlos said. "And he said, 'They're going to continue killing us,' if we don't fight back."

Thus began the Castano war against the guerrillas. Carlos, Fidel and a handful of brothers and cousins became guides for the Colombian army. But when they located suspected guerrillas or collaborators, the

army seemed to have little power to arrest or punish them. So, Carlos explained, "we would get on our civilian clothes, grab our rifles or whatever, and--tan! tan! tan!--we would kill them." The Castano cadre was relentless. The first to fall were Jesus's kidnappers, but the Castanos didn't stop there. One witness reported a week-long killing spree in a neighboring province by men "dressed in ponchos, white hats and carrying new machetes, rifles, knives, pistols and grenades." Dozens were killed, including women and children.

"The first year after they kidnapped my father, all I wanted was revenge," Carlos explained. "I wanted to destroy everything. At that time, the border between justice and vengeance was very difficult to decipher, very vague . . . We killed a lot of civilians."

My paramilitary guide, Commander 04, took me on a tour of the area under AUC control. We drove past some more large cattle ranches and through a few small towns. There were men with radios on bicycles, at vending booths and in doorways. The paramilitaries maintain close contact with one another and the local authorities to keep the rebels out of their domain.

The ties between the military and the paramilitaries go back to the time of Fidel. Although the army denies it, there is a mountain of evidence that officials have provided the paramilitaries with intelligence, and given them free passage past checkpoints and protection from the rebels. These days, by Carlos's own admission, the AUC and government forces split up regions, but the paramilitaries still do most of the dirty work. I found a few AUC radio-men drinking beer in a cantina one day in the poor village where I'd met 04. I tried to get them talking about Fidel, but they were as reluctant as 04.

"One day he was gone," one finally said. "Like he went on vacation. It was like the Bermuda Triangle."

Another man, who called himself "Churoto," said Fidel was a real leader, challenging people to defy the guerrillas: " 'I need 150 men,' he would say. And sure enough, 150 men would arrive. Old men, teenagers, husbands, workers. They all came ready to fight."

Without Fidel, who knew where the country would be now? "There should be a monument to Fidel," insisted Churoto, who was less voluble on the subject of Fidel's fate.

Is Fidel dead? I pressed.

"Yeah, he's dying," Churoto told me with a smile. "He's dying of laughter."

Yet as I sped down the road leading out of the area, my new paramilitary guide, nicknamed "the Russian," assured me that Fidel was indeed dead and pointed to the area along the road where Carlos, in My Confession, said he'd been shot.

"Didn't you read the book?" he asked.

The Russian--who was called that because he'd lost part of his face to a grenade and spoke with a slur--had started out as a teen assassin for Pablo Escobar before joining the "House of Castano," as Carlos likes to call it.

Escobar and Fidel were close for years, according to Carlos, respecting and using one another. Escobar frequently brought Fidel to his ranch to show others that he had Rambo's muscle behind him. Fidel made loads of money from his association with Escobar. But Carlos stopped trusting Escobar because of the kingpin's increasingly aggressive attacks on the government. Like Carlos today, Escobar feared spending the rest of his life in a U.S. prison for drug trafficking. And the government was threatening extradition. In response, the drug kingpin launched a campaign of terror, using bombs and assassinations to gain political leverage and negotiate his way out. Escobar was widely considered responsible for placing a bomb on a commercial jetliner that exploded in midair, killing 110 people in 1989.

That same year, Carlos said in his biography, he began working as an anonymous informant for the

government without his brother's knowledge. He was waiting, he said, for the right moment to bring Fidel into the fight. When Escobar killed several of his own closest allies for allegedly withholding money from him, Carlos convinced Fidel he might be next. Soon the war was on. Working with a former bodyguard of an Escobar victim, Carlos and Fidel formed the Pepes, or Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar (People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar).

By then, Escobar was holding the government hostage, detonating car bombs in the middle of major cities and kidnapping prominent Colombians. The United States was calling for a war without quarter, and the vigilante group began waging it. The Pepes bombed Escobar's houses and burned his relatives' and associates' offices; they threatened, harassed and assassinated dozens of Escobar's friends, relatives and business partners. Escobar hit back with more terror, but Fidel and Carlos thwarted some of the attacks and led authorities to safe houses, and drug and weapons depots. They acted as chiefs and guardians for the police. On one particular raid, several policemen fell into a river they were crossing. Fidel jumped into the rapids and pulled one of the officers to safety. Two others died, but Fidel's allegiance to them--and theirs to him--had become as unquestioned as his leadership.

The U.S. government knew all about the Pepes' dirty war against Escobar. Both the Drug Enforcement Administration and the CIA worked closely with the police in the Escobar manhunt. A 1993 memo written by the U.S. ambassador shows that the agencies knew the Pepes were running the show. Another government document indicates that the DEA had at least one direct contact with close associates of the Castano brothers. The agencies couldn't claim ignorance about whom they were dealing with. A May 1990 U.S. Embassy memo reads: "Authorities now believe that 'Fidel' Castano was responsible for many of the most notorious of the massacres of rural inhabitants which have plagued Colombia over the past several years." Other memos detailed Fidel Castano's role in assassinations, massacres and mass graves throughout the north of the country. But the U.S. agents didn't complain. They wanted Escobar too much.

The chase continued for months. Escobar deftly eluded authorities, but his associates kept falling, and his scramble to find a safe place to hide his family from the Pepes kept drawing him into the open. By now, the Pepes had destroyed Escobar's organization, leaving him desperate and isolated. On December 2, 1993, Colombian government agents tracked Escobar to one of his Medellin safe houses. He was fleeing across the tin roofs of some ramshackle houses when police gunfire cut through his beefy body. Fidel didn't pull the trigger, but there was no doubt that he and the Pepes played a crucial role in bringing Escobar down.

The campaign against Escobar was Fidel's last public battle. He was tired of war, but he was even more tired of not getting his due. Like Rambo, he believed he'd fought all the dirty wars without the recognition he deserved from the government or anyone else. Nothing irked him more.

"I don't need forgiveness from anyone," Fidel told some guests on his farm once. "I saved this country from communism." He also saved it from Escobar, he thought. But neither victory seemed to bring him any closer to what he really wanted: a way out of the war without fear of prosecution.

Fidel was under investigation by the Colombian government for multiple assassinations, massacres and his involvement with the Pepes. In the early 1990s, other paramilitaries had made deals with the government to avoid being prosecuted as drug traffickers and murderers. Instead they'd managed to win some of the same legal protections as the guerrillas, who were treated as political combatants rather than common criminals. Now Fidel, too, wanted political recognition, which could eventually lead to amnesty. He sent letters to Colombian officials, but they were mute. The government had stopped talking about deals for paramilitaries; it was talking about jail.

"If I can't resolve my legal situation," he told his guests, "I can live in Europe or Israel. I'm not bound to this land."

Fidel already owned a posh apartment in Paris, where he traveled frequently on art-hunting expeditions. He'd become quite a connoisseur since the late 1980s. Expensive black market paintings and sculptures were even more lucrative than dealing cocaine, he told one acquaintance. He acquired only pieces he thought he could sell for at least a \$ 50,000 profit and peddled them to drug traffickers longing for social

acceptance. Fidel became their main supplier. He traveled to galleries in New York and Paris. He had photographs of himself with Salvador Dali, had his portrait painted by Ecuadorean artist Oswaldo Guayasamin, and was said to own dozens of Fernando Botero's depictions of corpulent Colombians.

He learned English and French, stayed in five-star hotels, bought the finest clothes and dined at the best restaurants. It was a life far removed from Colombia's ruthless power struggles--one that Fidel seemed eager to embrace permanently.

More than a month after Escobar was gunned down, Fidel vanished. But the rumors and sightings of him have yet to die away.

In May 1994, five months after Carlos says Fidel died, the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research produced a dossier titled "Profile of Fidel Castano, Super Drug-Thug" that treated its subject as very much alive.

In Colombia, the attorney general's office continued to charge Fidel with crimes long after he disappeared. In 1998, four years after "the shot right to the heart," as Carlos described it in his book, the office indicted him and his brother for the 1997 murder of two human rights activists, one of them a former Jesuit priest, in Bogota.

One ex-government investigator told me he had good reason to believe Fidel was living in Medellin as late as 1997. That impression was reinforced by a later encounter with a paramilitary assassin, who told the investigator that "Professor Yarumo," one of Fidel's aliases, had sent him to kill the ex-priest in Bogota. An internal investigation by the attorney general's office in 1997 said Fidel was running the paramilitaries in the province of Antioquia.

Other leads continue to come in. A London source told me Fidel lives in Israel, where he bought some land. A former Colombian security agent said that Fidel was in Portugal, buying and selling black market art. Sightings also include Madrid and Paris, his old stomping grounds. In Cordoba Province, a security agent told me that high-level politicians talk openly about Fidel as if he were alive. And few in Valencia believe he's dead.

"If the guerrillas had really killed him," an elderly shop owner asked me incredulously, "don't you think they would have said something?"

When I asked Carlos why so many people believed Fidel was still alive, he offered an intriguing answer: "Fidel always said, 'When we kill Escobar, I'm going to disappear, and you're never going to know anything more about me . . .'" Otherwise, Fidel believed, he risked becoming the most wanted man in Colombia--in effect, Escobar's successor.

It sounded like a more plausible explanation for Fidel's disappearance than a ravenous jungle or a single bullet to the heart. But only Carlos knows what is fact and what is fiction. And only Carlos knows whether, in the end, he will be the one to take responsibility for the sins of the House of Castano.

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