

Correcting the record



Alive and angry: Yamillet Fernandez holds a photo Jack Kelley shot of her while he was on assignment in Cuba. Kelley told USA TODAY editors that the photo was of a woman named Yacqueline. He reported in a March 10, 2000, story that Yacqueline died while fleeing Cuba.

Cuba, February 2000

Woman who died in Cuba story alive in USA

By Blake Morrison
USA TODAY

When USA TODAY foreign correspondent Jack Kelley returned from Cuba in February 2000, he brought home an incredible tale — and a photo he took to support it.

The story was of a woman, Yacqueline, whom Kelley said he watched flee Cuba for the USA. Six refugees, including Yacqueline and her little son, drowned the next day when a storm sank their boat, Kelley wrote. Atop the front-page, eyewitness narrative stood the photo that seemed to authenticate the tragedy — a picture of Yacqueline that Kelley said he took just days before her fateful trip.

The story, reprinted months later in *Reader's Digest*, was a lie from start to finish, an examination of Kelley's work shows.

The "crescent moon" that the story says "guided" the fleeing refugees had not risen above the horizon early that morning. The "storm" that Kelley wrote killed Yacqueline never occurred.

And the woman in the picture — a woman who Kelley wrote was swallowed by the sea — is alive, married, pregnant and now living in the southeastern United States, where she arrived from Cuba as a legal immigrant one year ago.

For three years, the woman in the photo, Yamillet Fernandez, knew only that Kelley had published the photo alongside a story he had written about Cuba. The hostess at the Havana hotel where Kelley stayed now realizes Kelley could have cost her everything — her job and her future in the USA if Cuban authorities had found out who she was and thought she helped Kelley with the piece, she said in a recent interview.

Kelley, shown the picture of Fernandez on Thursday, refused to acknowledge that she was the woman he called "Yacqueline."

"This is not the same person," he said. Fernandez and her husband, Fidel Santalo — neither of whom speak much English — remain angry and incredulous.

They once considered Kelley a friend. Now, if he tries to contact them, a neighbor says, they plan to call the police.

"She was very angry because, in Cuba, if they had found out, she would have lost her job and they might have taken away her visa," says the neighbor, who translated for Fernandez.

A USA TODAY reporter traveled to Cuba, discovered the real identity of the woman in the photo and subsequently located Fernandez earlier this month.

About a week after Fernandez was contacted by the newspaper and shown the story, she hired lawyer Emilia Diaz Fox.

'A mistake'

Fernandez says the only reason she knew Kelley had published her picture was that he had called her around the time the story was printed, March 10, 2000. The call began with him asking a question, she recalls: *Do you have any relatives in the United States?* When she told him no, he began to apologize and told her he had made "a mistake" and published her picture, Fernandez says. The call ended within two minutes, she says.

Whether that call came before or after the story was published is unclear, but if Kelley did view the decision to use her photo as a "mistake," he perpetuated the deception.

He never told USA TODAY editors what he had done. He failed to alert *Reader's Digest*, which reprinted the photo. And in one presentation to the Evangelical Press Association in 2000, Kelley told another lie about the circumstances under which the photo was taken.

"Just before the, the day before the boat left, the boyfriend of the woman named Yacqueline, who drowned with her 15 month old, said 'Would you take a picture of me and my girlfriend? Um, and then could you mail this picture back to me?' I said, 'Sure.' Well, that was the last picture that was ever taken of her," he said, ac-

ording to a transcript of a question-and-answer session to the group.

In truth, Fernandez says, the photo was taken on the balcony of her apartment. Kelley, she says, told her he wanted to send it to Santalo's mother.

This month, a neighbor translated Kelley's story for her — the passages about "Yacqueline's" tragic death and the even more painful sections about the choices "Yacqueline" was forced to make to secure a job. Fernandez, the neighbor says, can prove she's alive, but undoing the damage of the other passage is more difficult.

No moon, no storm

The newspaper had examined the Cuba story last year, during its first inquiry into Kelley's work. At the time, Kelley — still on staff pending the results of the investigation — offered reporter Mark Memmott tips on how to verify the story. Despite traveling to Cuba, Memmott could find no evidence to show the story was true or false.

When the inquiry into Kelley's work began anew in February, a different USA TODAY reporter scrutinized the story more closely. It had numerous problems:

► Kelley could not have observed any exodus of refugees from Cardenas, Cuba, that was "guided by the dim light of a crescent moon." That's because there was no moon over Cardenas at 5 a.m. Feb. 4, 2000, the day the story says the refugees fled. On that morning, the moon remained beneath the horizon until 6:25 a.m. Even when it rose, just a fraction of it — about 1% — was visible, an astronomer with the U.S. Naval Observatory in Washington, D.C., said.

► The storm that Kelley wrote killed many of the refugees never occurred. Weather reports from Varadero, Cuba, the weather station nearest to where the refugees would have left, reported calm conditions on the two days Kelley wrote the group was at sea.

Kelley's story says winds reached "33 mph." In fact, they never exceeded 16 miles

per hour. The newspaper also examined calls from ships between Varadero and the Florida Straits, the area where the "storm" would have occurred. Reports that day from eight ships nearest to where Kelley says the refugees' boat capsized in "raging seas" — within 12 miles of the Cuban coast, he wrote — reported winds even calmer than those at the Varadero station. None reported bad weather.

► Kelley was likely at the Havana airport when his story — and a typed two-page diary he gave USA TODAY to support his story — claim he was at a "sunrise" memorial service in Cardenas. The city is at least a two-hour cab ride from the Havana airport.

The sun rose in Cardenas at 7:06 a.m. the day Kelley wrote that he observed the memorial service. But his expense reports show he caught a flight to Cancun that morning — an hour-long flight that left at about 7:30 a.m.

Records show Kelley was on that flight because he checked into his Cancun hotel at 9:10 a.m. Havana time (8:10 a.m. in Cancun). Even if Kelley had left the memorial service at daybreak — 7:06 a.m. — he would have had to travel more than 100 miles from Cardenas to the Havana airport, pass through customs and board his flight in 24 minutes, an impossibility.

On Thursday, Kelley defended the story by saying this about the exodus that never occurred: "I witnessed it myself. I saw it myself. I saw it with my own eyes. Honest to God."

Draft contains prophecy

Cuban authorities likely never detained Kelley either, as he told editors at the newspaper. In the story, Kelley described the facility where he was detained, Villa Marista, as having a "30-foot-high sculpture of an AK-47 at its main gate." No such sculpture exists now or when Kelley was there, the reporter who traveled to Cuba found.

And Cuban officials say they have no

record of Kelley being detained.

"We saw that (story) as the State Department or the CIA launching a smear campaign," says Roberto de Armas, a Cuban foreign ministry official.

"It was lying from the beginning to the end of the article."

A panel of journalists from outside USA TODAY continues its efforts to analyze the editing and reporting practices that allowed this story and others Kelley fabricated to be published.

What editors did not know, however, was the story behind the story:

► The first draft of the story, retrieved from Kelley's company-owned laptop computer after the newspaper located Fernandez, forecasts the future. The draft was saved on Feb. 4, 2000, the day Kelley wrote that the refugees left, and was not modified after that date. Even so, it contains this prophecy: "But it has now been 96 hours since the voyage began and there has been no reported sighting of her and the others by Coast Guard rescuers in Miami."

► Many of the names of characters, and their predicaments, also evolved between the draft and the published piece. Yacqueline, for instance, goes by three names in the first draft: Yacqueline, then Dominguez, and then Elizabeth. The widow Guadeloupe is named Nena; Joaquin is Juan Carlos.

► The reason for Yacqueline wanting to leave also is different in the two versions. In the published story, Kelley wrote that Yacqueline's actions were spurred by the need to help her father. Nowhere in the first draft is her father mentioned. Instead, Yacqueline/Dominguez/Elizabeth seems to have decided to leave because she was "unable to afford an operation to correct her son's wayward eye."

"I don't understand why," Fernandez's husband Santalo says. "I don't understand why because we helped him." Santalo calls the incident "very awful."

He calls Kelley "a master of disguise."

Scripts for 'sources' found on computer

The cover-up that prompted Jack Kelley to resign was part of a larger effort by him to mislead the paper, documents retrieved from his company laptop show. In three letters, Kelley wrote answers for associates to offer those investigating his work. The scripts focus on stories he wrote from Yugoslavia, Pakistan and Israel.

Karachi, Pakistan

One of the scripts was written last year as USA TODAY began questioning a pair of March 2003 stories Kelley had filed from Karachi, Pakistan. One reported that he had joined intelligence agents on a hunt for Osama bin Laden. The other described a mosque where "pictures of President Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair, with targets on their faces," were nailed to the door.

Kelley told USA TODAY that Khurram Butt, a Pakistani pilot, helped him with logistics on the stories and could verify them. He said Butt could be reached through a relative. Kelley provided phone numbers for the relative, who had worked with him on other stories.

But Kelley had created a script for the relative in his computer. The script, which had two e-mail addresses for the man at the top, asked for "a confidential favor."

Kelley wrote that "the CIA has refused to acknowledge that it helped me with this story" and "has told me to come up with a cover story." CIA spokesman Bill Harlow called the explanation "not true."

The script called for the relative to tell USA TODAY that Butt would "be traveling for the next 6-8 weeks and can't be reached." It also urged him to "please follow this script" when contacted by the newspaper.

A computer analysis could not determine conclusively whether Kelley e-mailed the script. However, the relative gave the requested answers in response to phone calls and e-mails from two USA TODAY reporters.

USA TODAY found Butt in Seattle, where he was in flight training for the new Boeing 777. He said he never worked with Kelley and met him only once, for 15-20 minutes, during a visit to his relative's home: "I have never been connected with journalism on anything."

In May 2003, Kelley filed a travel reimbursement report with USA TODAY that listed \$1,050 in payments to Butt for "interpretation and transportation services" related in part to the Karachi stories. The pilot said he "never" received money from Kelley.

Additionally, a Pakistani official said the drive Kelley described in the bin Laden story would take at least 10 hours, twice what he wrote. It is not possible to drive as fast as the 90 mph he reported, the official also said.

"I feel like I'm being set up," Kelley said Thursday when questioned about the story.

