

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE: *American Comandante*
Premieres Tuesday, November 17, 2015, 9:00-10:00 p.m. ET on PBS

The Fascinating True Story of American William Morgan,
 Who Rose to the Rank of *Comandante* in the Cuban Revolution



(BOSTON, MA) — When he was executed outside a Havana prison on March 11, 1961, the strange story of William Morgan seemed to vanish from the popular imagination as quickly as it had appeared. But recent scholarship, based on thousands of newly declassified government documents, has brought Morgan's story back into the public eye. Like something out of a dime store novel or a Hollywood Cold War thriller, the story of William Alexander Morgan has it all — adventure and romance, mobsters and spies, and a cast of characters that includes J. Edgar Hoover, Chè Guevera, and Fidel Castro. Told through eyewitnesses, including Morgan's widow and several Cubans who fought alongside him, as well as journalists and biographers, the film is a quintessential American story of a man who reinvented himself, transforming from a failure to a hero and celebrity. *American Comandante*, executive produced by Mark Samels and written and produced by Adriana Bosch, premieres on AMERICAN EXPERIENCE on Tuesday, November 17, 2015, 9:00-10:00 p.m. ET on PBS ([check local listings](#)).

Morgan's story had been lost in the classified archives of the Cold War and edited out of Cuban history by Fidel Castro's retelling of the revolution as an epic tale of a handful of men fighting under his direct command at the exclusion of all others. But research by journalists including *New Yorker* writer David Grann and Michael Sallah, who first broke the story in Morgan's hometown paper, the *Toledo Blade*, and Aran Shetterly, who accessed the Cuban archives, have helped restore Morgan to his rightful place as a key character in both Cold War and Cuban history. *American Comandante* features an unexpectedly rich visual record that includes 8-millimeter home movies of Morgan's childhood and youth filmed by his father, never-before-seen photographs, and film shot during the revolution that had been given up for lost.

The larger-than-life story of William Morgan began in Toledo, Ohio, where — much to the consternation of his upper middle class Midwestern family — Billy was a wild, rambunctious kid who lusted after adventure. Before he had even reached high school, he'd run off with the circus and in quick succession became a merchant marine; an Army deserter and ex-con; a circus fire eater (married to a snake charmer); and a street soldier for the mob. In 1954, at age 26, Morgan settled in Miami, working as a clown and nightclub bouncer. It was there where he first heard rumblings of a revolt on the island of Cuba.

EXCLUSIVE CORPORATE FUNDING FOR AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IS PROVIDED BY LIBERTY MUTUAL INSURANCE. MAJOR FUNDING PROVIDED BY THE ALFRED P. SLOAN FOUNDATION. ADDITIONAL FUNDING PROVIDED BY THE CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING AND PUBLIC TELEVISION VIEWERS. AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IS PRODUCED FOR PBS BY WGBH BOSTON.

Two years earlier, the dictator General Fulgencio Batista had seized power on the eve of a presidential election; Miami became the center of opposition, which was beginning to crystalize around a charismatic young lawyer named Fidel Castro. Morgan was captivated by the idealistic fervor of the rebels and was soon helping to smuggle arms to the island. But what he really wanted was to join Castro and the rebels in the mountains as a soldier.

Abandoning his family, Morgan headed to Havana, planning to join Castro's forces. Instead, Morgan's Cuban contact connected him with the Second Front, a new guerrilla group forming in the Escambray Mountains led by the 23-year-old Eloy Gutierrez Menoyo. Initially suspicious of this strange *gringo*, Menoyo and his men soon became convinced of Morgan's sincerity and, with his tactical army experience and unusual bravery, Morgan quickly proved invaluable.

In the mountains with the Second Front, Morgan found his place and his calling. Now a *comandante*, he was no longer a mobster or an ex-con but an honorable man, fighting for freedom and democracy against a vicious and repressive regime. He fell in love and married the beautiful and idealistic Olga Rodriguez, a student activist and young guerrilla fighter who had fled to the Escambray just ahead of Batista's secret police.

Soon the Second Front had grown from a handful of guerrillas to an army of more than five hundred, controlling an expansive territory in Cuba's strategic center. Morgan's own company, the Tigers of the Jungle (los tigres de la espesura), had not lost a single fight. In the East, Castro's guerrillas had secured their own territory. Castro asked Ché Guevara, his Argentinian second-in-command, to extend the war west and bring the Second Front under Castro's control. It would take weeks for the two groups to reach a pact, but from then on, an uneasy relationship would exist between those loyal to Castro and those loyal to Menoyo.

By early January 1959, the revolutionaries had succeeded in driving Batista out of the country. A victorious Castro promised the Cuban people a return to democracy but, behind the scenes, he was working to consolidate his power around his closest confidants. Menoyo and his Second Front, including Morgan, were marginalized and excluded from positions of power.

Still loyal to the cause, Morgan soon helped Castro fend off a coup backed by Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo and Batista loyalists. In a spectacular double cross, Morgan and Castro set a trap for the conspirators, whom they then triumphantly exposed to the international media. Featured in publications around the world, the mysterious *Americano* had transformed himself into a hero and celebrity. But his newfound fame did not sit well with Fidel Castro, or with the American government, which stripped him of his citizenship.

Less than two years later, Morgan would be executed for treason for helping foment opposition to Castro, who he believed had betrayed the promises of the revolution. Olga would spend ten years in prison for helping her husband conspire against the Castro regime. In 1980, she resettled in Morgan's hometown of Toledo and began the struggle of restoring his citizenship and bringing his remains home.

"As a child growing up in the Cuban Revolution, I knew about William Morgan as a hero. Among the women in my family, the handsome American who loved Cuba and fought for freedom was nearly worshipped. Doing this story was a chance for me to revisit those memories and to rescue a richness and diversity in the narrative of the revolution that had been forgotten," says Producer Adriana Bosch.

“The story of William Morgan is one that both the U.S. and Cuban governments tried to suppress,” says AMERICAN EXPERIENCE Executive Producer Mark Samels. “We were so fortunate to be able to make this film while many who fought alongside Morgan, including his wife Olga, were still alive and able to share his story. Morgan epitomizes that uniquely American desire for reinvention and second chances.”

“In his lifetime, Morgan had failed numerous times,” says Biographer Michael Sallah. “That failure drove him to Cuba, to the revolution, to his own heroism, and his own death. But there was a redemption in that because, in the end, William Morgan became the person that he wanted to be.”

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About the Participants (in alphabetical order)

Dr. Armando Fleites was a *comandante* in the Second Front of the Escambray during the Cuban Revolution.

Olga Rodríguez Goodwin is William Morgan’s widow.

David Grann is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and author of the 2012 article, “The Yankee Comandante.”

Lillian Guerra is a professor of history at the University of Florida.

Rafael Huguet was a pilot with the Second Front of the Escambray.

Evelio Martínez was a fighter with the Second Front of the Escambray.

Henry Raymont is a former UPI correspondent.

Roger Redondo was a captain in the Second Front of the Escambray.

Michael Sallah is a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter and co-author of the recently published book *The Yankee Comandante*.

Aran Shetterly is the author of *The Americano: Fighting with Castro for Cuba's Freedom*.

About the Filmmakers

A **Bosch and Company** production for **AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**.
This program is a co-production of WGBH and Latino Public Broadcasting.

Written, Produced and Directed by	Adriana Bosch
Edited by	Jon Neuburger
Director of Photography	José Luis Vázquez
Music by	Nathan Halpern
Narrated by	Oliver Platt
Coordinating Producer	Luis Pérez-Tolón
Associate Producer	Sabrina Avilés
Production Manager	Astrid Vega

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is a production of **WGBH Boston**

Senior Producer Susan Bellows
Managing Director James E. Dunford
Executive Producer Mark Samels

Adriana Bosch (Writer/Director/Producer) was series producer of *Latino Americans* (2013), the Peabody Award-winning series produced by WETA in Washington, DC. She spent much of her 30-year professional career at WGBH in Boston, where she was senior producer for the series *Latin Music USA* and producer of numerous films for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, including *Fidel Castro* (2005) and *Jimmy Carter* (2003). Bosch produced and wrote several of AMERICAN EXPERIENCE's acclaimed presidential biographies including *Reagan, Ike*, and *Ulysses S. Grant*. She also produced *The Rockefellers* and *The Great Fever*, about the Yellow Fever epidemic. Bosch has received many of the industry's highest awards, including two Peabody Awards, an Emmy Award, an Eric Barnouw Award, and three Writers Guild nominations. Her film *Fidel Castro* won a Silver Hugo at the Chicago International Film Festival and *Jimmy Carter* was nominated for an IDA Award. Born in Cuba, Bosch is a graduate of Rutgers University and holds a Ph.D. in International Affairs from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

Mark Samels (Executive Producer) was named executive producer of AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, PBS' flagship history series, in 2003. Under Samels' leadership, the series has been honored with nearly every industry award, including the Peabody, Primetime Emmys, the duPont-Columbia Journalism Award, Writers Guild Awards, Oscar nominations, and Sundance Film Festival Audience and Grand Jury Awards. Prior to joining WGBH, Samels worked as an independent documentary filmmaker, an executive producer for several U.S. public television stations, and as a producer for the first co-production between Japanese and American television. He is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and holds honorary degrees from Emerson College and Elizabethtown College.

About AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

For more than 27 years, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE has been the nation's most-watched television history series. It has been hailed as "peerless" (*The Wall Street Journal*), "the most consistently enriching program on television" (*Chicago Tribune*), and "a beacon of intelligence and purpose" (*Houston Chronicle*). On air and online, the series brings to life the incredible characters and epic stories that have shaped America's past and present. Acclaimed by viewers and critics alike, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE documentaries have been honored with every major industry award, including thirty Emmy Awards, four duPont-Columbia Awards, and seventeen George Foster Peabody Awards; the series received an Academy Award® nomination for Best Documentary Feature in 2015 for *Last Days in Vietnam*.

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About Latino Public Broadcasting

Latino Public Broadcasting (LPB) is the leader in the development, production, acquisition, and distribution of non-commercial educational and cultural media that is representative of Latino people, or addresses issues of particular interest to Latino Americans. These programs are produced for dissemination to public broadcasting stations and other public telecommunication entities. Latino Public Broadcasting provides a

voice to the diverse Latino community throughout the United States and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Latino Public Broadcasting produces the series VOCES, PBS's signature Latino arts and culture documentary showcase and the only ongoing national television series devoted to exploring and celebrating the rich diversity of the Latino cultural experience. Between 2009 and 2014, LPB programs won 85 awards, including the prestigious George Foster Peabody Award as well as two Emmys, two Imagen Awards, and the Sundance Film Festival Award for Best Director, Documentary. In addition, LPB has been the recipient of the Norman Lear Legacy Award and the NCLR Alma Award for Special Achievement – Year in Documentaries.

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